

Local & State

ENVIRONMENT
Football-sized
goldfish found in lake
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BRIEFS

Eight new COVID-19 cases in area

MANKATO — Five south-central Minnesota counties combined for eight new COVID-19 cases since Friday. The Minnesota Department of Health's Monday update included cases confirmed over the weekend plus Friday. There are no case updates over the weekend anymore due to lower case counts statewide.

Blue Earth County accounted for three of the eight new cases in the south-central region, followed by Waseca County with two, Brown, Sibley and Faribault counties each had one, according to the health department.

Minnesota has two more COVID-19 deaths statewide. The state's pandemic death toll rose to 7,624.

About 56.8% of residents 16 and older in the region have been fully vaccinated. Rates among counties range from as high as 64.9% in Brown County to 46.7% in Le Sueur County.

Suspect accused of coercing witness

WALDORF — A Waldorf man is now facing felony charges for allegedly attempting to coerce a woman to testify in his favor in a misdemeanor assault trial.

Todd Lawrence Levine, 42, was charged with felony tampering with a witness Monday in Waseca County District Court.

On June 28 a woman who was a witness in an alleged assault last year told authorities Levine was threatening her over the upcoming trial. He reportedly made statements such as she would disappear if she did not say positive things about him at the trial. He also reportedly prevented her from returning a call from a prosecutor.

The woman said Levine also shot her with a BB gun. Levine was set to go on trial Monday for allegedly fighting with a man who was trying to stop him from snorting his Ritalin and then reportedly not listening to orders from deputies last July in Waldorf. The trial has been postponed.

Charges: Driver crashed in chase

HENDERSON — An unlicensed driver crashed while fleeing from police Saturday near Henderson, charges say.

Daniel John Hutchins, 34, of Le Sueur, fled from a Sibley County sheriff's deputy who tried to pull him over for speeding at the Rush River County Park, according to a court complaint.

The deputy called off the pursuit but soon after found Hutchins had crashed. Hutchins was on the ground, where it appeared he had crawled after the crash.

Hutchins was taken to jail and charged Monday in Sibley County District Court with felony fleeing police and misdemeanor driving after license revocation.

Motorcyclist injured in crash

NEW ULM — A young motorcyclist was injured when he crashed in rural Nicollet County.

Lawrence Dean Grunke, 19, of Fairfax, crashed just before 5 p.m. near County Road 21 and 701st Avenue northwest of New Ulm. No other vehicle was involved, according to a Nicollet County Sheriff's Office news release.

Grunke was airlifted to the Hennepin County Medical Center in Minneapolis with injuries that were not believed to be life-threatening.

Flower shop supports grieving parents

By Brian Arala
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MANKATO — Costs shouldn't get in the way of parents who need to talk to a mental health professional after losing a newborn or infant, said Kelsey Barchenger.

Barchenger, along with her sister, Heather Hering, and fellow KEYC News anchor, Lisa Cownie,

co-founded an initiative providing grieving parents with free therapy sessions. Known as the Mac Initiative, the partnership with Sioux Trails Mental Health Center is named after Hering's son, Mac, who died shortly after his birth in 2019.

After Sioux Trails' therapists went through specific training to offer the therapy, free sessions

launched in April. The initiative's focus since then has been to spread the word so parents know help is out there.

Their efforts received a publicity and funding boost this month when Hilltop Florist in Mankato chose the Mac Initiative for July's Hope in Bloom program.

Being selected, especially as a newer organization, was huge, Barchenger said.

"To have them reach out, knowing we're a new organization, means a lot," she said. "They know it's an issue in our community and across the region."

In announcing July's recipient, Hilltop Florist owner Deb Newman stated the goal for Hope in Bloom is to support nonprofits helping children and families in the Mankato area. The flower shop designs a

custom floral arrangement, then donates a portion of the proceeds to the selected nonprofit.

"The Mac Initiative, in partnership with Sioux Trails Mental Health Center, helps families who are grieving the loss of a child," she said. "With Hope in Bloom, people can give a gift that is generous

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CHURNING UP FUN



Farmamerica's Baylee Sorenson shakes a container of buttermilk as she demonstrates making homemade butter at a booth Monday at the North Mankato Farmers' Market.

Pat Christian
Iyaan Sharma, 4, tries homemade butter at Farmamerica's booth Monday at the North Mankato Farmers' Market.



Work slated on Highway 169 in St. Peter

The Free Press

ST. PETER — Pavement work on Highway 169 in St. Peter begins Thursday morning.

The project will continue during daytime hours until July 21.

Traffic delays and lane closures will be necessary while pavement markings are replaced between the

highway's south junction of Highway 22 to north of Chestnut Street. Motorists coming from or destined for Broadway and East Highway 99 will encounter a two-block detour to Nassau Street.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation will keep the highway's northbound lanes open between 6-9 a.m. and its southbound

lanes open 3-6 p.m. to reduce impacts on traffic during commuting periods.

The project includes replacement of the striping and pavement messages along the portions of Highway 169 constructed in 2009 as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act project.

Traffic turns to and from side streets will be limited

during the project that includes the replacement of crosswalk markings.

The overall project includes replacement of the pavement markings at the Highway 22 roundabouts in Mankato. That work should be completed by 6:30 a.m. Wednesday.

For updated road condition information, call 511 or visit: www.511mn.org.

As world moves on, vulnerable still dying from COVID

By Catharine Richert
Minnesota Public Radio News

After more than a year of playing it safe during the pandemic, Patrick Struth wanted nothing more than to see his son get married in April. He gambled that his COVID-19 vaccine, and a mask, would at least afford him some protection

from the virus even though his immune system was suppressed.

Less than a month after the wedding, the 51-year-old husband and father was dead, his life taken by the virus he had been so careful to avoid.

"It's still kind of not real to me," said his sister, Julie Lundrigan. "We went from

seeing him at the wedding, and then three weeks later, he was in a coffin."

Patrick died on May 3, a time when the number of coronavirus infections was declining after a small peak in April, and about 45 percent of Minnesotans 16 and older were fully vaccinated.

Even though the pandem-

ic has abated — for now — a handful of people are still dying from COVID-19 every day, and for the most vulnerable the war against the virus is anything but over.

While most of those deaths are among people who aren't fully vaccinated,

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COVID audit not likely

Scope of request would strain auditor's office

By Brian Bakst
Minnesota Public Radio News

Minnesota's independent legislative auditor has no plans to satisfy a request by lawmakers to carry out a comprehensive study of the state's

Minnesota Public Radio News can be heard in Mankato on 90.5 FM or at MPRnews.org.

COVID-19 response. Legislative Auditor Jim Nobles said the scope of the request —

included in the new state budget — combined with other projects his office is undertaking make it difficult to do the extensive review. "I don't think we really have the capacity to do that. It would be large to say the least," Nobles said in an interview. "And there really wasn't much discussion at all with the legislative auditor's office about that request."

The nudge to Nobles came in a single paragraph in a 67-page, must-pass state government finance bill. Walz signed it in late June in time to head off a partial government shutdown.

Sen. Mary Kiffmeyer, R-Big Lake, sponsored the legislation and advocated for inclusion of the COVID-19 review during her negotiations with the DFL-led House.

"It is fair to the taxpayers to say 'We did our best. It was a tough time. It was a very tough time.' So everybody did their best. But it's OK to look back and say, 'Did we measure up to that? Are there some lessons we learned? Are there some areas we could have done better in?'" Kiffmeyer said as the special session concluded last week. "Let us learn from this very difficult situation by taking a look back."

Kiffmeyer said an audit would provide some of those answers.

"I'm expecting it to go forward," she said. Nobles said he is willing to hear lawmakers out but would have a tough time fitting it in amid other projects they already put on his plate and required financial audits of state agencies his staff conducts.

"This one is so large that it would just make us drop a lot of other things that are

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