

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

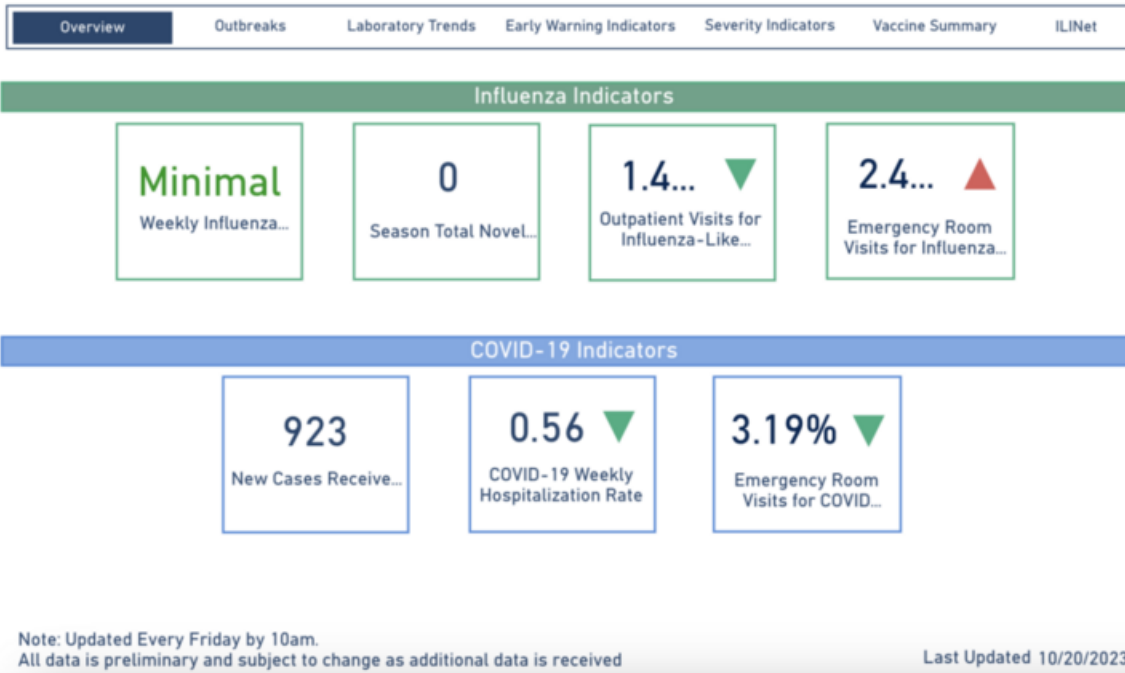
I've got a boatload of health care news for you today. Most of it is stories that are actually about health care, but there's also an update on Congress. In health terms, it's slightly improving, but I wouldn't say the long-term prognosis is particularly good.



The Big Takeaway

Let's begin our little health journey by revisiting everyone's least favorite virus, COVID-19. First, an obligatory disclaimer: Do not panic. We are not in a pandemic. There are no looming global shutdowns. We are, in fact, so extremely *not* in a pandemic that it's difficult to find reliable, up-to-date data on COVID cases. That information has been hard to come by since May, when the [public health emergency expired](#) and states either stopped reporting COVID data, or began updating it far less frequently. For the most part, the change went unnoticed. It's not that COVID is gone — it's that we've accepted the fact that it's here to stay.

West Virginia is the latest state to embrace that reality. Earlier this month, the state health department retooled its weekly COVID dashboard to track a trio of respiratory diseases that typically flare during colder months: influenza, respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), and COVID, [West Virginia Watch reported](#).



*COVID tracking, now with extra viruses!
(Screenshot via West Virginia Watch)*

The change mirrors a shift at the federal level, where [data](#) is now focused on the same three viruses. In West Virginia, the adjustment is part of a larger transition from emergency pandemic response to regular public health practice, which requires reframing COVID as a permanent presence that is likely to flare during fall and winter, according to Shannon McBee, the state's epidemiologist.

"Typically the primary virus that causes the most severe morbidity and mortality is influenza, but RSV is also something that we track on a routine basis that is also severe," she said. "And now, COVID."

The dashboard will update regularly throughout the respiratory illness season, which runs from October through May. For now, hospitalizations and case counts are low for all three viruses, McBee said.

Tracking is a sore subject in Maryland, which could lose \$1.4 billion in federal reimbursements due to years of poor recordkeeping and accounting practices at the state Department of Health, according to a legislative audit released Tuesday. The agency spent that money on various health programs, including Medicaid, but did not document the expenditures, jeopardizing the state's chances of recouping the costs via federal aid, [per Maryland Matters](#).



*Meanwhile, in Maryland.
(Photo by Danielle E. Gaines/Maryland Matters)*

The bill would punch a sizable hole in the state’s \$63 million budget and exacerbate a projected \$418 million deficit, which is already expected to triple by 2027. Auditors said they would need to conduct a more comprehensive review to determine whether the state could be reimbursed, according to the report.

“I’ve never seen an audit like this,” said state Sen. Clarence Lam, a Democrat who chairs the Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee. “It’s every worst nightmare pulled together.”

The review, compiled by the nonpartisan Office of Legislative Audits, examined finances at the Maryland Department of Health from February 2019 through June 2022. During that stretch, the department filed reimbursement requests arbitrarily and then failed to track the ensuing payments, making it impossible to determine whether “the balances of the revenue and expenditure accounts related to federal fund activity were accurate,” auditors wrote.

The report also highlighted questionable oversight of contractors hired to help the department during the pandemic, including insufficient documentation of payments and noncompliance with state procurement policies. In total, the audit identified 17 deficiencies, including a handful of redacted items related to [a 2021 ransomware attack](#) that paralyzed the department’s computer system and hindered the audit process.



*Not a Maryland Department of Health computer.
(Photo by AliFuat/Adobe Stock)*

Officials from the agency are scheduled to appear before the Joint Audit and Evaluation Committee during a Nov. 15 hearing. In a statement, the department acknowledged its shortcomings and said it was “moving swiftly” to correct the problems identified in the audit.

Reimbursements are in much better shape in New Hampshire, where lawmakers allocated \$134 million to increase Medicaid payments for a host of medical providers. Recipients include ambulance operators, pediatric dentists, pregnancy care providers and two agencies that provide in-home care to elderly patients. Providers received a 3% bump in July, with additional raises set to kick in in January, [the New Hampshire Bulletin reported](#).

“It’s a game changer,” said Keith Kuenning, director of Waypoint, an in-home care group that received a 42% bump. “We’ve been working on this for years. This has been astounding.”

Lawmakers approved the allocation after repeated pleas from health and service providers, who warned that inadequate Medicaid reimbursement rates had made it nearly impossible to stay in business. The lobbying was a coordinated effort that included state hospitals, which pledged to forego their own rate increase to benefit other providers. The resulting budget, approved in June, included the unprecedented \$134 million for rate hikes, more than five times the amount recommended by Gov. Chris Sununu. Combined with a federal match, the amount totals nearly \$300 million.

“This is huge and historic,” said Amy Moore, in-home care director for Ascentria.

Vital signs: [Report: Abortions up nationwide post-Dobbs, soared in some states ...](#) [Health report: More dengue infections in South Florida; another case of West Nile virus in Panhandle ...](#) [Kansas Speaks survey: Nearly 70% ready for legalization of marijuana, Medicaid expansion ...](#) [Kansas University research: Human-driven climate change to amplify risk of toxin concentration in U.S. lakes ...](#) [Health care choices narrow for Kentuckians in Medicare Advantage plans ... \(Minnesota\) Mayo Clinic workers say they have terrible health insurance ...](#) [Mississippi health care leaders to advocate for Medicaid expansion at free summit in Jackson ...](#) [Montana committee overseeing work to get Alzheimer’s patients out of state hospital needs more data ...](#) [New Jersey launches website with info on reproductive health care ...](#) [Albuquerque City Council considers abolition of air quality board authority](#)



State of Our Democracy

House Republicans on Wednesday elected U.S. Rep. Mike Johnson as speaker, ending three weeks of intraparty gridlock and sending a weary nation running to Google, [our D.C. bureau reported](#).



*He's the one on the left.
(Photo by Win McNamee/Getty Images)*

Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, clinched the speaker's gavel on a 220-209 party-line vote that seemed to stem more from a collective desire to *end this already oh my god* than his ability to do the job. He's a far-right [election denier](#) who's [skeptical about climate change](#), [opposes same-sex marriage](#) and supports a [national abortion ban](#). He doesn't have a record of bipartisanship (recent "no" votes include the infrastructure law, a gun safety bill and the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act). He's basically Jim Jordan, but with better timing.

In a meandering speech, Johnson pledged to attempt to "restore the people's faith in this House" and also to ensure that his office is "known for decentralizing power." He thanked lawmakers and their family members for everything "they've had to endure for the last few weeks." (He made no such overture to the people whose "faith" he is attempting to "restore.") He repeatedly cited scripture, telling lawmakers that "the Bible is very clear that God is the one that raises up those in authority," including "each of you" and "all of us." He pledged to repair the "broken" border and curtail spending.

"The challenge before us is great, but the time for action is now," he said. "I will not let you down."

It remains entirely unclear how Johnson will weather the struggles that plagued his predecessor, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), who was [ultimately ousted](#) by a small clutch of far-right lawmakers who could not abide his decision to fund the federal government. Johnson will do fine with that group, but he'll be far less popular among more mainstream Republicans, particularly those from purple districts who imperiled their own reelection bids to support him/end our long national nightmare. In short, the GOP's many divisions are still there, and they'll probably come to a head sooner rather than later, as Congress must pass another spending bill by Nov. 17 to avoid a government shutdown. Crucially, Johnson did not pin his candidacy on repealing a rule that allows a single lawmaker to call for his ouster, and that makes him the most obvious casualty of the ongoing-but-temporarily-hidden dysfunction.

But it's possible he'll last long enough to get something (anything) done.

Informed that a new speaker had finally been chosen, 2020 election winner President Joe Biden said simply, "I hope that's true, because we have to get moving."

Asked whether he was concerned that Johnson might try to overturn the 2024 election, Biden all but chuckled. Old hat. Been there, done that. Living in the White House, if you hadn't noticed.

"No," he said. "Just like I wasn't worried the last campaign would overturn the election."

Girl bye: [Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs skips out on final election task force meeting ... After five debates, Kentucky gubernatorial candidates Beshear and Cameron call on each other to answer questions directly ... Louisiana Gov.-elect Jeff](#)

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From The Newsrooms

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- [Borrowers weigh personal, professional options as student loan payments resume](#)
- [Minnesota joins Biden administration push against concentration in agriculture](#)



One Last Thing

Bret Michaels, the lead singer of [Poison](#) who did not find love on "[Rock of Love](#)", adopted a 6-year-old shelter pup named Bret Michaels. While at the shelter, Michaels (the dog) became a blood donor for a month-old kitten, saving the feline's life and earning him the moniker "Thorn" (from Poison's biggest hit). Michaels (the singer) [reached out](#) to the Nebraska Humane Society as soon as he heard about the pooch, noting that he's a longtime husky owner who credits his pets for helping to keep "my spirits rocking."

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