

News From The States

EVENING WRAP

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By [Kate Queram](#)

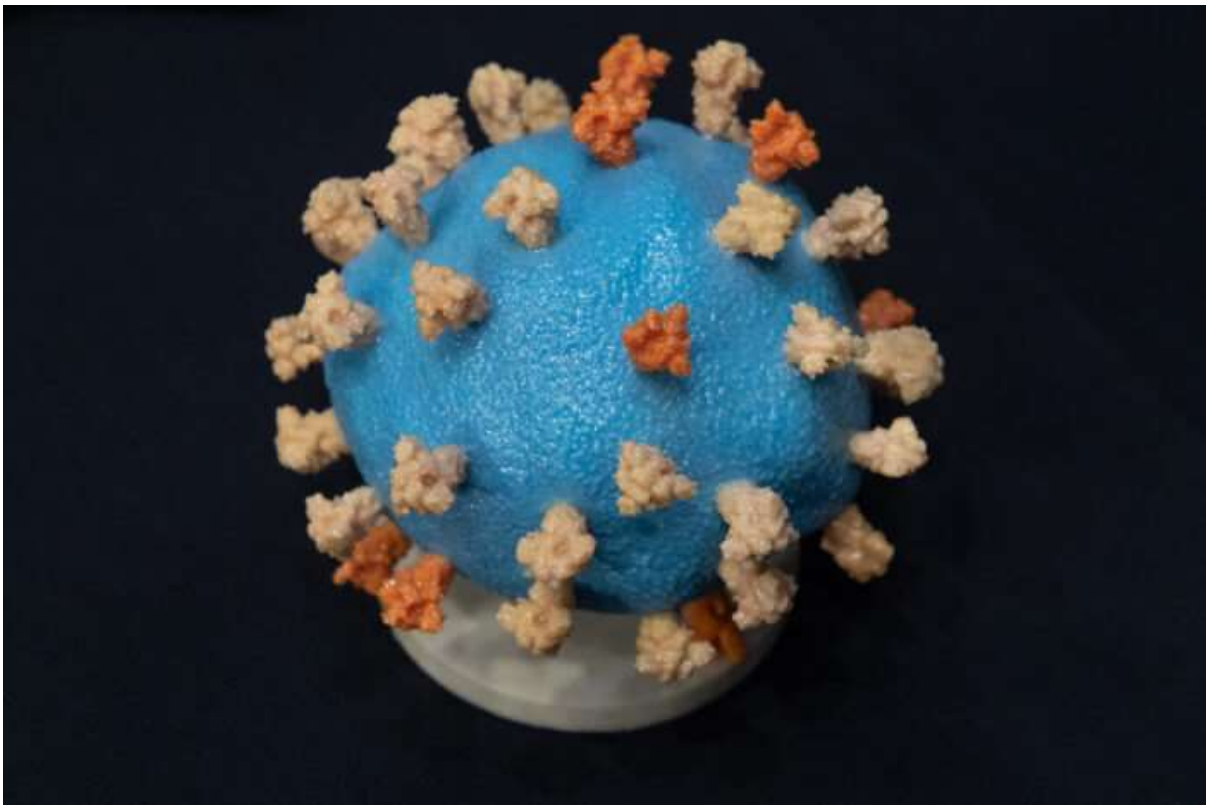
The next time we see each other, it will be 2024 and officially presidential election season. What an exciting opportunity to watch democracy in action!

...And with that, I will scratch “possibly be more optimistic” off my list of new year’s resolutions. Look, positivity works for a lot of people, but I do not think those people follow politics. That being said, I do have surprisingly high hopes for 2024! But to get there, we’ve got to wrap up one last newsletter in 2023.



The Big Takeaway

You know what’s worse than a lump of coal in your stocking? Sewage teeming with COVID-19, just in time for the holidays! Wastewater testing sites [across the country](#) have reported increasing levels of the virus, with “very high” viral activity in at least a dozen states. Which is, apparently, an expected part of our post-pandemic reality, [per VT Digger](#).



IT'S ME, THE WORLD'S WORST CHRISTMAS TREE ORNAMENT
(Photo by Saul Loeb-Pool/Getty Images)

Or at least our post-pandemic winters, when respiratory viruses like the flu and COVID typically spread, according to Ben Truman, a spokesperson for the state health department in Vermont, where levels have [spiked dramatically](#) in at least three counties. The increase parallels a rise in two emerging COVID variants (JN.1 and BA.2.86), which can reinfect even people with immunity to other variants, often leading to a rise in overall transmission.

Because of that, it's best to interpret the data in conjunction with other metrics, like hospital admissions — which remain low across the state, Truman said. Still, it's best to do what you can to limit exposure during holiday gatherings by washing your hands, avoiding sick relatives, not sneezing directly in Grandma's face, and, most importantly, staying up to date on your COVID vaccines.

Wastewater is an apt segue to the current situation in Idaho, where doctors are hoping the courts will intervene to block a strict gender-affirming care ban from taking effect Jan. 1. They're also brainstorming legal ways to continue to treat transgender kids under the policy, which would ban puberty blockers, hormones and surgical interventions for minor patients. Providers who violate the law can face felony charges and lose their medical license, [the Idaho Capital Sun reported](#).



*Yeah, that wasn't meant as a message to doctors.
(Photo by Greg LaRose/Louisiana Illuminator)*

Some doctors have referred patients to providers in states where gender-affirming care [remains legal](#). Others have vowed to help kids access whatever treatments are permitted under the ban, including counseling, hair removal, breast binding and speech therapy. In Boise, Dr. Marvin Alviso has helped patients stretch their prescriptions by instructing them to hang on to extra doses of hormones that might otherwise go unused.

There are ways to work around the law, he said. But that shouldn't be a requirement for providing medical care, he added.

"I keep using the term 'creative,' because that's what we're doing," he said. "This shouldn't be how to provide care to kids, for care [backed by science](#). Unfortunately, our lawmakers think otherwise."

Indeed, they do. State Rep. Bruce Skaug, the Republican who sponsored the ban, all but shrugged when asked how doctors might continue to treat patients once it takes effect. Stuff like speech therapy is probably still legal, he said. But that's *beside the point*, which is that gender-affirming care — a [science-based](#) spectrum of treatment sanctioned and supported by [virtually every](#) major medical organization — should instead be called "gender denial," according to Skaug and [a bunch of other Republican lawmakers](#) who have never needed gender-affirming

care and are not doctors but still believe they know better than transgender patients and the doctors who treat them.

“Over time, these doctors are going to be seen like old doctors that did lobotomies,” he said. “It’s a fad, and it’s hurting people.”



*The photo, much like the medical system, is crooked. But not because of gender-affirming care.
(Photo by Bryan Steffy/Getty Images)*

Pain is the norm in Nevada, where [nearly two-thirds](#) of people struggled last year to afford health insurance or pay medical bills. The high cost of care led thousands to delay treatment for addiction, mental health and dental problems. All the while, insurance companies raked in record profits, [the Nevada Current reported](#).

From 2013 to 2021, per-person health care spending in Nevada grew by 29%, according to [an analysis](#) released last month by the nonprofit United States of Care. Much of the expense stemmed from rising health care premiums, which grew at a significantly higher rate than the cost of covered insurance claims. Put simply, Nevada insurance companies charged customers more for coverage than it cost to pay their claims, allowing them to reap [unprecedented profits](#).

Unsurprisingly, the state’s largest private health insurance companies — UnitedHealth Group, Centene, and Anthem Blue Cross Blue Shield — are among the most profitable. (Last year, UnitedHealth Group alone earned \$28.4 billion in national profits, a 19% increase from 2021.) In addition to individual plans, the

three companies cover Medicare Advantage plans for 900,000 Nevadans, worth an estimated \$2 billion. They also cover most of the 46% Nevadans who obtain insurance through their employers. None responded to requests for comment.



He saw that.
(Photo by Getty Images)

Nevada hospitals also fared well, in part because [most of them](#) are private for-profit facilities. In general, private hospitals charge more for care, allowing patient revenues to outpace what they spend on operating. The state's largest acute care facility is Sunrise Hospital and Medical Center, which charges patients on average [12.9% more](#) than the cost of their care — the second-highest bill markup rate in the country. (The facility is owned by the Hospital Corporation of America, the largest for-profit health company in the country.) Representatives from the hospital declined to comment.

The big price tag has nothing to do with the quality of care, which ranks 41st nationally and dead last for prevention and treatment. Still, the cost keeps climbing. This year alone, health insurance premiums grew by 9% in Nevada.

“The findings are stark,” said Liz Hagan, director of policy solutions at United States of Care. “You see, on one hand, people who are really struggling with affordability in really profound ways — and on the other hand, you have a health care industry that is profiting and doing financially very well.”

Feed a fever, starve the rich: [Experts recommend steps to reduce Alaska's high rate of chronic hepatitis B](#) ... [Medical professionals see need for more education about the RSV vaccine for older Kansans](#) ... [State health officials confirm season's first child flu death in Louisiana](#) ... [DHHS renews Medicaid coverage for nearly 1M Michiganders](#) ... [Dozens of Uber rides requested in first month of Mississippi health access program](#) ... [North Carolina has expanded eligibility for Medicaid. Now what?](#) ... [A 'momentous victory': Pennsylvania advocates celebrate anniversary of Pregnant Workers Fairness Act](#) ... [As access to mental health care declines in rural South Carolina, state agency tries to fill gaps](#) ... [Nursing home complaints up 38% in South Dakota since last year](#) ... [The number of Texas midwives is increasing — but advocates say the state needs more](#) ... [How the Texas vision for seamless mental health care fell apart over 60 years](#) ... [Seattle Children's Hospital sues Texas Attorney General over trans patient records](#) ... [In one West Virginia county, opioid settlement could fund children's resources, substance abuse treatment](#)



State of Our Democracy

I do not even have to switch gears to begin talking about Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds, who told nursing home executives in September 2022 that she agreed they weren't getting "much help from the federal government." No matter, she said.

"I can promise this," she said. "In Iowa, you'll continue to get the support you're being denied in Washington."



It's not looking good.

(Photo illustration by Clark Kauffman/Iowa Capital Dispatch)

This is boring, standard politician fare, but it's also an acknowledgment of a symbiotic — and lucrative — relationship between the state's nursing home industry and its Republican lawmakers. For years, state-regulated care facilities have funneled money through political action committees to campaign funds for lawmakers who support bills to protect nursing homes and block proposals intended to help elderly Iowans, according to a review of finance and legislative documents compiled [by the Iowa Capital Dispatch](#).

So Reynolds was among friends when she spoke last year at the Iowa Health Care Association's annual convention. The group's political action committee donated \$30,000 to her 2022 reelection effort. Five industry executives — David Chensvold, nursing home consultant and president of HealthCARE of Iowa; Ted LeNeave, CEO of Accura Healthcare; Lisa Toti, president of Accura Healthcare; Richard Allbee, CEO of the ABCM nursing home chain and Douglas Johnson, CEO of Blue Stone Therapy — gave a combined \$80,000 to the campaign, with individual donations ranging from \$30,000 to \$5,000.

The investment had already paid dividends for the industry, which scored \$42 million in additional Medicaid funding over a three-year period with help from Reynolds. There have been less tangible benefits, too. A year earlier, Reynolds' administration bestowed the Governor's Award for Quality Care on a Stanton nursing home operated by Accura Healthcare in what proved to be a perfectly timed bit of good PR. Two months later, state inspectors cited the home for

placing residents in immediate jeopardy after a defective door alarm enabled one person to leave, walk a third of a mile and cross a busy street before being spotted by someone in the neighborhood.

The incident was part of a pattern of what you might call less-than-Quality Care from the Accura chain, which operates 32 facilities that score a combined 2.5 out of 5 stars on a ranking scale from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. The company has been fined more than \$1.1 million for quality-of-care violations that put residents at risk, and federal regulators have suspended Medicaid payments to individual facilities at least 11 times.

Since 2018, Accura's CEO has donated a total of \$47,000 to Reynolds' campaigns, including \$10,000 in 2022. That money is separate from \$83,779 in contributions to the Iowa Health PAC, the industry's political arm and one of the state's biggest campaign donors. Reynolds' campaigns received \$132,785 from that fund, which also gave \$155,288 to her predecessor, Terry Branstad. He'd campaigned on ending "gotcha" inspections at nursing homes, [noting that he'd had](#) "a close and good" relationship with "nursing home people" for a "long period of time."

The head of the industry PAC declined to comment. A spokesman for Reynolds said she "cares deeply about older Iowans and the care they receive, which is why she works closely with the health care industry, organizations, and providers to support a quality, safe, and affordable long-term care system for Iowa families." Iowa now has one inspector for every nine care facilities, the [second-worst ratio](#) in the country.

Caring deeply, closely working: [Biden to commute sentences of 11 nonviolent drug offenders](#) ... [Alabama 2nd Congressional District race: Belinda Thomas says economics 'affects everything'](#) ... [DeSantis on two fronts in January 2024: Florida Legislature and Iowa caucuses — plus Nikki Haley](#) ... [Nikki Haley hires former Reynolds staffer, tours Iowa ahead of caucuses](#) ... [Governor of disaster: John Bel Edwards led Louisiana through crisis after crisis](#) ... [Does Colorado decision impact Trump's eligibility in Maine? Trump says no, challengers yes](#) ... [Recording allegedly captures Trump pressuring Michigan canvassers to reject 2020 election results](#) ... [Observers question Nebraska poll indicating a close U.S. Senate race between Deb Fischer and Dan Osborn](#) ... [Two U.S.-Mexico rail crossings closed by Border Patrol to reopen, Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen says](#) ... [New Jersey lawmakers OK bill allowing some 17-year-olds to vote in primaries](#) ... [Oregon lawmakers' overseas trips funded by lobby groups, Taiwanese government](#) ... [White House says sale of U.S. Steel to foreign company deserves 'serious scrutiny'](#) ... [WVU paid more than \\$230K for Coben to fly on private jet to](#)

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From The Newsrooms

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- [States, Biden administration push efforts to aid renters, keep people housed](#)
- [Bombshell ruling requires 13 Michigan districts to be redrawn before 2024 election](#)



One Last Thing

Thank you so much for being here all year (and for reading to the very end)!
Enjoy the break, and I'll see you on Jan. 2.

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