

Chairman Clyburn, Ranking Member Scalise, and Members of the Committee.

My name is Pete Ricketts, Governor of Nebraska.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony this afternoon.

We've been living with coronavirus now for nearly two years. Nebraska's strategic response to the pandemic has been a holistic one. We've sought to promote the overall wellbeing of Nebraskans, factoring in social, mental, educational, financial, and spiritual wellbeing as well as physical health. These are all elements of the Good Life that our great state is known for. Nebraska has struck a balance between slowing the spread of the virus, while helping people lead a more normal life. We've learned how to live with the virus while protecting our healthcare system and giving people the opportunity to get vaccinated.

Nebraska has managed the coronavirus pandemic without lockdowns, without statewide mask mandates, and without vaccine passports. We've given businesses flexibility to find creative ways to stay open to serve customers. We've worked hard to put protocols in place so that students could return to school. We've engaged faith communities to find ways for them to join together for worship. These efforts have helped people stay connected, while minimizing disruptions to Nebraskans' livelihoods and educations.

Numerous national comparisons show that Nebraska is staying strong:

- Last month, *Politico* released its State Pandemic Response Scorecard for all 50 states. The in-depth, independent analysis shows Nebraska has weathered this storm better than any other state. This confirms the success of Nebraska's pandemic approach.

Nebraska is ranked first nationally in *Politico's* Economy category, which measured our state GDP growth. This steady growth has helped Nebraska achieve the lowest unemployment of any state in history—currently at 1.8%.

In its Scorecard, *Politico* ranked Nebraska fourth in the nation for Education. *Politico's* research shows that Nebraska is one of few states whose students displayed virtually no drop in achievement in math and reading during the pandemic.

- Nebraska also climbed the rankings in child welfare this year. According to the Casey Family Foundation, Nebraska is now #7 out of 50 states for overall child well-being. That's up from #12 in 2019 and #9 in 2020.
- We've accomplished this while ranking in the top ten nationally for measures of physical health. Among U.S. states, Nebraska is tied for the seventh-lowest fatality rate among persons who've had COVID-19 according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. And, we have the ninth-lowest overall mortality rate from COVID-19.

Staying focused on one primary metric has helped us be consistent throughout the pandemic and has helped us achieve strong outcomes. Throughout the pandemic, we've used coronavirus hospitalizations as the north star guiding our response. Early on, we recognized that it would be impossible to stop the coronavirus from spreading given its infectiousness and the lack of immunity to it. The key would be to

slow its spread to prevent hospitals from being overrun. Operating from this awareness, we were one of the first states to focus on hospital numbers rather than case counts.

As a result, we've been successful throughout the pandemic in ensuring that every Nebraskan who needs a hospital bed, ICU bed, or ventilator has access to one.

We are seeing the importance of this approach with the omicron variant. While there has been an increase in positive cases, hospitalization and death rates do not mirror this rise.

### **Managing Omicron**

The omicron variant has affected Nebraska with an increase in both cases and coronavirus hospitalizations. As of January 18th, we had 714 people hospitalized with coronavirus. Our peak of COVID-19 hospitalizations was in November of 2020 with 983, and we had not been over 700 until recently. Like all states across the country, Nebraska is experiencing increased strain on our health care system, with 18% of adult ICU beds available and 24% of adult medical/surgical beds available statewide.

To help protect our healthcare system, my administration is implementing a hospital decompression program. It's intended for patients that are no longer requiring hospital level of care but haven't found a skilled nursing facility bed yet. This will allow them to shorten their time in the hospital by transferring to alternate care sites that are licensed skilled nursing facilities. These patients will continue to get all their skilled nursing needs met during this temporary placement. Then, they receive help finding a facility or discharge home. We estimate using four facilities and about 100 beds for this program.

As we deal with omicron, we have more tools in our toolbox, including vaccines and boosters, at-home testing, and enhanced treatments. The best tool we have to help folks stay healthy is vaccination. We know the vaccines are effective in reducing severe cases, hospitalizations, and death.

Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) State Epidemiologist Dr. Matthew Donahue and his team completed an in-depth analysis of vaccination rates correlated to hospitalizations. The analysis concluded that individuals who received the vaccine, but not the booster, were 11 times less likely to be hospitalized. More dramatically, individuals who got their booster shot were 46 times less likely to be hospitalized.

The vaccine is especially critical for older Americans. In Nebraska, about eighty percent (79%) of the deaths we've seen have been among those 65 and older. Over ninety percent (91%) of deaths have been among those 55 and older. In Nebraska, we've been able to vaccinate 90.6% of our 65+ population. Seventy-one percent of Nebraskans in this age group have been vaccinated and received a booster shot, which ranks #10 nationally.

At this point, yet another announcement from a public health official isn't likely to move the needle on vaccination. We need sisters and brothers, sons and daughters, neighbors and friends to be our primary advocates for vaccination. I'm urging Nebraskans who have already been vaccinated to share their experience with a loved one who is hesitant. This firsthand testimony is a powerful tool to convince people to get the shot.

We are leveraging the resources of the Nebraska Public Health lab to partner with private companies to expand access to testing:

- We have a standing order to purchase test kits directly from private vendors.
- We have tests available through the Nebraska Public Health lab and have ample supply to run about 2,000 tests per day.
- We have multiple private companies testing throughout the state and hospital systems and health clinics who prefer to manage their own testing. In combination, these entities delivered an all-time high of 28,580 test results on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

Additionally, we are in the process of beginning an at-home testing program. This will supplement the federal program for at-home tests, but our program will also include an option to do a video call to allow medical professionals to help talk people through the test and generate an actual lab report if positive.

For monoclonal antibodies, we are now using only sotrovimab and Evusheld due to the Omicron variant. Our weekly allotments change from week to week. They have been between 160-230 courses each (sotrovimab and Evusheld) for the entire state. We continue to work with the federal government to request additional antibody treatments to meet the growing demands in Nebraska.

We're also making use of federal ARPA funds to bolster our pandemic response. In Nebraska, we've decided to treat federal ARPA funding like a regular budget. Our state legislature is working to appropriate the \$1.04 billion in COVID recovery aid allocated to Nebraska. My budget recommendation to our Unicameral legislature includes funding to enhance our healthcare workforce, add healthcare facility capacity, and upgrade our public health emergency response capabilities. I'm calling for funding to strengthen our beef processing supply chain to help us continue feeding the world. Additionally, I've asked the Legislature to allocate funding for parents of lower-income children who have experienced learning loss during the pandemic.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to share about Nebraska's coronavirus response.