

PEN CITY CURRENT

It's Black & White and Read all over

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www.pencitycurrent.com

Health care staff crisis looms

GRHS: Federal vaccine mandate putting squeeze on health care providers

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – A Jan. 4 mandate facing about 33% of workers in the Great River Health System is creating an unstable workforce in the health care industry.



WENZEL

A meeting was held Monday night, attended by about 60 health care workers in West Burlington,

and another meeting is scheduled for next Monday.

Health care workers are pushing back against a mandate that requires them to be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4, 2022 or face termination.

The mandate comes from the Center for Medicare/Medicaid Services, the federal agency that oversees reimbursements to area hospitals.

The mandate puts hospital administrators around the country in unenviable positions with regard to maintaining safe working environ-

ments, respecting workers' rights, and holding onto what makes up more than half of annual revenues in the form of Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements.



MITCHELL



REICHMAN

"This is the rock and the hard

See GRHS, page 5

NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH

Councilman wants to beef up watches

Amandus claims Schulz's comments on crime were racist

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG
PCC EDITOR

FORT MADISON – A Fort Madison City Councilman wants the city to get behind additional community policing with the city seeing more violent crime recently.

At Tuesday night's regular City Council meeting, Councilman Tom Schulz said he would like to work on putting together an event to bring people together around the neighborhood watch program.

"I've been talking to the police chief about trying to beef up our neighborhood watch system. With the exception of the 34th Place group, it's kind of fallen apart," Schulz said.

The 34th Place group has shined above other groups, while offering assistance to get other neighborhood watch programs up and running. That group not only patrols the neighborhood in the area of the DuPont plant near 34th Street and 34th Place, but they also have an annual block party, fund raise, and provide scholarships.

Other groups such as Lincoln Neighborhood Watch Group and Dry Creek Neighborhood Watch have been organized and a group in the downtown historical area was trying to get organized, but COVID made getting together difficult for some of the groups.

"I really want to try and start a big social media push, maybe even with some help from local media, to put together an event to bring people around that



AMANDUS



SCHULZ

See COUNCIL, page 3

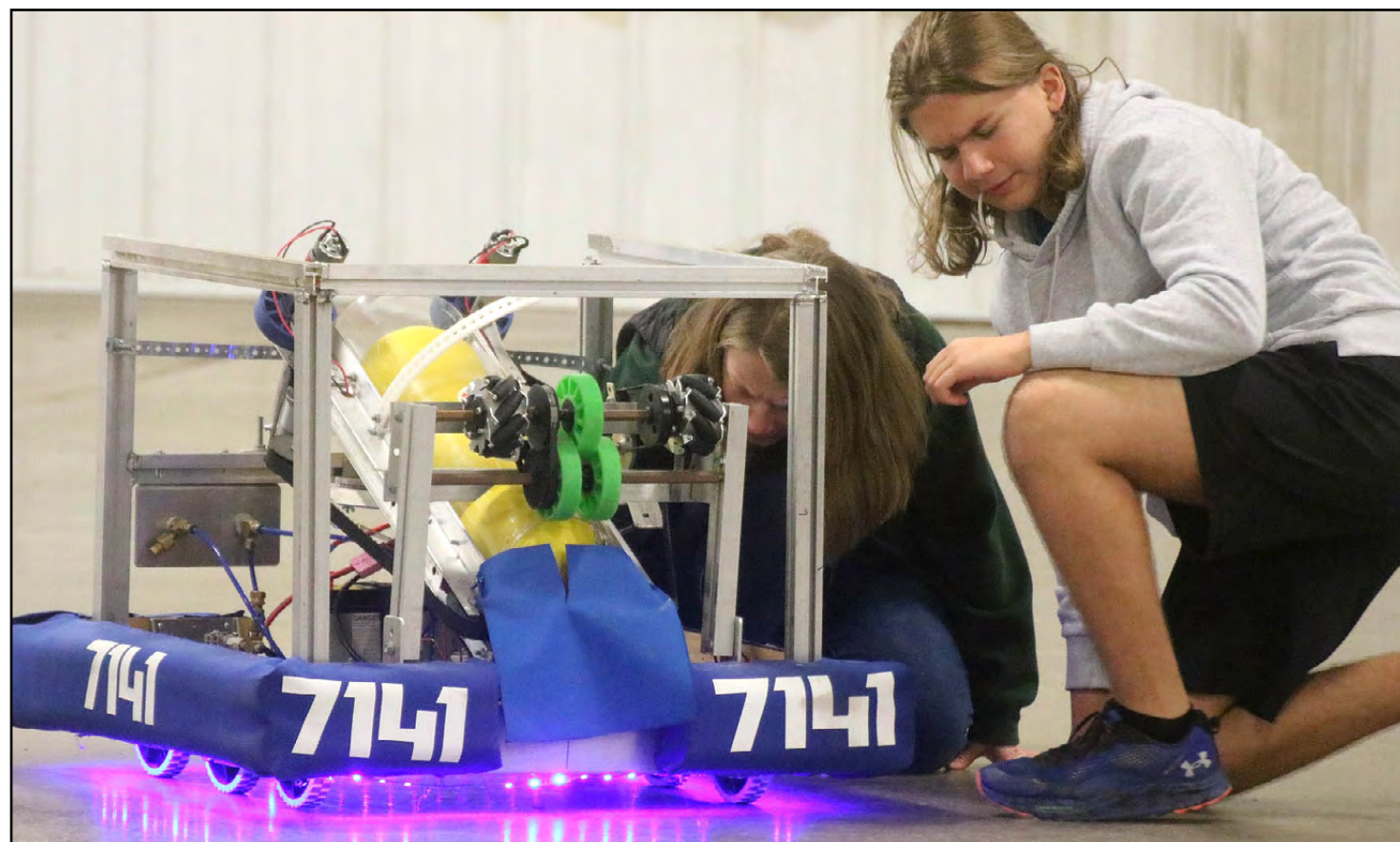


Photo by Chuck Vandenberg

Students with the Lee County Robotics team look over a "Big Bot" that was built last year for a basketball shooting game created by the team at Fort Madison High School.

Robotics team takes new countywide approach

BY CHUCK VANDENBERG
PCC EDITOR

MONTROSE – A robotics team that held its own a couple years ago at a regional competition has been retooled to incorporate students from all of Lee County.

The team is being hosted by the Lee County Economic Development Group and is sponsored by county businesses and industries.

Shalisse Johnstun, the instructor for the program for the past several years, said adding Keokuk and Central Lee brings additional opportunities to the crew.

"Before, we were the only schools doing the big bots and the other schools have been a little apprehensive, but tonight we have students from all three schools here," Johnstun said.

Students from Keokuk, Fort Madison, and Central Lee at-

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WEATHER

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From the Front

Partners needed to help with county robotics team

TEAM - Continued from Page 1

tended an open house at Lee County Economic Development Group's new offices in Montrose.

She said having a countywide team also provides some additional opportunities. Not just the added number of students but from different industries in the county now that can help with the team.

Johnstun also said there will be some challenges being a countywide team with transportation, but nothing that can't be overcome with good planning and sponsorships.

LCEDG Project Manager Dana Millard said the theme of a united Lee County, which LCEDG has been promoting for years, wasn't lost on the group.

"We wanted to have something that was countywide for our students and this was an opportunity for us to be able to do that," she said.

"All three schools have had robotics in some form, but we haven't been able to come together and build something great and this is that opportunity."

Millard said robotics in the county began with Lego Robotics programs at school libraries, which transitioned into middle schools, and then to the high school level for high school robotics.

The Fort Madison team has been in the First Robotics League since 2018, while Keokuk and Central Lee both have been involved in First Tech Challenge. Keokuk also does Lego Robotics classes at its elementary schools currently.

Millard said LCEDG is a great location to host the team because it is equal distance from each school and allows more room for the students to work with the robotics.

"This allows them also to have a build room that is significantly bigger than a classroom. They also have a business side of the program where they have to create



Photo courtesy of Stephanie Brownlee/FMCS

Fourteen students showed up for a Lee County Robotics team open house on Thursday afternoon at the Lee County Economic Development Group's facility in Montrose. A countywide team is being compiled to compete in 1st Robotics regional competitions starting in January.

a website, do some writing and budgeting, and they will have room here to do that, as well," Millard said.

The students involved have to sell their own sponsorships, but LCEDG can help make those connections.

"The big challenge is that the students don't know who to contact and we provide those connections for them, as well as providing meeting spaces," Millard said.

"We have business and industry mentors that work on robotics in their facilities who have committed to come out and help the students on site."

The students meet after school on Thursdays at the LCEDG facility.

Millard said the season kicks off Jan. 8 and competitions begin in April. The first competition is in northern

Missouri and then, if they advance, they would move to UNI for a regional competition and as they progress, the competition becomes national.

Last year the competitions were cancelled, and the program focused on creating games in each team's facility and turning them in for competition scores.

Johnstun said fundraising has been going okay so far this year, but they are still trying to determine what the team looks like. She said the biggest need is for industry folks to come in and help the students with problem solving, welding, and electronics.

Anyone interested in helping mentor, sponsor, or contribute to the program can do so by calling the LCEDG at 319-463-9030.



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Opinion/Local News

Mayor says city can get behind watch groups

COUNCIL - Continued from Page 1

that are interested in trying to help watch over their community more," Schulz said.

"We're seeing some changes in demographics in Fort Madison that no one can ignore at this point and we need more people looking out for each other. I'm not 100% sure how to make this happen, but I'm going to put more effort into it. There are a lot of people around here retired and a lot of people that have the time."

Bowker said she couldn't let the demographic comment go.

Schulz said the changes he sees are apparent.

"The demographic change I see is when I go to Casey's in the morning, I didn't used to see six people sitting out in front of the place or four people sitting out in front of the place. Not that they're there because of any particular reason that I know of, but they're there," Schulz said.

Bowker said his concern should be based on socio-economics and not demographics such as age or race.

"That's more socioeconomic factors that shouldn't necessarily be defined by demographics," Bowker said.

"More people are being shot and stabbed in Fort Madison and we need to freakin' stop it," Schulz said.

"Because of demographics?" Bowker pushed.

Councilwoman Donna Amandus called Schulz's comments racist.

Schulz said there was nothing racist in his comment.

"Oh My God, that's exactly what you meant," Amandus said.

Mayor Mohrfeld regained control of the conversation and said he agreed that if there's something the city council can do to give the watch groups a helping hand, they should get involved.

"I've been a fan of theirs since I started and I love going down and getting dunked in the dunk tank and raising money, so Tom, I applaud that effort," Mohrfeld said.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Councilwoman addresses crime issue

Dear Editor;

I would like to address the issue that a fellow Council person has brought to light.

Homelessness and food insecurity is an issue that has nothing to do with race, but also have little to do with crime. If this is indeed the concern, then let's address the real problem shall we?

I encourage everyone to please donate and volunteer at our Food pantry and the Emma Cornelius house. Criminalizing homelessness and food insecurity is not should not be an option.

However, I do applaud the efforts of Community watch programs. They are an asset to our community. They are blind to color and race and focus on what is important. I sincerely hope that those in all districts

continue to support community watch efforts across our wonderful city.

If you look at historical numbers, there is not an increase in crime in our county, but rather a shift in the way it is reported and glamorized in social media.

Look not at color of those committing the "recent crime" that has occurred but the individual circumstances that surround each heinous act.

Finally I leave you with the need for us as a Council and a community to move forward together. Not divided by hate and threats, but rather a strong desire to work together to achieve the common good.

Donna Amandus

Fort Madison City Council for Third Ward

District wants residents to complete assessment survey online

FORT MADISON - The Fort Madison Community School District is asking for feedback to help improve student achievement and communication in our district. The district has partnered with the State of Iowa's Department of School Improvement for this assessment.

Everyone in the community is encouraged to take this quick survey. Your feedback can help shape the future success of our school district.

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FMCSO board of directors attended the Iowa Association of School Board conference Thursday in Des Moines. Clockwise from front left are Dianne Hope, board president; Josh Wykert, vice president; Brad Menke; Paul Wilkerson; Mio Santiago; Carol Ross; Lois DiPrima, and Superintendent Dr. Erin Slater.

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**ad
COUNCIL**

Health News

Mandate requires all staff to be vaccinated by Jan. 4

GRHS - Continued from Page 1

place,” said State Rep Joe Mitchell (R-Wayland).

“I’m usually not a black and white argument kind of guy, but this is pretty black and white. This administration does not respect individual freedoms,” Mitchell said Thursday.

Mitchell said he’s absolutely concerned there will be a critical local health care shortage because of the CMS mandate.

The Occupational Safety and Hazard Administration had a similar mandate in place for all employers with more than 100 employees, but they have since backed down from that mandate due to pending litigation and current court rulings.

The OSHA mandate will currently be in front of the 6th Circuit Court of Appeals in the very near future after being ruled unconstitutional in the 5th circuit.

The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals on Friday affirmed a stay of the Biden administration’s vaccine rule covering employers with 100 or more workers, requiring them to be vaccinated for COVID-19 or to test negative once per week.

Great River Health Systems CEO Matt Wenzel said he doesn’t believe the CMS will step back from its mandate however.

“No, I don’t see them backing off it,” Wenzel said. “We are getting information about OSHA and that’s being challenged. But this is not, and we don’t think it will be overturned.”

Wenzel said Great River released their mandate this week to give employees time to get their affairs in order.

“That’s what we’re hearing and planning for, and that’s why we announced it this week,” Wenzel said. “I don’t think it will get overturned. Now, I’ve thought other things in the past and they’ve changed quickly, but if I was betting – this is going to stick.”

Pen City Current reached out to members of a Facebook group that has organized in opposition to the mandate, but no members of that group were willing to comment for the story.

Wenzel said he wants to be very clear that this is not a hospital mandate, but a federal mandate. And for the hospital to not suffer crippling revenue loss without Medicare reimbursements, they have to follow the mandate.

“I feel we have some employees that don’t understand this isn’t the hospital. I don’t know if it makes a difference with them or not, but this isn’t.

“We have tried to work through this as best as we can with the guidance we’ve been given. Some are choosing to terminate based on the Dec. 6 timeline. We are doing a leave of absence and (paid time off) to get them through ’til Jan. 4. That’s another sign we are trying our best. They can take PTO and they would be an employee until Jan. 4.”

However, under the mandate obtained by Pen City Current, employees would be responsible for paying for company benefits during any unpaid leave, but not during PTO.

The COVID-19 vaccine plan was sent in an email to employees Tuesday from Wenzel’s account. The plan read in part:

“To comply with a mandate from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), Great River Health employees, medical staff, and volunteers must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 by Tuesday, Jan. 4. If we don’t enforce the vaccination mandate, we will be unable to participate in Medicare and Medicaid programs. If we can’t participate in these programs, the residents of southeast Iowa would not have any health care providers in their community.”

“If you have not been vaccinated, you must receive the first dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, or the single Johnson & Johnson vaccine, by Monday, Dec. 6, to continue working. This will allow time for employees to become fully vaccinated by the Jan. 4 deadline.

•If you don’t receive a vaccine by Dec. 6, you must take an unpaid leave of absence or use your PTO. If you take a leave of absence, you must make payments for benefits in which you are enrolled to continue receiving them.

•If you are not fully vaccinated by Jan. 4, your employment at Great River Health will be terminated.”

The Iowa legislature has countered the mandate with guaranteed unemployment to all health care providers terminated under the mandate, which will be billed back to employers through the state’s unemployment trust formulas.

State Sen. Jeff Reichman (R-Montrose) said he, too, is concerned for health care following the man-

date.

“Who’s going to take care of people after Dec. 6? The industry is already facing shortages and mandating overtime left and right.”

Reichman said he’s not sure the executive branch has the power to withhold payments to hospitals.

“The problem is the executive branch doesn’t hold the power of the purse. (Biden) cannot say we’re not going to pay you Medicare Payments. He might be holding it over their head, but I’m not sure they are legally able to do so.”

“But as bad as things are now, and I don’t know what shortages are at Great River, but everybody in the area needs nurses and CNAs – there aren’t enough now. If you get 10% or 20% that walk on Dec. 6th or Jan. 4th and find a different profession – we’re going to be in bad shape.”

Wenzel said he’s not concerned that hospitals would be closed down if those numbers of staffers are lost, but he said he’s very concerned about another round of service cuts to residents in the Great River Health System service area.

“It’s tough. We will get out of it. I can’t tell you when and I can’t tell you how,” Wenzel said. “There are so many things changing for us. But we will make our way through it. I have not lost hope and folks in our community shouldn’t either.”

Staffers would have the option to fill out exemptions and waivers to the mandate. The waivers would be for a medical condition or a religious reason, and employees must submit a Request for Accommodation form by Nov. 30. The exemptions get reviewed by a system committee and any denials can be appealed by Dec. 6. Anyone granted an exemption would be required to wear PPE including a mask and face shield, in addition to other equipment that may be required, and maintain social distancing.

When asked what he had been hearing from staff on why the 33% weren’t getting vaccinated, Wenzel said it was either a medical or religious reason, or the employees didn’t like the mandate.

“It’s multifactorial. It could be religious, or medical, or just the mandate itself – government telling me I’ve got to do it. Those are three big ones,” he said.

“This is not unique to southeast Iowa or even Iowa. This is across the country what hospitals are

See **MEDICARE**, page 8

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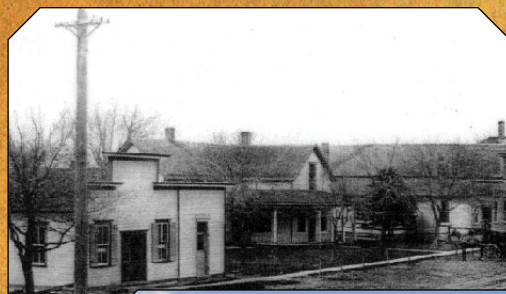


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Health News/Iowa News

Ross said LCHD won't be hurt by mandate

MEDICARE - Continued from Page 5

facing now. Across Iowa we're already facing workforce shortages like we've never seen before. And the CMS has told us very clearly, we have to be vaccinated as employees and volunteers.

"We have two choices. We either comply with the mandate as every hospital will have to do - or we don't, and here's the consequences.



GRABER

Most hospitals' largest payer is Medicare followed by, in many cases, Medicaid. And it's more pronounced in southeast Iowa because of aged populations. If we don't comply, residents in southeast Iowa will be able to come in, but we won't be a Medicare provider."

State Rep. Martin Graber says it's an unfortunate scenario for health care providers who just 18 months ago were the heroes on the front of the pandemic fight.

"These people were good enough when we needed them 18 months ago, and now because they won't take a shot which is an individual choice, we're setting them up for financial trouble."

Graber said the issue will certainly be a high priority for the 2022 legislative session set to begin Jan. 11, but he said termination shouldn't be the only option.

"If I have antibodies in my body because I've already had the virus and my employer wants me vaccinated there should be other options going forward. That shouldn't mean termination."

Reichman said the mandate needs to end.

"That mandate needs to be rescinded. They say you can turn in a waiver, but are they going to scrutinize them heavily or say the employee has a founded issue."



ROSS

He said he thinks some health care staff is concerned about the long-term effects of the vaccine.

"There are varying reasons, but some are worried about the long-term effect. It's called novel corona for a reason. We haven't seen this before and no other vaccine uses this technology,"

Reichman said.

"Usually you get a non-living sample of a virus and your body builds antibodies, but here you're blocking proteins and going about it different ways. We just don't know the long-term difference of this mRNA technology."

Wenzel said the situation is unprecedented and the mandate is making things very difficult for the system.

"We feel our best decisions are made employer to employee and when private businesses get mandates it makes it very difficult," he said.

"Candidly, we care about all of our employees and we want them to make the best decision they can. We feel for them and we don't want anybody to leave. If we lose more staff it's going to hurt. That's the bottom line. This is unprecedented."

According to Great River Health Systems' data, 59% of staff at the Fort Madison campus are vaccinated, 77% at Henry County Health Center are vaccinated, compared to 66% of staff at the West Burlington campus.

Michele Ross, administrator at Lee County Health Department, where the mandate would also be in effect for the LCHD to recover Medicare/Medicaid payments, said she wasn't as concerned about the mandate.

"I am not concerned about our operations at LCHD due to the CMS rule at this time," Ross said.

Miller joins effort to measure impact of Facebook on youth

DES MOINES - Attorney General Tom Miller today joined a nationwide investigation into Meta Platforms, Inc., formerly known as Facebook, for providing and promoting Instagram to children and young adults despite knowing that such use is associated with physical and mental health harms.

A bipartisan group of attorneys general across the country is examining whether the company violated state consumer protection laws and put the public at risk.

"I'm increasingly concerned about how Instagram's algorithms capture the attention of children and how its content affects their physical, emotional, and mental well-being," Miller said.

The investigation targets, among other things, the techniques used by Meta to increase the frequency and duration of engagement by young users and the resulting harms caused by such extended engagement.

Today's announcement follows recent reports revealing that Meta's own internal research shows that using Instagram is associated with increased risks of physical and mental health harms on young people, including depression, eating disorders, and even suicide.

AG Miller has long been concerned about the negative impacts of social media platforms on Iowa's youngest residents. In May, a bipartisan coalition of 44 attorneys general urged Facebook to abandon its plans to launch a version of Instagram for children under the age of 13.

HAPPY

THANKSGIVING

In observance of the Thanksgiving holiday, we will not publish an e-Edition Thursday, November 25 through Sunday, November 28. We'll resume publication on Monday, November 29. Breaking news will continue to be published on our website 24/7.

We wish you a very warm & wonderful Thanksgiving.

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