

The Minnesota Star Tribune

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H: 42° L: 30° | MOSTLY CLOUDY

Billing flaws widespread in autism services

Optum reviews state programs now being scrutinized for fraud.

By EVA HERSCOWITZ and JESSIE VAN BERKEL
The Minnesota Star Tribune

A program that provides support services to Minnesota children with autism has long faced scrutiny for possible Medicaid fraud over accusations of payment for services that were never provided.

Now, a long-awaited report has revealed widespread billing irregularities with the program, which grew exponentially in recent years.

Ninety percent of claims that Medicaid-funded autism intervention providers billed the state over a four-year period veered from acceptable standards, according to the initial report from an outside firm tasked with improving state fraud protections. But state officials noted that doesn't mean all of those claims are fraudulent.

The staggering number of questionable autism claims is just one finding from the Feb. 6 report meant to help the Department of Human Services strengthen its fraud-fighting measures. The agency is contending with a massive welfare

scandal that prosecutors say could total billions of dollars in stolen funds. President Donald Trump has pointed to the situation as a reason to send thousands of federal agents to Minnesota.

In October, the state contracted with Optum, a subsidiary of UnitedHealth Group, to spend a year reviewing and developing a stronger oversight system for payments in Medicaid programs.

John Connolly, the agency's deputy commissioner and state Medicaid director, said at a Feb. 6 news briefing that the department continues to share fraud allegations with the state Attorney General and U.S. Attorney's Office, but mass resignations of federal prosecutors have complicated efforts to prosecute fraud in Minnesota.

"We're forwarding the information, as we always have, in the usual channels," Connolly said. "Who's receiving that information, and who's investigating at the U.S. Attorney's Office? We're just not sure at this point, given how many folks have departed that office."

DHS publicized the Optum report about a month later than anticipated. The state tasked the firm with conducting a comprehensive evaluation of fraud,

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Vonn breaks leg in crash at Olympics

A medical crew airlifts U.S. skier and Burnsville native Lindsey Vonn after the 41-year-old, already racing on a badly injured knee, broke her left leg during the Winter Olympics women's downhill race on Feb. 8 in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy. **C1**

Photo by JACQUELYN MARTIN • The Associated Press

Qualls is hopeful his anti-DEI views lead to GOP endorsement for governor

By NATHANIEL MINOR
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Heading into precinct caucuses, Kendall Qualls was primed for a big win.

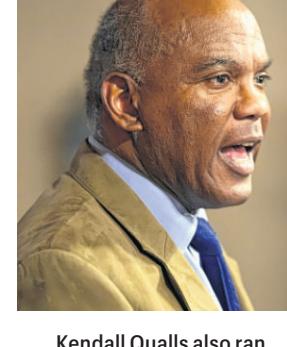
The Republican candidate for governor had racked up strong fundraising numbers and won several smaller preference polls leading up to the party's straw poll of more than 17,000 Republican activists across the state. Instead, Qualls came in second to House Speaker Lisa Demuth.

Qualls was "obviously disappointed," he told reporters on a call the day after caucuses, before quickly pivoting back to the message he's been honing through dozens of podcast interviews, cable TV hits, op-eds, and a book since his last run for governor in 2022.

"We have a choice of candidates," he said. "A legislator vs. a leader. We're looking for a political outsider."

Qualls' central message highlights his own background as a

SEE QUALLS ON A5 »



Kendall Qualls also ran for governor in 2022.

Demuth rises in GOP governor race by putting focus on fraud amid DHS surge

By WALKER ORENSTEIN
The Minnesota Star Tribune

President Donald Trump's immigration operation in Minnesota was blanketing the local and national news and threatened to shut down the federal government, but Minnesota House Speaker Lisa Demuth was talking about an issue that has united Republicans: fraud.

Chatting with Republican activists streaming into precinct caucuses in Blaine on Tuesday evening, Feb. 3, Demuth touted

a bill she carried to fight child care fraud long before the scandals rocking Minnesota's social services programs came to light.

"So as soon as I became speaker, I said we're going to set up the fraud prevention agency oversight committee," Demuth said.

So far, that approach is working. On Feb. 3, Demuth came in first over 11 rivals in a straw poll of activists, vaulting her to front-runner status in the race for the GOP nomination for governor. To

SEE DEMUTH ON A5 »



Lisa Demuth was elected Minnesota House speaker in 2025.

TOP NEWS

FBI concluded Jeffrey Epstein wasn't running a sex trafficking operation, files show. **A3**

NATION & WORLD

Medicare and Medicaid leader Dr. Oz urges people to get inoculated against measles. **A2**

STATE & REGION

The winter reprieve from road work on Interstate 394 in Minneapolis is just about over. **A4**

SPORTS

Narrow loss to Maryland may cost Gophers a chance to make a late run, Souhan writes. **C1**

BUSINESS

Voters say housing prices are too high. President Trump wants them higher. **D1**

VARIETY

Thai and West African cuisine plus treats in the 5 best foods our writers ate last week. **E1**

HAVE YOU HEARD?

In a sign of how extraordinarily pricey silver has become, Pandora

plans to make more of its charm bracelets with platinum. **D1**

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