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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, **SEE OPTUM ON A8 »**



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

Feds play fast, loose with license plates



A Jeep with Porsche tags. A Tahoe with none. The DHS says it's all for safety.

By JANA HOLLINGSWORTH
The Minnesota Star Tribune

A Jeep Cherokee left the Whipple Federal Building at Fort Snelling on a January afternoon. As it drove away, protesters quickly captured its Minnesota license plates to share with others tracking immigration agents. But the plates didn't belong to the Cherokee. They were last registered in 2014 to a Porsche 911 Turbo. It wasn't the only suspicious plate activity involving federal vehicles. There was a Chevy Tahoe with no plates. A Jeep was registered to a Ferrari with 2019 tabs. One plate was seen on four vehicles. An observer even

photographed two cars with the same plates, one driving a few feet in front of the other. A Minnesota Star Tribune review of more than 100 Minnesota license plates attached to immigration enforcement vehicles in recent weeks shows that nearly 60% were not registered with the state of Minnesota, including the Chevy Tahoe that federal agent Jonathan Ross traveled in the day he fatally shot Renee Good in south Minneapolis. Another 11% of the plates reviewed by the Star Tribune had some kind of irregularity, including expired tabs from different vehicles or plates registered to a nonexistent **SEE PLATES ON A8 »**



Photos by ALEX KORMMANN and RICHARD TSONG-TAATARIU • The Minnesota Star Tribune
An ICE agent, top, with his vehicle in Minneapolis and an observer, above, confronting an agent in St. Paul. A Minnesota Star Tribune review of over 100 Minnesota plates on agents' vehicles found most were either not registered with the state or had an irregularity.

Surge has evangelicals choosing sides

By ROHAN PRESTON
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Some 80% of evangelical Christians voted for Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election. But as the immigration crackdown has unfolded in Minnesota — where federal agents killed observers Renee Good and Alex Pretti and where many ordinary people have risen up in protest — some evangelical Christians find Trump's

actions at odds with Jesus' teachings. "As evangelical Christians, we're known for placing a high priority on the sanctity of life and human dignity," said Carl Nelson, president and CEO of Richfield-based Transform Minnesota, a 60-year-old network with hundreds of churches. "When we look at what is happening, we believe that any orderly or just approach to immigration enforcement has to adhere to those values."

Between 10% to 20% of Minnesotans are evangelical Christians, according to Nelson. Minnesota Star Tribune interviews with denomination leaders, churchgoers and former churchgoers in the wake of Operation Metro Surge found that while support remains strong for the president, cracks in the alliance have emerged. Evangelicals have been a force in America's cultural life for generations dating to Billy Graham, who was close with a

succession of presidents. But on paper, Trump — a profane, twice-divorced businessman who bragged about assaulting women and was famous for not paying his contractors — runs counter to their faith. However, once influential leaders such as Graham's son, Franklin Graham, got behind Trump, others quickly fell in line, said Phyllis Alsduf, a children's book author who spent the past five years as a member **SEE EVANGELICALS ON A8 »**

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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