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USA TODAY

THE NATION'S NEWS | \$2 | MONDAY, NOVEMBER 16, 2020



Trump defiantly tweeted about the election Sunday. TASOS KATOPODIS/GETTY

Vote fight distracts focus from COVID-19

Transition delays create obstacles for Biden team

John Fritze
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – President Donald Trump faced mounting criticism Sunday for continuing to focus his message on the election and unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud while sidestepping a resurgent coronavirus pandemic raging across the country.

Trump struck a defiant tone in a series of weekend tweets, claiming voting was "rigged" for President-elect Joe Biden. His critics said Sunday that by refusing to acknowledge the results of the Nov. 3 election, Trump was delaying the transition and complicating Biden's ability to hit the ground running in the battle against COVID-19.

In a tweet Sunday, Trump acknowledged for the first time Sunday that Biden "won" the presidential election, but he later said he was not conceding.

New coronavirus cases have surged in the USA during November, with the country hitting record new infection levels. Almost 170,000 new infections were reported Saturday, according to Johns Hopkins University – the litth

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Trump says Biden 'won,' then backtracks

President again claims the election was "rigged." **2A**

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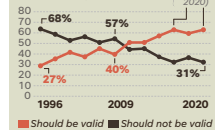
- Dems wage war over party's future.
- Trump blames cities for fraud, but suburbs actually cost him the election.
- MAGA march draws large crowds.



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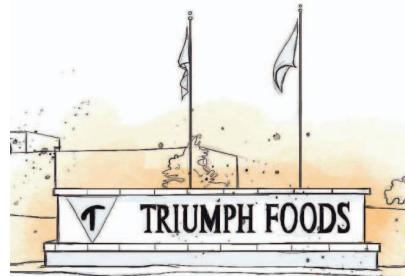
USA TODAY Snapshots Same-sex marriage support matches record-high level

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CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC INVESTIGATION



'They think workers are like dogs'

How pork plant execs sacrificed safety for profits

Rachel Axon, Kyle Bagenstose and Kevin Crowe
USA TODAY
Sky Chadde
Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting

Bernardo Serpa cut pork legs eight hours a day, six days a week. He made the same cut roughly 12,000 times a shift, wielding a sharp knife as a production line worker at the second-largest pork processing plant in the country.

Then the coronavirus pandemic hit. In one week, dozens of his colleagues at the Triumph Foods plant in St. Joseph, Missouri, got sick. It prompted the company to test all of its 2,800 employees. In late April, large white tents appeared outside. When it was Serpa's turn, he got his nose swabbed. Then he went back inside where he stood elbow to elbow, shoulder to shoulder, with dozens of other potentially infected employees to await the results.

Serpa's test came back negative, but his relief was short-lived. One week later, the Cuban immigrant was among hundreds of his co-workers to contract the coronavirus in what would become one of the nation's largest meatpacking plant outbreaks.

Serpa would spend nearly four months in the hospital, much of it in a coma.

On Oct. 16, he died. USA TODAY and the Midwest Center for Investigative Reporting spent five months piecing together the pivotal moments in the Triumph Foods outbreak, interviewing more than a dozen current and former workers and examining thousands of pages of government records.

The reporting found Triumph failed to respond with effective safeguards during a crucial period from mid-March to mid-April that could have contained the spread of COVID-19. And local health officials, who received complaints from employees and their family members, missed several opportunities to investigate. They instead took the company's word that it was doing all it could to protect its workers.

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Outbreak

How cases of COVID-19 multiplied at the Triumph Foods plant in St. Joseph, Missouri, this year.



VERONICA BRAVO/USA TODAY

About this story

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Rural US hospitals ravaged by virus

Not enough beds, medical staff for soaring infections

Ken Alltucker
USA TODAY

In North Texas, Moore County Hospital District CEO Jeff Turner is managing more than his small rural hospital can handle.

The hospital in Dumas has space and staff for 11 coronavirus patients, but only three who are really sick and need intensive care. When they need lifesaving therapies, Turner's hospital can't provide, his staff tries to find open beds at larger hospitals in Amarillo, about 50 miles to the south.



America's small-town hospitals aren't designed to respond to global pandemics. BRETT CARLSEN/GETTY IMAGES

When those hospitals are full, his staff scours for space, first in Midland, Wichita Falls and Lubbock, then in Dallas, Denver, Albuquerque, Oklahoma City – even Kansas City, Missouri, more than 500 miles away.

Some patients have died waiting for space at big-city hospitals. Six patients died in six days recently; two died within 24 hours last week.

"In a small town, these are our neighbors, our family members," Turner said. "That makes it tough."

Last spring, the coronavirus attacked major metro areas like New York City and Houston. This summer, it spread to suburban communities and ravaged the Sunbelt.

The current wave, which has surpassed 2,000 deaths a day, frightens public health officials because it's tearing into the frayed health care safety net of rural America.

Small hospitals, understaffed and financially vulnerable before the pandemic, are under siege as the virus runs unchecked from North Dakota to the Texas Panhandle. Many of these

See HOSPITALS, Page 6A

'Reinfection phenomenon' and vaccines

Some people believe they've had COVID-19 twice. Scientists are trying to figure out what that means for vaccines. **1D**

Would struggling kids do better in classrooms?

Schools are grappling with how to weigh academic performance against safety concerns. **1D**

For Thanksgiving plans, start quarantining now

States have warned against family gatherings. But for those who take the risk, here's how to stay safe. **4D**

CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Triumph

Continued from Page 1A

As outbreaks spread through meatpacking plants across the country, some experts warned that Triumph and others in the industry would choose production over worker safety. Since then, workers and their unions have accused companies of doing the bare minimum to protect staff and time and again finding ways to keep their lines running.

At the start of the pandemic, Triumph Foods employees worked up to 10 hours a day, crammed side by side. Even after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended the general public wear face masks, the company did not require them for weeks. It initially did not screen sick employees and implemented a bonus program that rewarded workers for perfect attendance even as they complained and fell ill.

On April 19, the day before the plant's first positive case, Triumph's board chairman, Glenn Stolt, shared a coronavirus conspiracy theory video on his Facebook page that claims 5G cell towers were instead to blame for illnesses, that the virus is less deadly than the seasonal flu, and that the CDC's recommendation on 6-foot social distancing was "misinformation."

Weeks later, nearly 500 Triumph employees — roughly a fifth of its workforce — tested positive. Four workers, including Serpa, have since died.

Executives at Triumph Foods had known for weeks that the nation's meatpacking plants were particularly susceptible to the coronavirus. By the end of April, thousands of meat plant workers across the nation were sick. At least 30 had died.

Factories in many industries — including at least 33 meatpacking plants — had shut down temporarily, sending workers home to protect them from infection. Triumph never did.

Instead, the company worked behind the scenes to lobby state and federal officials to push back on safety recommendations and keep its plant open.

State health officials, meanwhile, never used their authority to shut down the plant. Missouri economic and agricultural officials advocated keeping Triumph open. With Triumph's input, local members of Congress lobbied the CDC and the Occupational Health and Safety Administration in mid-May for relief from COVID-19 guidelines such as those recommending workers stand at least 6 feet apart. Do the best you can, the CDC told them.

After the extent of Triumph's outbreak became clear in May, the company withheld information on the total number of cases and encouraged state agencies to do the same, according to company emails and interviews with workers. Weekly reports to the union stopped. State and local health departments said cases from the plant spread to Kansas City, Missouri, and to eight counties in the state and Kansas.

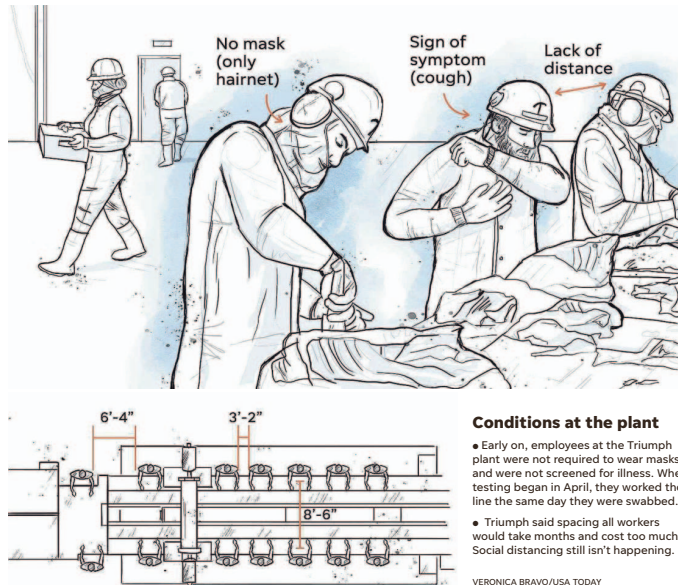
Missouri's Department of Health and Senior Services did all it could to help Triumph, its employees and the community, wrote Lisa Cox, an agency spokeswoman. That included testing and contact tracing designed to limit additional exposure. Based on the results, she said, state health director Randall Williams "determined closure was not necessary."

A spokeswoman defended the state agriculture department's involvement as helping Triumph ensure pork supply. "If we had any concern beyond protecting food workers," wrote spokeswoman Sami Jo Freeman, "it was for our Missouri families heading to the grocery store."

Triumph declined to make its top executives available for interviews and did not directly answer a lengthy list of questions. Instead, Triumph provided statements that pointed to efforts it took in response to the coronavirus, including providing personal protective equipment to employees, installing plastic barriers in tight working spaces and giving two weeks' pay to those who had to isolate. Those efforts cost nearly \$7 million, the company said.

"Because of our early, thorough, and proactive response to COVID-19," Triumph CEO Mark Campbell said in the statement, "Triumph Foods became one of the industry leaders in the United States for its response to the pandemic and remains one today."

The company stressed that its actions should be understood in the context of operating during an evolving pandemic and characterized its interaction with government as seeking clarification. The company "went above and beyond" government mandates, Tri-



Conditions at the plant

- Early on, employees at the Triumph plant were not required to wear masks and were not screened for illness. When testing began in April, they worked the line the same day they were swabbed.

- Triumph said spacing all workers would take months and cost too much. Social distancing still isn't happening.

VERONICA BRAVO/USA TODAY

"They brought me back to work, for what? For me to die there?"

Bernardo Serpa

umph said. In fact, the government mandated little because Triumph and other meatpacking executives immediately pushed back against a host of recommendations that would have cost them time and money.

Triumph touted its preemptive effort to test its entire workforce. Without it, the company said, it would have kept sick workers in the plant and all but guaranteed further spread.

But Triumph did keep sick workers in the plant for days while they awaited test results. Testing was an unusual step for the industry at the time, but so too was keeping the plant open after recording hundreds of cases.

After getting their noses swabbed in the parking lot in late April, Serpa and his colleagues went back to work with people whom tests would later confirm had been infected and likely shedding the virus for days.

"They brought me back to work, for what?" Serpa said in a telephone interview from his hospital bed in July, three months before his death. "For me to die there?"

April 20

Triumph learned of its first two cases on April 20.

Within hours, Williams, the state health director, was on the phone with Triumph's plant manager. That evening, he ordered 38 tests for workers on those lines.

Rather than take action, the city relied on Triumph to call the shots. Bradley said she asked the company's CEO to shut down a line where sick employees worked and was told her request was unreasonable.

"I said, 'Well, this virus spreads rapidly and easily, and there is a risk to people in your plant,'" Bradley said in an interview. "They were aware, and they knew the risk and wanted to try other options."

Meanwhile, case counts at the plant were climbing. By the end of the week, dozens more employees had tested positive. What started as a couple of cases now stood at 46.

It was about to get worse.

April 28

President Donald Trump handed meatpacking plants a gift on Tuesday, April 28, signing an executive order declaring them "critical infrastructure." It stopped short of ordering plants to stay open, but companies and government officials took it as a pass.

Nearly 1,000 of Triumph's workers lined up outside the plant that same day, spaced 8 feet apart, shuffling through white tents during the second of five days of coronavirus testing.

Serpa was tested this week, too. His results came back negative, so Triumph sent potentially contagious workers back into the plant immediately after testing.

That same week, one janitor went home feeling sick the day he was tested. But he worked Wednesday and part of Thursday before a supervisor told him to go home.

"I'm pretty sure I had it a couple days prior before they tested me," he said, "and I touched every part of that building and every part of that place."

Serpa was tested this week, too. His results came back negative, so Triumph kept him on the line. He would soon blame the company for that decision.

Martin Rosas, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 2, says more workers fell ill during the days they were in the plant with their infected co-workers.

Lynelle Phillips, vice president of the Missouri Public Health Association, said as a precautionary response Triumph should have quarantined all workers for two weeks.

In defense of its decision to remain open, Triumph pointed to Trump's order and a recommendation from the state health director.

But the meatpacking industry influenced the executive order the company now uses to justify its actions. A week before Trump's order, the North American Meat Institute, where Triumph's CEO is a board member, shared a draft containing similar language with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

May 6

Arturo Chavez Valencia, 44, was the first Triumph worker to die from the outbreak. As he was wrapping up two weeks of quarantine at home, his condition took a turn. Paramedics declared him dead on May 6 at 1:15 p.m.

At that moment, executives from Triumph were on the phone with aides for two of Missouri's congressional representatives, Republicans Vicky Hartzler and Sam Graves, according to a company email. The executives came to that meeting with a list of six CDC and OSHA guidelines they questioned. Key among their concerns: Spacing workers out more than 6 feet would take months and require "a significant stoppage and re-engineering of our facility."

By the next morning, the representatives drafted a letter with the company's concerns.

In his response to that letter in June, CDC Director Robert Redfield repeated that the guidance was just that, a recommendation. Meatpacking plants "should" space workers 6 feet apart "wherever possible."

Triumph still has not done that.

On May 11, a temperature check caught Serpa's fever as he arrived at the plant for his shift. At 64, his age, weight, high blood pressure and diabetes put him at high risk.

By that afternoon, he leaned on staffers at Mosaic Life Care hospital as he staggered through the doors. Diagnosed with COVID-19, he'd soon be in a month-long coma, passing his 65th and final birthday alone in the intensive care unit.

"They knew that the plant was contaminated, and they never closed it," said Serpa's wife, Maritza Drake, in Spanish. "They had a lot of cases, and they never closed the plant."

Epilogue

Within a week of each other in early July, two more workers died from COVID-19. One was a maintenance worker in his 50s who fell ill in early June; the other a man in his 60s who tested positive in early May. Relatives of both men declined to speak to reporters.

Since the pandemic began, OSHA has opened four investigations at Triumph, each in the wake of a coronavirus-related death.

In Serpa's case, the agency has ruled his death wasn't related to work and wasn't from COVID-19, but Drake said the toll the virus took on his body led to his death. OSHA has not ruled on the other cases.

By mid-June, Triumph announced that "nearly all" employees had recovered, noting around 50 people were still out sick. "Our production volume continues to improve due to the stabilization of our workforce," it stated.

Workers say conditions in the plant have improved, but that all issues are not addressed.

"The union says workers still can't distance from each other."

Triumph has changed its policy about testing, workers said. Now workers who are tested are sent home until they know their results.

The policy change was too late to help Bernardo Serpa, who couldn't walk and relied on supplemental oxygen when he returned home from the hospital and rehab in late August. Maritza Drake, his wife of 26 years, had to bathe him and help him up the stairs to their home. On Oct. 13, he returned to the hospital.

She was by his hospital bedside when he died in his early morning hours of Oct. 16. Doctors told Drake that Serpa's kidneys and lungs failed. Now she awaits a chance to take her husband's ashes back to Cuba.

Across the highway, Triumph continues churning out pork.

"They think workers are like dogs," Serpa had told a reporter from his hospital bed in July. "If we don't work, they get rid of us. And in any case they get new workers."