

Minnesota buys a warehouse to store bodies of expected COVID-19 victims

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On May 18, the state of Minnesota purchased a 75,000 square foot refrigerated produce warehouse with the capacity to store 5100 bodies of persons expected to succumb to the surge of COVID-19 in the coming weeks.

According to the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the state paid \$5.5 million for the Bix Produce Company cold storage facility to serve as an “emergency morgue.” Operational and improvement costs for the repurposing of the property are estimated to bring the total to about \$6.9 million. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is expected to reimburse the state of Minnesota for 3/4’s of the expense.

The property had been for sale for over a year. When the Minnesota Department of Administration approached warehouse owners in the Twin Cities seeking lease agreements for buildings suitable for the macabre project, none could be persuaded to rent for the stated purpose.

The Bix Produce Company is headquartered in Little Canada, Minnesota, a northern suburb of the Twin Cities. The company had used the recently acquired warehouse as a distributing facility for the bulk trucking of pre-cut fruits and vegetables to supermarkets, hotels, schools and restaurants in the greater metro.

The Department of Administration explained the building was needed to “accommodate a surge in demand for the timely, dignified, and temporary storage of human remains.” A surge in deaths is expected as the direct consequence of the abandonment of any and all effective public health preventive measures across the country to protect the population against coronavirus.

Minnesota and other states’ government officials are doubtless mindful of horrid scenes in America’s major

cities in which funeral homes in recent weeks were completely overrun and resorted to piling decomposing corpses in trucks, such as on the streets of Brooklyn, New York.

The assistant commissioner at the Department of Administration, Curtis Yoakum, announced that, “the facility will be used if available mortuary facilities are overwhelmed and would not be limited to COVID-19 victims.” At the department’s direction, emergency managers across Minnesota have surveyed hospitals, medical examiners, and funeral homes as to storage capacity. The available storage for the deceased is half full presently.

The Department of Administration consulted varied pandemic models for the expected surge of spread. They expect the peak of casualties to jump between now and August to as many as 1000 deaths a week, with half of those total fatalities coming in a 4 to 5 week period.

The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reported on May 9 that the initiative and authorization to acquire the Bix warehouse came from the Minnesota Legislative COVID-19 Response Commission. A ten member legislative panel of Democrats and Republicans unanimously approved the acquisition.

Governor Tim Walz (D) said of the announced plan, “We will not allow our dead to be set somewhere undignified, which is a horrible worse case scenario.”

Joe Kelly, director of the Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management agency, providing a rationale for the buying of the warehouse, “I know this is a sensitive topic..., but we need to have a plan for a large number of deaths.”

On March 19, Governor Walz signed an appropriations bill for \$200 million allegedly for resources to protect the population from the

pandemic's onslaught. Sixty-five million remains in the fund, and \$135 million was used to buy testing equipment and related materials to acquire alternate care sites, and to purchase personal protective equipment for health care workers. The state government reportedly counts on federal reimbursement for these outlays.

Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) announced May 23 that the state had seen the greatest jump in COVID-19 cases in one day since the outbreak, with a record number of persons hospitalized. On Saturday, there were 847 new cases bringing the confirmed state total to 19,845, including another 10 deaths for a total deceased of 852. Most of the state's deaths have come from long term care units.

State public health officials have pleaded with persons to use face masks in public and maintain social distancing practices in the opening of businesses, reiterating that the spread of COVID comes from the reservoir of asymptomatic individuals of all ages. Minnesota health commissioner Jan Malcolm reported May 22 that several of the Twin Cities hospitals are approaching capacity in their intensive care units (ICU's).

The Minnesota State Fair, a 12 day annual event late summer, was cancelled this year. Last year's fair attendance was 2 million, and the last time the fair was called off was for the polio epidemic in 1946.

Malcolm reported that she laid out the risks to the state fair and government officials, saying "it would have been a pretty predictable accelerator of community spread."

Lobbyists for tavern and restaurant owners and church officials have been demanding loosening of restrictions on populations congregating at their facilities.

Governor Walz to date has said all eateries must serve only outdoors.

Minnesota Catholic and Lutheran church representatives said they would defy Walz's congregating bans and resume services.

Anti-hunger activists confirmed to MPR that many more Minnesotans are depending on food emergency services with the pandemic. In 2018, Hunger Solutions of Minnesota reported food insecurity in one of twelve families. Presently, Blue Cross Blue Shield reports that one in three state residents are food insecure.

Jackson County in southern Minnesota has seen a doubling of monthly food shelf use in the last year. Even before the pandemic, use of food pantries in Minnesota surged 775% in the last 5 years. Food pantries saw a jump in usage in 2008 and has been steadily increasing ever since. Minnesota's hungry have made visits to food relief units 3 million times in 9 consecutive years.

With the state's lockdown for the pandemic, 692,000 applied for unemployment. Gary Colburn, a 66 year old veteran accessing food at a pantry and homeless 3 times in the last decade, told MPR "We're all just one paycheck away from the street."

The Minnesota Department of Health reports that, before the pandemic's onset, 4 of 10 children qualified for free or reduced cost public school lunches.

The Sheridan House, a non-profit supplying food to children on weekends and extended school breaks, saw an overnight increase in calls for food of 400 percent. Rob Williams, Sheridan's director, said with the pandemic and state schools closure, the increased need "was instant."

Pre-COVID, Sheridan supplied children 25,000 meals a week, and presently they provide over 100,000 a week.



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