When COVID-19 transmission rates are as high as they are in Nebraska, epidemiological studies indicate that a combination of the following four interventions is the most effective strategy to control the epidemic:

1) Eliminating gatherings over 10 people,
2) Eliminating indoor dining/bars/clubs,
3) De-densifying schools, and
4) Mandating face mask wearing outside of one’s home.

While the first three interventions can be associated with significant direct economic costs, face mask mandates carry almost no inherent economic toll, and can be easily implemented.

The two studies most frequently used as arguments against face mask use for COVID-19 actually provide compelling arguments in favor of universal facemask mandates. The first study examined community exposures associated with positive COVID-19 cases and found that 85% of people testing positive for COVID-19 reported “often” or “always” wearing a face mask. This study was conducted in cities that already had mask mandates in place, however, and thus face mask use was equally high among confirmed coronavirus cases and matched negative controls. The risk factors most strongly associated with COVID-19 infection were visiting a restaurant or bar where face mask use was not common – indicating that venues where people are unmasked present the highest risk. The second paper described a study in Denmark comparing a group recommended to wear face masks to a group that did not receive such a recommendation. While this study found no statistically significant difference in infection between the two groups, it was conducted when community transmission rates were low in Denmark and thus had low rates of infection in both groups. More importantly, mask usage in Denmark at the time was very low - fewer than 5% of the general public were using face masks; therefore, the study did not measure the most impactful feature of face masks, which is preventing infected persons from transmitting virus to others. Finally, surveyed compliance among the “mask recommended” group was low. In short, the study showed that a mere recommendation of face mask use for a small segment of the population was insufficient to impact transmission. This finding supports the use of universal mandates as a tool to increase compliance and reduce transmission.

1 https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6936a5.htm?s_cid=mm6936a5_e&deliveryName=DM37614
2 https://www.acpjournals.org/doi/10.7326/M20-6817