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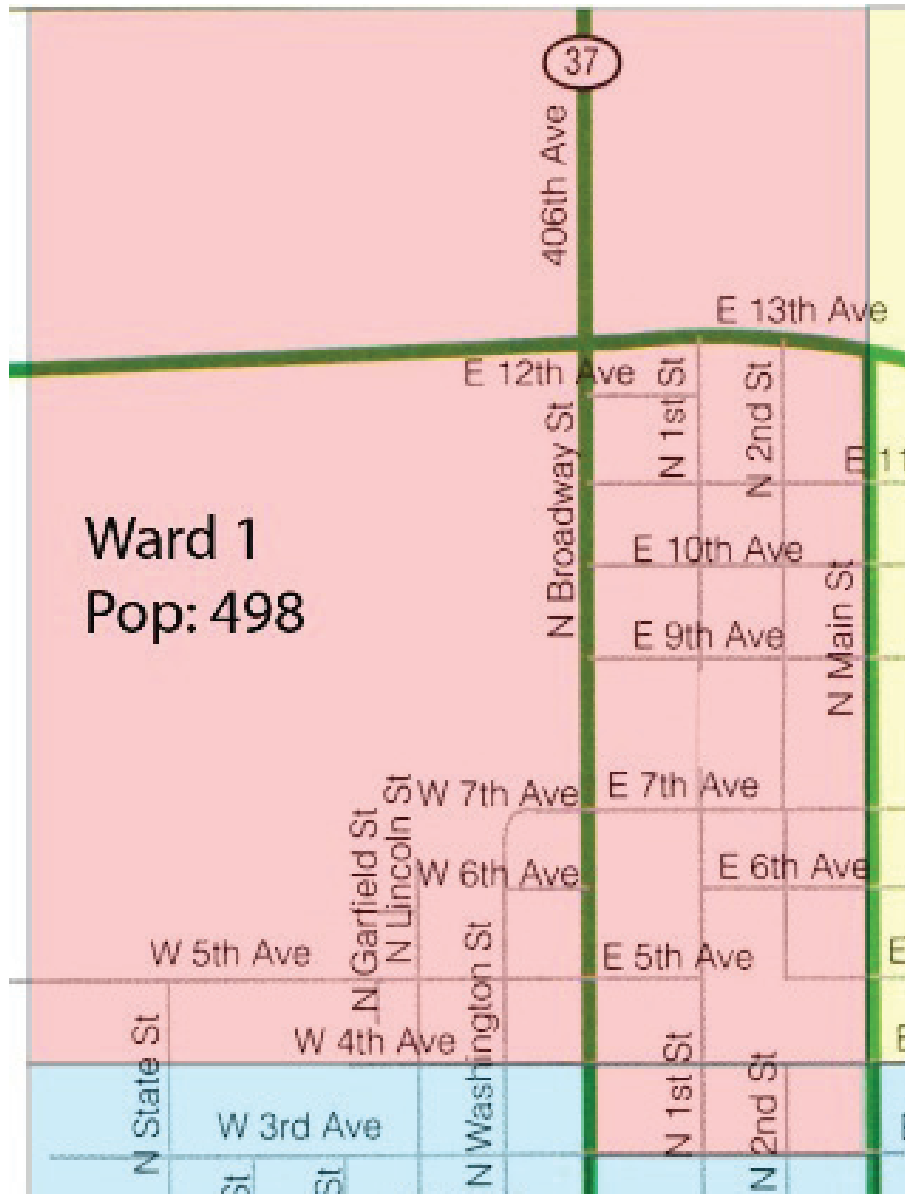


OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.

Correction Election slated for Ward 1

The election is slated for Ward 1, not Ward 2. It will be between incumbent Jon Cutler and challenger Mitchell Locke. The pink area on the map represents Ward 1.



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Call now to get your ADT security system starting at \$19.99/mo.*



Plus get \$100 off installation† when you call today!

*Requires 36-month monitoring contract for intrusion only with a minimum charge of \$28.99 after the 12 month term. Equipment shown requires ADT Secure or higher. Early term. and installation fees apply. Taxes add'l. For full terms and pricing see below.

†Requires minimum purchase of \$449.



Cameras

Choose from indoor, outdoor & doorbell cams so you can keep watch even when you aren't there with upgrade to ADT Video.

Life safety

Let us help you stay protected from fire, CO, floods & more!



\$100 off installation
Upgrade to a touchscreen panel and smart home equipment or stick with basic home security. Either way, you'll save \$100!



YOUR EXCLUSIVE SAVINGS COUPON

STARTING AT
\$19.99
/mo

BONUS \$100 off installation



Call now to redeem your exclusive offer!

▶ **1-605-824-1118**

Redemption code:

DF-CD-NP-Q121

Reply by:

April 15, 2021

We're available 24/7. See if you qualify for same-day service!

***\$19.99/month + †\$100 off Installation:** Requires 36-month monitoring contract with a minimum charge of \$28.99/mo. (before instant savings) (24-month monitoring contract in California, total fees from \$695.76 (before instant savings) and enrollment in Easy Pay. Service and installation charges vary depending on system configuration, equipment and services selected. Offer includes (i) \$9.00 instant savings per month applicable only towards monthly monitoring charge for the first 12 months of initial contract term (total value of \$108.00) and (ii) \$100 instant savings on installation with minimum purchase of \$449 after promotion is applied. Traditional Service Level requires landline phone. Excludes ADT's Extended Limited Warranty. Upon early termination by Customer, ADT may charge 75% of the remaining monthly service charges for the balance of the initial contract term. Limit one offer per new ADT customer contract. Not valid on purchases from ADT Authorized Dealers. Expires 4/15/2021.

Interactive Services: ADT Command Interactive Solutions Services ("ADT Command") helps you manage your home environment and family lifestyle. Requires purchase of an ADT alarm system with 36 month monitoring contract ranging \$45.99-\$57.99/mo with QSP (24-month monitoring contract in California, total fees ranging \$1,103.76-\$1,391.76), enrollment in ADT Easy Pay, and a compatible device with Internet and email access. These interactive services do not cover the operation or maintenance of any household equipment/systems that are connected to the ADT Command equipment. All ADT Command services are not available with all interactive service levels. All ADT Command services may not be available in all geographic areas. You may be required to pay additional charges to purchase equipment required to utilize the interactive service features you desire.

General: Additional charges may apply in areas that require guard response service for municipal alarm verification. System remains property of ADT. Local permit fees may be required. Prices and offers subject to change and may vary by market. Additional taxes and fees may apply. Satisfactory credit required. A security deposit may be required. Simulated screen images and photos are for illustrative purposes only.

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DF-CD-NP-Q121

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

GOLF ALIGNMENTS

CLASS B

Region 1

Aberdeen Christian
Britton-Hecla
Castlewood
*Clark/Willow Lake
Deuel
*Florence/Henry
Frederick Area
Great Plains Lutheran
Hamlin
Hitchcock-Tulare
*Iroquois/Doland
Langford Area
Leola
*Waubay/Summit
Webster Area

Region 2

Arlington
Chester Area
Colman-Egan
De Smet
Dell Rapids St. Mary
Deubrook Area
Elkton-Lake Benton
*Estelline/Hendricks
Flandreau Indian
Howard
James Valley Christian
Lake Preston
*Oldham-Ramona/Rutland
*Wessington Springs
Wolsey-Wessington

Region 3

Alcester-Hudson
Baltic
Bridgewater-Emery
Canistota
Centerville
Freeman
*Freeman Academy/Marion
Garretson
Gayville-Volin
Irene-Wakonda
*McCook Central/Montrose
Parker
Viborg-Hurley

Region 4

*Andes Cent./Dakota Christian
Avon
Bon Homme
Burke
Corsica-Stickney
Ethan
Gregory
Hanson
*Kimball/White Lake
Marty
Mitchell Christian
*Mt. Vernon/Plankinton
Platte-Geddes
*Sanborn Central/Woonsocket
*Scotland/Menno
Tripp-Delmont

Region 5

Bowdle
Crow Creek
Edmunds Central
Eureka
Faulkton Area
Herreid
Highmore-Harrold
Ipswich
Lower Brule
Lyman
Miller
*Potter County
Selby Area
Stanley County
Sully Buttes

Region 6

Bennett County
*Bison/Hettinger/Scranton
Crazy Horse
Harding County
Hill City
Jones County
Kadoka Area
Lemmon
McIntosh
McLaughlin
Newell
Philip
RC Christian
Takini
Timber Lake
Tiospaye Topa
Wall
White River

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

SOCCER ALIGNMENTS

Class AA

*Aberdeen Central
Brandon Valley
Brookings
*Douglas/RC Christian
Harrisburg
Huron
Mitchell
O’Gorman
Pierre T.F. Riggs
RC Central
RC Stevens
SF Jefferson
SF Lincoln
SF Roosevelt
SF Washington
Spearfish
*Sturgis Brown
Watertown
Yankton

Class A

Belle Fourche
Dakota Valley (G)
*Freeman Academy (B)
*Garretson (G)
Groton Area
Hot Springs
James Valley Christian (B)
SF Christian
St. Thomas More
Tea Area
Vermillion
West Central (G)

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

TRACK & FIELD ALIGNMENTS

CLASS AA

Aberdeen Central	Huron	RC Stevens	Spearfish
Brandon Valley	Mitchell	SF Jefferson	Sturgis Brown
Brookings	O'Gorman	SF Lincoln	Watertown
Douglas	Pierre T.F. Riggs	SF Roosevelt	Yankton
Harrisburg	RC Central	SF Washington	

CLASS A

Region 1

*Clark/Willow Lake (from 2 to 1)

*Florence/Henry (from 2 to 1)

Groton Area
Milbank
Redfield
Sisseton
Tiospa Zina
Webster Area

Region 3

Baltic
Dell Rapids
Garretson
Madison(from 5 to 3)
*McCook Central/Montrose (5-3)
SF Christian
Tri-Valley
West Central

Region 5

*Andes Central/Dakota Christian
Bon Homme (B to A)
*Ethan/Parkston
Hanson (B to A)
*Mt. Vernon/Plankinton
*Sanborn Central/Woonsocket
Wagner

Region 7

Bennett County
Lakota Tech
Little Wound
Pine Ridge
Red Cloud
St. Francis Indian
Todd County

Region 2

Deubrook Area (B to A)
Deuel
Elkton-Lake Benton (B to A)
Flandreau
Flandreau Indian
Great Plains Lutheran (B to A)
Hamlin
Sioux Valley

Region 4

Beresford
Canton
Dakota Valley
Elk Point-Jefferson
Lennox
Parker (from 5 to 4)
Tea Area
Vermillion

Region 6

Chamberlain
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte
Crow Creek
Dupree (B to A)
McLaughlin
Mobridge-Pollock
Stanley County
Winner

Region 8

Belle Fourche
*Custer
Hill City
Hot Springs
Lead-Deadwood
RC Christian
St. Thomas More

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS Track & Field CLASS B

Region 1

Aberdeen Christian
Aberdeen Roncalli (A to B)
Britton-Hecla
*Dakota Hills
Frederick Area
Langford Area
Leola
Northwestern
School for the Blind/VI
Tri-State
Warner

Region 3

Arlington
Castlewood
De Smet
*Estelline/Hendricks
Hitchcock-Tulare
*Iroquois/Doland
James Valley Christian
Lake Preston
Waverly-South Shore (1 to 3)
Wolsey-Wessington

Region 5

Alcester-Hudson
Centerville
Freeman
*Freeman Academy/Marion
Gayville-Volin
Irene-Wakonda
Menno
Scotland
Viborg-Hurley

Region 7

Crazy Horse
Edgemont
Jones County
Kadoka Area
Lyman
New Underwood
Oelrichs
Philip
Wall
White River

Region 2

Faulkton Area
*Herreid/Selby Area
Highmore-Harrold
Ipswich
Lower Brule
Miller (A to B)
*North Central
*Potter County
Sully Buttes
Sunshine Bible Academy

Region 4

Bridgewater-Emery (5 to 4)
Canistota (5 to 4)
Chester Area
Colman-Egan
Dell Rapids St. Mary
Howard
McCrossan
Mitchell Christian
*Oldham-Ramona/Rutland
Sioux Falls Lutheran

Region 6

Avon
Burke
Colome
Corsica-Stickney
Gregory
*Kimball/White Lake
Marty
Platte-Geddes
*Tripp-Delmont/Armour
*Wessington Springs (3 to 6)

Region 8

Bison
Faith
Harding County
Lemmon
McIntosh
Newell
Takini
Timber Lake
Tiospaye Topa
Wakpala

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

VOLLEYBALL

CLASS AA

Aberdeen Central	Huron	RC Stevens	Spearfish
Brandon Valley	Mitchell	SF Jefferson	Sturgis Brown
Brookings	O'Gorman	SF Lincoln	Watertown
Douglas	Pierre T.F. Riggs	SF Roosevelt	Yankton
Harrisburg	RC Central	SF Washington	

CLASS A

Region 1

*Clark/Willow Lake (from 2 to 1)

*Florence/Henry (from 2 to 1)

Groton Area
Milbank
Redfield
Sisseton
Tiospa Zina
Webster Area

Region 3

Baltic
Dell Rapids
Garretson
Madison (from 5 to 3)
*McCook Central/Montrose (5-3)
SF Christian
Tri-Valley
West Central

Region 5

*Andes Central/Dakota Christian
Bon Homme (B to A)
Hanson (B to A)
*Mt. Vernon/Plankinton
Parkston
*Sanborn Central/Woonsocket
Wagner

Region 7

Bennett County
Lakota Tech
Little Wound
Pine Ridge
Red Cloud
St. Francis Indian
Todd County

Region 2

Deubrook Area (B to A)
Deuel
Elkton-Lake Benton (B to A)
Flandreau
Flandreau Indian
Great Plains Lutheran (B to A)
Hamlin
Sioux Valley

Region 4

Beresford
Canton
Dakota Valley
Elk Point-Jefferson
Lennox
Parker (from 5 to 4)
Tea Area
Vermillion

Region 6

Chamberlain
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte
Crow Creek
Dupree (B to A)
McLaughlin
Mobridge-Pollock
Stanley County
Winner

Region 8

Belle Fourche
*Custer
Hill City
Hot Springs
Lead-Deadwood
RC Christian
St. Thomas More

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

Volleyball CLASS B

Region 1

Aberdeen Christian
Aberdeen Roncalli (A to B)
Britton-Hecla
Langford Area
*Leola/Frederick Area
Northwestern
Warner
*Waubay/Summit
Wilmot

Region 3

Arlington
Castlewood
De Smet
*Estelline/Hendricks
Hitchcock-Tulare
*Iroquois/Doland
James Valley Christian
Lake Preston
Waverly-South Shore (1 to 3)
Wolsey-Wessington

Region 5

Alcester-Hudson
Centerville
Freeman
*Freeman Academy/Marion
Gayville-Volin
Irene-Wakonda
Menno
Scotland
Viborg-Hurley

Region 7

Crazy Horse
Edgemont
Jones County
Kadoka Area
Lyman
New Underwood
Oelrichs
Philip
Wall
White River

Region 2

Faulkton Area
*Herreid/Selby Area
Highmore-Harrold
Ipswich
Lower Brule
Miller (A to B)
*North Central
*Potter County
Sully Buttes
Sunshine Bible Academy

Region 4

Bridgewater-Emery (5 to 4)
Canistota (5 to 4)
Chester Area
Colman-Egan
Dell Rapids St. Mary
Ethan
Howard
Mitchell Christian
*Oldham-Ramona/Rutland
Sioux Falls Lutheran

Region 6

Avon
Burke
Colome
Corsica-Stickney
Gregory
*Kimball/White Lake
Marty
Platte-Geddes
*Tripp-Delmont/Armour
*Wessington Springs (3 to 6)

Region 8

Bison
Faith
Harding County
Lemmon
McIntosh
Newell
Takini
Timber Lake
Tiospaye Topa
Wakpala

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2021-2022 PROPOSED SPORTS ALIGNMENTS

WRESTLING ALIGNMENTS

CLASS A

Region 1

Brookings
*Dell Rapids
Madison
O'Gorman
SF Jefferson
SF Roosevelt
Tea Area
Watertown
West Central

Region 2

*Beresford/Alcester-Hudson
Brandon Valley
Dakota Valley
Harrisburg
Lennox
SF Lincoln
SF Washington
Vermillion
Yankton

Region 3

*Aberdeen Central
Chamberlain
*Cheyenne-Eagle Butte/Dupree
Huron
Milbank
Mitchell
Pierre T.F. Riggs
Todd County

Region 4

Belle Fourche
*Douglas
Little Wound
Pine Ridge
RC Central
RC Stevens
Spearfish
Sturgis Brown

CLASS B

Region 1

*Britton-Hecla
*Clark/Willow Lake
*Deuel
Faulkton Area
Groton Area
*Hamlin/Castlewood
*Ipswich/Bowdle
*Iroquois/Doland
*Kingsbury County
*Potter County
*Redfield Area
Sioux Valley
Sisseton
Sully Buttes
Tiospa Zina
*Warner/Northwestern
*Webster Area

Region 2

Canton
Chester Area
Elk Point-Jefferson
*Flandreau
Garretson
Howard
*Marion/Freeman
*McCook Central/Montrose
Parker
Tri-Valley
Viborg-Hurley

Region 3

*Andes Cent./Dakota Chr.
*Bon Homme/Scotland/Avon
*Burke/Gregory
Crow Creek
Hanson
*Kimball/Wh. Lake/Plat-Ged.
Lower Brule
*Miller/Highmore-Harrold
*Mt. Vern./Plank./Cor-Stic.
*Parkston
St. Francis Indian
Sunshine Bible Academy
Wagner
*Wess. Sprgs./Woon./Wol-Wess
*Winner Area

Region 4

Bennett County
Custer
Elk Mountain
Faith
Harding County
Hill City
Hot Springs
Lead-Deadwood
*Lemmon/McIntosh
Lyman
McLaughlin
Mobridge-Pollock
Newell
*Philip Area
Red Cloud
St. Thomas More
Stanley County

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American Standard
150 YEARS OF EXCELLENCE



NEW
SHOWER DESIGN

ENJOYING A
NEW SHOWER
IS EASIER THAN
YOU THINK



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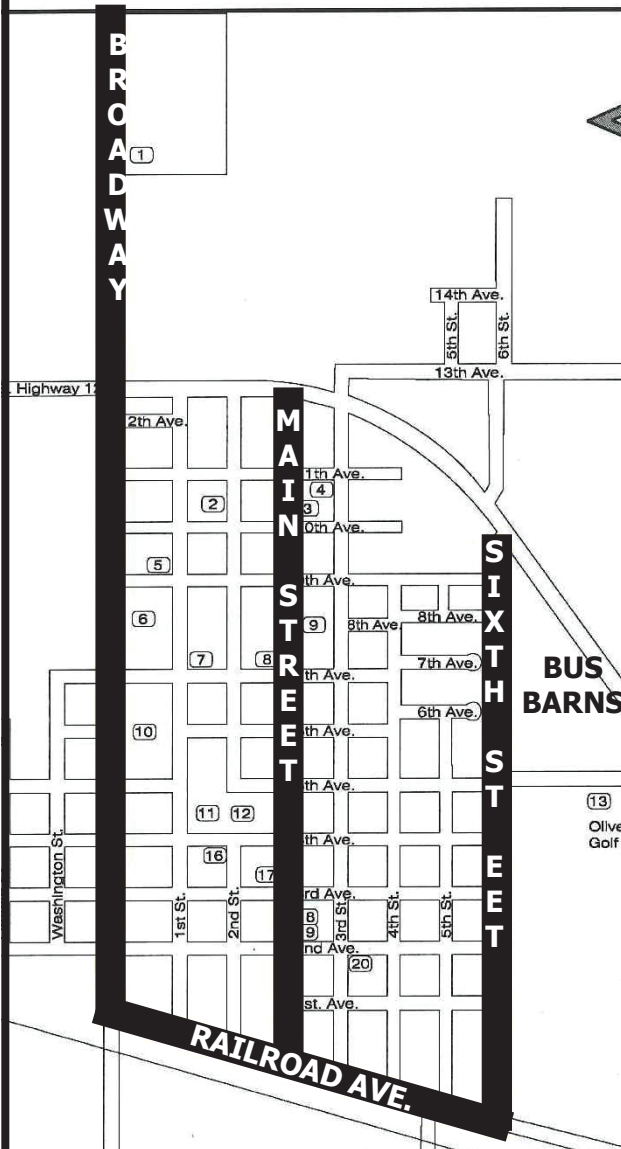
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*Offer valid only while supplies last. Limit one per household. Must be first time purchase. Minimum spend amount applies. Financing subject to third party credit approval. Some financing options cannot be combined with other offers and may require minimum monthly payments. All offers subject to change prior to purchase. See AmericanStandardShowers.com for other restrictions and for licensing, warranty, and company information. CSLB B982796; Suffolk NY: 55431H; NYC: HIC 2022748-DCA. Safety Tubs Co. LLC does not sell in Nassau NY, Westchester NY, Putnam NY, Rockland NY.

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Notice of Garbage Pickup Effective March 9th



Groton residents are asked to bring their garbage to the following locations until further notice:

Railroad Avenue, Main Street, Sixth Street & Broadway (Highway 37)

Residents of the Broadway Mobile Home Park need to take their garbage to Hwy 37.

Residents north of 13th Avenue (Olson and Jacobson Developments) need to bring their garbage to the bus barns.

Please bring your garbage bags and cans to these streets for Tuesday pickup.



2021 Groton Area Elementary Kindergarten Roundup (Screening) for children turning 5 on or before September 1, 2021

Friday, March 12, 2021

If your child is currently attending Junior Kindergarten at Groton Area Elementary school, please **DISREGARD** this notice. Your teacher will be sending information if necessary.

Packets are being sent home this week with information regarding KG Roundup. These would apply to families who have children eligible for KG and JK this coming 2021-2022 school year who are not currently enrolled in our school. Please contact the school if you do not receive a packet by the end of this week.



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Concrete was lowered down in this carrying device and then released. The floor for the new pump room was poured on Thursday. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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Friday was Groton Area's seniors last night of playing basketball for the Tigers. The seniors are Tristan Traphagen, Kannon Coats, Steven Paulson, Chandler Larson, Isaac Smith and Lucas Simon. (Photo from Shelley Coats facebook page)

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For 12 mos. plus taxes and fees.

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Requires subscription to top-tier PREMIER™ programming package, Movies Extra Pack, EPIX, Hallmark Movies Now, Lifetime Movie Club and Pantaya. Other packages will have fewer shows and movies. Additional fees apply for new releases and library titles available through DIRECTV CINEMA.



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Subj. to change. HBO Max auto-renews after 12 months at then prevailing rate (currently \$14.99/mo.), and Cinemax,® SHOWTIME,® STARZ,® and EPIX® are included for 3 months and auto-renew thereafter at then prevailing rate (currently \$38.96/mo.), unless you call to change or cancel. Req's you to select offers. Access HBO Max only through HBO Max app or hbo.com. HBO Max also includes HBO channels and HBO On Demand on DIRECTV. Online account registration required. Data rates may apply for app download/usage. See back for details.

*\$19.95 ACTIVATION, EARLY TERMINATION FEE OF \$20/MO. FOR EACH MONTH REMAINING ON AGMT., EQUIPMENT NON-RETURN & ADD'L FEES APPLY. Price incl. CHOICE™ Pkg., monthly service and equip. fees for 1 HD DVR & is after \$5/mo. autopay & paperless bill and \$10/mo. bundle discounts for up to 12 mos. each. Pay \$74.99/mo. + taxes until discount starts w/in 3 bills. New approved residential customers only (equipment lease req'd). Credit card req'd (except MA & PA). Restr's apply. See back for details.

Don't settle for cable. Call now!

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1-855-945-4896



CHOICE Package 1-YR ALL INCLUDED PACKAGE W/ OTHER ELIG. SVCS: Ends 3/27/21. Available only in the U.S. (excludes Puerto Rico and U.S.V.I.). Pricing: \$59.99/mo. for first 12 mos. only. After 12 mos. or loss of eligibility, then prevailing rate applies (currently \$122/mo. for CHOICE All Included), unless canceled or changed prior to end of the promo period. Pricing subject to change. \$5/mo. autopay/paperless bill discount: Must enroll in autopay & paperless bill within 30 days of TV activation to receive bill credit starting in 1-3 bill cycles. First time credit will include all credits earned since meeting offer requirements. Must maintain autopay/paperless bill and valid email address to continue credits. No credits in 2nd year for autopay/paperless bill. \$10/mo. bundle discount: Internet, Req's new (min. \$35/mo. plus taxes and \$10/mo. equip. fee) or existing svc. Excludes DSL. Wireless: Consumers only. Sold separately. Req's new (min. \$50/mo after discounts) or existing AT&T postpaid svc on elig. plan (excl. Lifeline) on a smartphone, phone or AT&T Wireless Internet device (excl. voice-only AT&T Wireless Internet). Both svcs: Eligible svc must be installed/activated w/in 30 days of TV activation and svc addresses must match to receive bill credit starting in 1-3 bill cycles. First time credit will include all credits earned since meeting offer requirements. Must maintain both qualifying svcs to continue credits. No credits in 2nd year for bundled services. Includes: CHOICE All Included TV Pkg, monthly service & equipment fees for one Genie HD DVR, and standard pro installation. Additional Fees & Taxes: Price excludes Regional Sports Fee of up to \$9.99/mo. (which is extra & applies to CHOICE and/or MAS ULTRA and higher Pkgs.), applicable use tax expense surcharge on retail value of installation, custom installation, equipment upgrades/add-ons (min. \$99 one-time & \$7/mo. monthly fees for each extra receiver/DIRECTV Ready TV/Device), and certain other add'l fees & charges. See att.com/directvfees for additional details. Different offers may apply for eligible multi-dwelling unit and telco customers. **DIRECTV SVC TERMS:** Subject to Equipment Lease & Customer Agreements. Must maintain a min. base TV pkg of \$29.99/mo. Some offers may not be available through all channels and in select areas. Visit directv.com/legal or call for details. **GENERAL WIRELESS:** Subj. to Wireless Customer Agmt (att.com/wca). Credit approval req'd. **Deposit/Down Payment:** may apply. **Additional monthly fees & taxes:** Apply per line & include Regulatory Cost Recovery Fee (Up to \$1.50), Administrative Fee (\$1.99) & other fees which are not government-required surcharges as well as taxes. Additional one-time fees may apply. See www.att.com/mobilityfees for more details. Usage, speed, coverage & other restr's apply. International and domestic off-net data may be at 2G speeds. AT&T service is subject to AT&T network management policies, see att.com/broadbandinfo for details. **†DIRECTV App & Mobile DVR:** Available only in the US. (excl Puerto Rico and U.S.V.I.). Req's compatible device. Live streaming channels based on your TV pkg & location. Not all channels available to stream out of home. To watch recorded shows on the go, must download to mobile device using Genie HD DVR model HR44 or higher connected to home Wi-Fi network. Rewind and fast-forward may not work. Limits: Mature, music, pay-per-view and some On Demand content is not available for downloading. 5 shows on 5 devices at once. All functions and programming subject to change at any time. **Programming, pricing, promotions, restrictions & terms subject to change & may be modified, discontinued or terminated at any time without notice.** Offers may not be combined with other promotional offers on the same services and may be modified or discontinued at any time without notice. Other conditions apply to all offers. HBO MAX™ is only accessible in the U.S. and certain U.S. territories where a high-speed broadband connection is available. ©2021 WarnerMedia Direct, LLC. All Rights Reserved. HBO MAX is used under license. ©2021 AT&T Intellectual Property. All Rights Reserved. AT&T, Globe logo, DIRECTV, and all other DIRECTV marks contained herein are trademarks of AT&T Intellectual Property and/or AT&T affiliated companies. All other marks are the property of their respective owners.

Nest Predator Bounty Program Approved for 2021 and 2022

PIERRE, S.D. – At their March meeting, the South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission approved a resolution to authorize the Nest Predator Bounty Program for 2021 and 2022. The resolution specifies that the 2021 and 2022 program will include a payment of \$10/predator with a maximum of \$500,000 in bounty payments each year. The Commission amended their January resolution, modifying the dates of when the program will start and end. The GFP Commission unanimously agreed to run the 2021 program from April 1 through July 1, unless the \$500,000 maximum is reached.

In 2022, the program will begin on March 1 for youth under 18, then open to all South Dakota residents beginning April 1 and running through July 1, unless the \$500,000 maximum is reached.

“This program enhances pheasant and duck nest success at localized levels and encourages families to get involved in wildlife management,” said interim GFP department secretary Kevin Robling. “We have rich trapping traditions here in South Dakota and this program is designed to encourage youth and families to step outside and enjoy our incredible outdoor resources.”

As soon as the program launches on April 1, GFP will provide a weekly giveaway for all youth (under the age of 18) who participate in the program. The giveaway will consist of a GFP-sponsored trapping package that includes three live traps, knife and the National Trappers Association Trapping Handbook. Follow our GFP Facebook page for more details.

GFP will also enhance the ETHICS SD program, which doubled in size in 2020 reaching 110 new students in 11 counties. ETHICS SD is a partnership between trapping organizations, GFP and 4H where youth learn trapping skills, fur handling techniques, and elements of wildlife management.

“Educating youth on the importance of the trapline and wildlife management are key to ensuring our outdoor traditions remain strong for future generations,” said Robling. “Trapping provides an experience to explore the outdoors and create lasting stories and memories while making a difference for managing wildlife in South Dakota.”

With help from mother nature, resulting in a mild winter, enhanced efforts on habitat management and the continuation of the nest predator bounty program we should expect to see fantastic bird numbers for the 2021 pheasant season, Robling added.

Individuals are encouraged to share their trapping and outdoor memories by using #SDintheField on social media. For more details on the 2021 program guidelines, visit <https://gfp.sd.gov/bounty-program/>.

SD Game, Fish and Parks Recognized for Education Efforts During COVID-19

PIERRE, S.D. - The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks was recently named the recipient of the South Dakota Parks and Recreation Association's Organization Citation Award. The award recognized the efforts of the department to promote and support recreation in local communities by providing alternative programming and events during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Educational programming was especially challenging this year," said Kevin Robling, Interim Secretary for the Game, Fish and Parks. "With staff shortages and duties being redirected to other areas, programming could have easily been pushed aside this year. Instead, the GFP educators stepped up and got creative."

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff had to come up with innovative ways to engage with the public, such as providing virtual programming on social media and Zoom; creating self-guided activities; offering virtual skills sessions to enable folks to participate in activities on their own; and modifying in-person programs to meet social-distancing guidelines.

Game, Fish and Parks also recognized that the outdoors offered fresh air, exercise and plenty of room for social distancing, and made a commitment to keep the outdoors open for users. State parks and public access areas remained open during the pandemic, including all recreational facilities within them like trails, basketball courts, playgrounds and swim beaches. Personal responsibility and CDC guidelines were stressed to visitors and staff. Many parks were even able to continue offering rental and checkout equipment, allowing users to experience a new activity with their family group.

"The group being recognized includes educators, park managers, volunteers and administrative staff," said Robling. "They saw the importance of continuing recreation and recruiting, retaining and reactivating campers during the pandemic and devoted time to make it happen, even amid many other demands for their time."

The Organization Citation Award recognizes an organization that has made an outstanding contribution to parks, recreation, or conservation at the local, state, regional, or national level. The South Dakota Parks and Recreation Association announced award winners earlier this month via social media in lieu of their traditional in-person conference and banquet. SDPRA President-Elect Katy Hiltunen recently presented the award on behalf of the association to Acting GFP Secretary Kevin Robling.

Unemployment Claims Filed for Week Ending Feb. 27

PIERRE, S.D. - During the week of Feb. 21-27, a total of 372 initial weekly claims for state unemployment benefits were processed by the Department of Labor and Regulation. This is a decrease of 124 claims from the prior week's total of 496.

A total of \$1.3 million was paid out in state benefits, in addition to \$1.6 million in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), \$98,000 in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and \$324,000 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) benefits.

The Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund balance was \$153.7 million on Feb. 28.

The latest number of continued state claims is 6,033 for the week ending Feb. 20, an increase of 534 from the prior week's total of 5,499. This indicates the number of unemployed workers eligible for and receiving benefits after their initial claim.

Benefits paid since March 16, 2020:

- Regular State = \$104.0 million
- FPUC = \$220.8 million
- PUA = \$19.2 million
- PEUC = \$6.3 million

Total = Approximately \$350.3 million



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GFP Commission Finalizes Simplifying Aerial Hunting Application Process

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission simplified the requirement to submit pilot and medical certification as part of the aerial hunting application process.

“Applicants will still need the certifications but will not be required to submit copies to the department,” said Tom Kirschenmann, GFP Division of Wildlife Director. “As we work to prioritize efforts for coyote control, this proposal simplifies the process for pilots to file their annual application with the department to hunt coyotes from the air.”

GFP Commission Rejects Big Game Ammunition Changes

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission voted against the use of non-toxic copper fluted bullets for big game hunting. Currently the only ammunition that is allowed is soft point or expanding bullets. The fluted bullet does not fit into either one of those categories. Commissioners expressed concern on the bullet’s performance in regards to big game hunting.

This proposal came from a petition submitted by Jeremy Silko of Rapid City at the November 2020 meeting, with the intent of giving hunters more options when looking for non-toxic ammunition.

GFP Commission Finalizes Several Small Game Hunting Seasons

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks Commission finalized several small game hunting seasons at their March meeting. These seasons include: cottontail rabbit, crow, mourning dove, and squirrel hunting seasons.

For details on these hunting dates, visit <https://gfp.sd.gov/hunt/>.

GFP Commission Finalizes Navigation Lane Procedures on Nonmeandered Waters

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) Commission established a procedure for the public to request a navigation lane through a closed nonmeandered body of water when no alternative legal public access is available.

The rule states that if a navigation lane is approved by the Commission after a 60-day public comment period, individuals using the navigation lane would be required to take the most direct path to the open nonmeandered lake and not recreate in any manner while in the navigation lanes. The proposal also requires GFP to mark established navigation lanes.

This rule is in direct response to statute 41-23-16, the Open Waters Compromise.

South Dakota continues to see water levels rise and inundate private property at unprecedented levels, particularly in the northeast region. While today’s landscape is different than it was a decade ago, or even in 2017, balancing the public’s interest in recreation and respect for private property rights remains a top priority for GFP.

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

March 8, 2021 – 7:00 PM – Groton Area Elementary Commons

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of February 8, 2021 school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of February 2021 Financial Report, Custodial Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approval of February 2021 Transportation Report
4. Approval of February 2021 School Lunch Report
5. Acknowledge receipt of public school exemption #20-16.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Discussion/Action on 2021-2022 School District Calendar.
3. Continued discussion and necessary action on District response to COVID-19.
4. Second reading and adoption of recommended policy change to policy ABAA Parent and Family Engagement.
5. Approve resignations/early retirements of:
 - a. Kristi Anderson
 - b. Jan Seibel
 - c. Brian Schuring
6. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Discussion/Action on refinance of 2016 Elementary project bonds [Tom Grimmond, Colliers Securities].
2. Discussion on Doney Field crow's nest.
3. Review Department of Health Food Service Inspections for Groton Area High School [100/100] and Groton Area Elementary [100/100].
4. Set 2021 Driver's Education Fee and issue Driver's Education Instructor Agreements.
5. Approve Memorandum of Agreement with SDSU – Student Teaching.
6. Approve resignation of Ashley Seeklander, K-12 School Counselor.
7. Approve resignation of Alexa Schuring, JH Volleyball Coach.
8. Approve resignation of Missi Hill, MS/HS Special Education Teacher.
9. Executive session pursuant SDCL1-25-2(1) for personnel (Superintendent evaluation) and SDCL1-25-2(2) for student issue.
10. Act on open enrollment applications #22-01 and #22-02.
11. Issue administrative contracts for 2021-2022 school year with terms to be negotiated at a later date.

ADJOURN

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Milbank slips past Groton Area in region play

Milbank pulled away win the fourth quarter to slip past Groton Area in regional basketball action played in Groton on Friday, 51-42.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by S & S Lumber, Blocker Construction, John Sieh Agency, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Weismantel Insurance Agency, SD Army National Guard, Thunder Seed with John Wheeting, Groton Ford, J. Simon Photography, Professional Management Services, Kens Food Fair, Groton Vet Clinic, Lori's Pharmacy, Ryan Tracy for School Board, Bk customs Ts, Bierman Farm Service.

The game was tied seven times and the lead changed hands 13 times before the Bulldogs got the upper hand late in the third quarter. The Bulldogs led at the quarterstops at 10-9, 22-19 and 37-33. Milbank scored seven straight points late in the third quarter going into the fourth quarter to take a 39-33 lead. The Tigers closed to within five, 45-40, with 1:12 left, but could not get any closer. Milbank made nine of 16 free throws in the fourth quarter to help fuel the win.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 11 points, three rebounds and two assists. Jayden Zak also had 11 points and had two assists and two steals. Tristan Traphagen finished with eight points, five rebounds, two assists, one steal and two blocks. Jacob Zak had six points, seven rebounds, one assist and one steal. Tate Larson had four points, three rebounds and one steal. Lucas Simon had two points, two rebounds and one steal. Wyatt Hearnen had two rebounds. Cole Simon had two rebounds and one steal.

Groton Area made 18 of 53 in total field goals for 34 percent while Milbank was 14 of 32 for 44 percent. Milbank had 14 team fouls which allowed the Tigers to make three of nine free throws for 33 percent. Groton Area had 23 fouls (Jacob Zak and Larson both fouled out) as Milbank made 17 of 30 free throws for 57 percent. Milbank had 14 turnovers, seven of which were steals. Groton Area had 12 turnovers, 24 rebounds, seven assists and two blocks. Jayden Zak made all three of Groton Area's three-pointers.

Bennett Schwenn led the Bulldogs with 25 points while Will Cummins had 10, Stevie Ash six, Mason Riley four and Wylie Mursu two. Ash made two three-pointers while Cummins and Schwenn each made one.

Groton Area finishes the season with a 13-8 record. Milbank advances to the SODAK16 taking on Vermillion at Mitchell and has a 11-10 record.

- Paul Kosel

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#375 in a series Covid-19 Update:

Same old, same old. We reported 66,900 new cases today. That brings us to 28,934,300, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. If we have another day like this tomorrow, we'll hit 29 million before nightfall; if we experience a weekend slowdown, then it will be Sunday. Either way, we're almost there. Our seven-day new-case average is 62,924; that really needs to come down. Soon. Hospitalizations continue to decline, now at 44,172. This is just about one-third of our January 7 peak of 132,424 and excellent progress. There have now been 522,361 deaths from this virus in the US, 0.5% more than yesterday. The seven-day average here is flat, not declining at all. There were 2491 deaths reported today.

One year ago today, March 5, 2020, the US had 211 reported cases in 18 states. Washington had 75, California 60, New York 22. Some early genomic testing indicated the outbreak in Washington may have been going on for some six weeks before a case was detected, infecting well over 1000 individuals. This was not great news. Testing delays were causing alarm in many places. There was another death in Washington, bringing the total nationwide to 12. Lyft, Amazon, and Facebook began encouraging office employees to work from home. Panic buying was underway: face masks and hand sanitizer were almost unobtainable. And for reasons I've never been able to figure out, toilet paper was a hot item; people were buying huge quantities and carting it home in preparation for I'm-not-sure-what. This was also the first day I had heard of a pet being infected, a dog with a weakly positive test.

Reported cases were up to 96,000 worldwide, 80,000 of those in China, where there had been 3300 deaths. The rest of Asia had varying levels of infection; Japan and South Korea had large numbers, with Iran the latest hot spot. Italy was in deep trouble and had quarantined 100,000 people in its northern regions in an attempt to slow down transmissions. Things were getting steadily worse in Spain and Ireland. The first case was reported in South Africa.

Attacks on Asian people—or anyone who looked vaguely “Asian” to the attacker—had been occurring in one after another western country. Cancellations and closures: Rome marathon, schools for around 300 million children in 13 countries, 7011 Lufthansa flights, the Six Nations rugby union game between England and Italy, Chinese President Xi's visit to Japan, the Venice Architecture Biennale. The Arnold Sports Festival proceeded with its bodybuilding competition without spectators. South by Southwest, the annual Austin, Texas, tech, film, media, and music conference was still scheduled to begin March 13, even though more and more folks were pulling out, companies like Twitter, Facebook, Intel, Vevo, Mashable, Netflix, and TikTok. Organizers of the annual Eurovision Song Contest, scheduled for May, were considering their options.

Today's continuing big numbers are very concerning. The problem we've discussed about each plateau being higher than the last one is still bearing down on us; the seven-day new-case average has been running around 65,000; the highest seven-day new-case average we had in the worst week last summer was just under 67,000—and we thought that was terrible then. Now we seem to have gotten comfortable with it—and we shouldn't be. Problem is we've had a seven-day new-case average more recently that was close to 260,000, so by comparison today's numbers don't seem so bad. They should. I watched yesterday's CNBC interview with Richard Besser, former acting director of the CDC. He voiced some of the things I've been worrying about: “In Texas where they removed the mask mandate, fewer than 10% of people have been vaccinated and the levels are higher than the levels were last summer when they put the mandates on in the first place. I worry we're getting a little numb to these numbers, and we're not remembering that each day in America more than 2000 people are still dying from Covid.” It seems premature to roll back the measures that brought us down from that 260,000 to under 70,000 when the number seems to be stuck as high as it is—as high as it was when we put the measures in place. There is also growing concern about upcoming spring break trips to Florida, a state which prohibits local governments from enforcing mask mandates. With cheap airfares and discounted room rates, the influx of partiers and lack of mitigation could turn into a mess.

The FEMA-supported mass vaccination sites being staffed by US military personnel have grown to 28 in seven states with the addition of sites in Georgia and Ohio, both situated in neighborhoods that have

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not been well served so far. Each of those has the larger-sized (222-person) vaccination team and so is equipped to deliver 6000 doses per day.

With all this vaccinating going on these days, syringes have become the latest hot item. Estimates are that we're going to need between eight and 10 billion syringes worldwide for Covid-19 vaccinations. Annual syringe production in prior years ran around 16 billion, so this is the greater share of the total production. We should remember here that there are many other uses and needs for syringes these days—all of the drugs and other vaccines which need to be administered by injection. In earlier years, only around 800 million to 1.6 billion syringes were used annually in vaccination, so this increase is huge. Manufacturers have been seriously increasing capacity and boosting volume. I hope that's enough; it would be a terrible thing if the limiting factor in getting these marvelous new vaccines into people was syringes. Honestly, I don't really want a limiting factor; I just want them to go into people.

We have another home-grown variant, this one first identified in Oregon. So far, only one case has shown up, but since genetic analysis seems to indicate it did not originate in the person identified, it seems likely there are others out there. What we have here is a variant with two modifications, the same one that makes B.1.1.7 (UK) more highly transmissible, and a mutation called E484K, or "eek," which is what we see in B.1.351 (South Africa) that makes it less susceptible to our antibodies. This so-called "B.1.1.7 with Eek" looks like it originated in Oregon, even though a similar variant has turned up in the UK. Eek is a mutation which has arisen independently in various places around the world; what makes this one scary is that it is associated in this variant with a mutation that makes it fairly likely the variant will become more and more predominant in the population as time goes on. That's a bad combination. Bears watching. And it should provide further incentive to rein in transmission now until we can get people vaccinated.

On the vaccination front, there is good news. About a week ago, we looked at a Kaiser Family Foundation poll that found around 55 percent of adults either had been vaccinated or planned to do so as soon as possible, up from 47 percent in January. Well, today the Pew Research Center released its poll showing 69 percent of us either have been vaccinated or plan to do so as soon as possible. Now, however this one is sampling is clearly different from the Kaiser poll because it was starting from a higher baseline of 60 percent in November; but it still shows a distinct upward trend in willingness to be vaccinated. And that is very, very good news, indeed. It appears we're making excellent headway in communities of color. In November (before vaccinations began), 42 percent of Black Americans said they planned to be vaccinated. This poll shows 15 percent already vaccinated and another 47 percent intending to be, which adds up to 62 percent, a huge increase. It does appear knowing someone who was vaccinated is a significant factor in turning hesitancy into willingness, so perhaps as vaccinations continue, we'll see continued improvement in willingness. We also need to deliver more vaccine to Black communities; they are currently well behind the rest of the population, and there are a whole lot of reports that White people from neighboring communities, having better access to the Internet, are booking up all of the appointments in Black neighborhoods, locking out the local residents. So the problem getting vaccines into Black people, who have been infected and died in highly disproportionate numbers throughout the pandemic, doesn't appear to be willingness; it appears to be access. That's not OK.

The CDC released a new study today that looks at the association between certain restrictive measures, namely mask mandates and indoor dining restrictions, and Covid-19 incidence. The data were gathered on a county-by-county basis to properly reflect differences in measures taken by local governmental entities. What they found was that when mask use was mandated infection rates and deaths declined. When restaurants were permitted to open for on-site dining, infection rates rose at about the six-week mark, and death rates rose after about two months. Now, we've discussed the fact that two things that are associated in time are not necessarily causally related; but it's hard to escape drawing conclusions from these data in conjunction with all of the evidence we have that this virus is spread via the airborne route and that mask-wearing reduces transmission of the virus. The report also urged that restaurants that do offer on-site dining carefully follow the CDC's guidelines for reducing transmission.

Sam Friedman is a junior at Suncoast Community High School in Riviera Beach, Florida, who loves working with technology. As he told Kelly Clarkson, he was the go-to guy in his family whenever anyone

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got a new cell phone or laptop and needed help to set it up or troubleshoot problems. He realized there were a lot of older people in his community who don't have someone to help them with technology. As he explained, "There's really three things Florida's known for: crazy people, alligators, and senior citizens." It was the seniors he was interested in. So in the summer of 2019, he started a project to connect tech-savvy volunteers with elderly people in need of assistance, calling it South Florida Tech for Seniors. The two dozen or so volunteers would fan out to assisted-living facilities and senior centers, where they'd offer one-on-one support, troubleshoot problems, install hardware and software, and teach people to use their technology. They also made house calls. He said it's "really something" to see those faces light up when they figured something out.

The cost? Zero. No fees, no membership, no tipping, no charge. Ever. Everyone's a volunteer, and the organization, a tax-exempt nonprofit, solicits donations to cover their costs.

That was all great until the pandemic. It's not exactly safe for seniors to meet in person with high school kids at this time—hasn't been for some months now. But that's where the technology really comes in handy. South Florida Tech for Seniors has a new constellation of services: phone call support on Sunday afternoons, one-on-one Zoom video support, remote support (where the volunteer accesses the senior's computer remotely so they can directly fix whatever's wrong with it), hardware drop-off (for installation of a new battery, storage upgrade, etc.), and a catalog of YouTube videos that address common problems and offer tips and tricks. Most recently, they are offering up-to-date information on vaccination clinics and helping seniors to navigate the online-only vaccination appointment system in Florida; I watched the YouTube video Friedman made for seniors that led them step by step through the process with screen shots and lots of explanation. They're even making appointments for seniors who do not have Internet access. And they're teaching people to use Facetime and Zoom so they can have virtual visits with family and friends, which is a huge boost as we all make our way through this pandemic.

All of this is still available at no cost.

One senior explained to WPTV News, "If you want to place a value on it, you can't. You really can't." He went on to say, "Every three months we're going to have a family meeting which would never have occurred really if not for Zoom. It's really a Godsend. It really is."

So I do not want to hear all about how terrible kids are these days—how irresponsible and lazy they are or how selfish. There's plenty of evidence that's simply not true. And these kids really shine brightly, don't they?

Take care. I'll be back tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	453	431	869	15	Minimal	4.2%
Beadle	2780	2628	5875	39	Substantial	24.4%
Bennett	382	370	1178	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1506	1477	2064	25	Minimal	9.3%
Brookings	3609	3509	11935	37	Moderate	1.8%
Brown	5161	4997	12663	89	Moderate	10.3%
Brule	694	678	1874	9	Minimal	9.7%
Buffalo	420	406	899	13	None	0.0%
Butte	982	949	3216	20	Moderate	6.5%
Campbell	131	125	256	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1308	1218	3911	21	Substantial	8.2%
Clark	374	358	948	5	Moderate	23.1%
Clay	1807	1763	5300	15	Moderate	8.2%
Codington	4018	3846	9661	77	Substantial	21.5%
Corson	471	453	995	12	Minimal	9.7%
Custer	760	735	2717	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2961	2872	6532	63	Moderate	7.0%
Day	667	624	1770	28	Substantial	5.9%
Deuel	474	461	1135	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1418	1379	3814	26	Substantial	7.6%
Douglas	434	416	908	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	484	462	1049	12	Minimal	4.0%
Fall River	541	505	2619	15	Moderate	9.2%
Faulk	361	343	696	13	Moderate	0.0%
Grant	980	915	2227	38	Substantial	13.4%
Gregory	544	499	1276	29	Moderate	8.3%
Haakon	256	238	534	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	721	659	1773	38	Substantial	26.4%
Hand	341	325	812	6	Moderate	11.1%
Hanson	364	351	714	4	Moderate	28.0%
Harding	91	90	182	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2313	2234	6566	36	Substantial	6.0%
Hutchinson	790	752	2368	25	Moderate	7.5%

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Hyde	139	136	405	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	280	263	915	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	274	251	553	16	Minimal	10.0%
Jones	85	84	220	0	Minimal	12.5%
Kingsbury	643	616	1669	14	Moderate	3.9%
Lake	1205	1152	3321	17	Substantial	7.6%
Lawrence	2832	2759	8526	45	Moderate	5.9%
Lincoln	7817	7581	20191	77	Substantial	10.1%
Lyman	602	586	1874	10	Minimal	2.8%
Marshall	333	302	1186	5	Substantial	15.4%
McCook	747	710	1616	24	Moderate	4.0%
McPherson	241	231	553	4	Minimal	12.5%
Meade	2610	2526	7681	31	Substantial	11.4%
Mellette	253	245	732	2	Minimal	33.3%
Miner	273	254	576	9	Minimal	7.1%
Minnehaha	28227	27398	77982	334	Substantial	7.6%
Moody	620	590	1751	17	Moderate	5.9%
Oglala Lakota	2064	1992	6630	49	Moderate	7.2%
Pennington	12974	12576	39339	189	Substantial	10.9%
Perkins	348	330	808	14	Minimal	8.0%
Potter	377	362	830	4	Moderate	14.3%
Roberts	1212	1128	4126	36	Substantial	15.7%
Sanborn	334	323	690	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	801	766	2121	25	Minimal	3.0%
Stanley	335	323	933	2	Moderate	0.0%
Sully	137	133	311	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1219	1189	4127	28	Minimal	8.0%
Tripp	704	670	1481	16	Substantial	21.2%
Turner	1071	1004	2718	53	Moderate	7.1%
Union	1996	1919	6243	39	Substantial	6.7%
Walworth	729	697	1819	15	Moderate	7.0%
Yankton	2814	2746	9318	28	Moderate	6.1%
Ziebach	337	327	863	9	Minimal	7.1%
Unassigned	0	0	1816	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4566	0
10-19 years	12793	0
20-29 years	20078	7
30-39 years	18620	18
40-49 years	16173	35
50-59 years	15980	113
60-69 years	12969	250
70-79 years	6921	434
80+ years	5129	1039

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	58954	893
Male	54275	1003

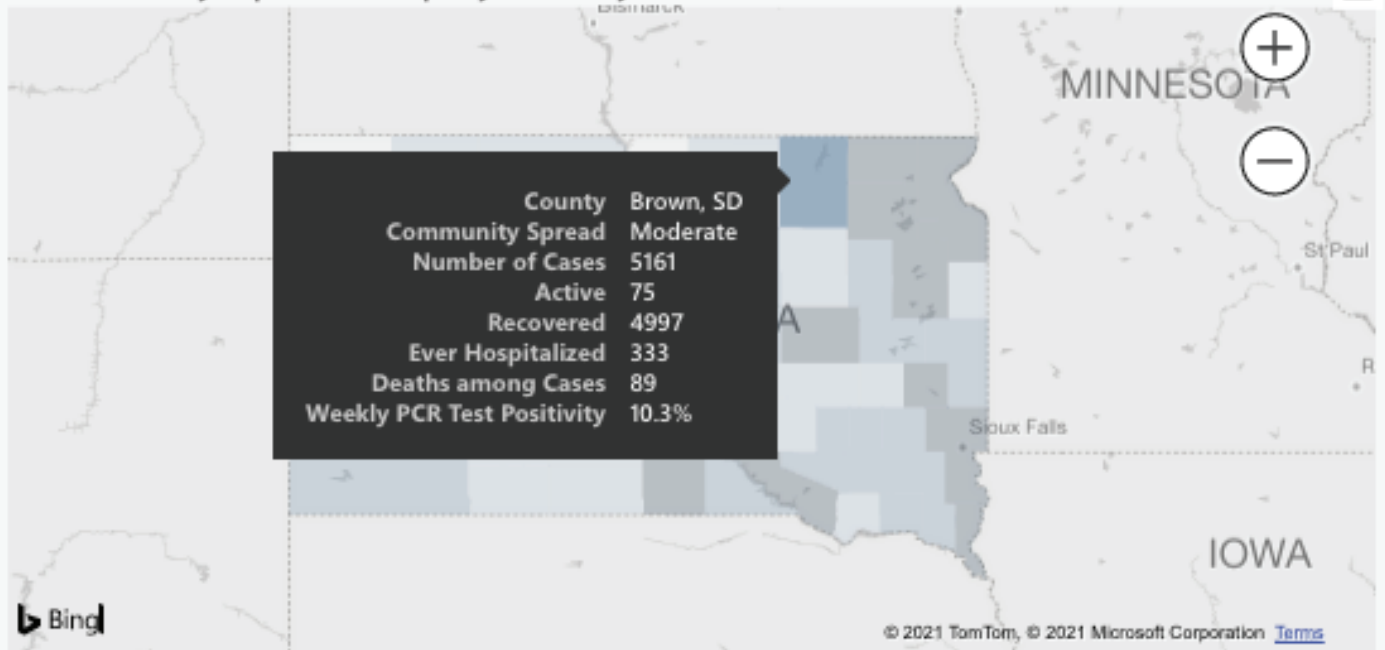
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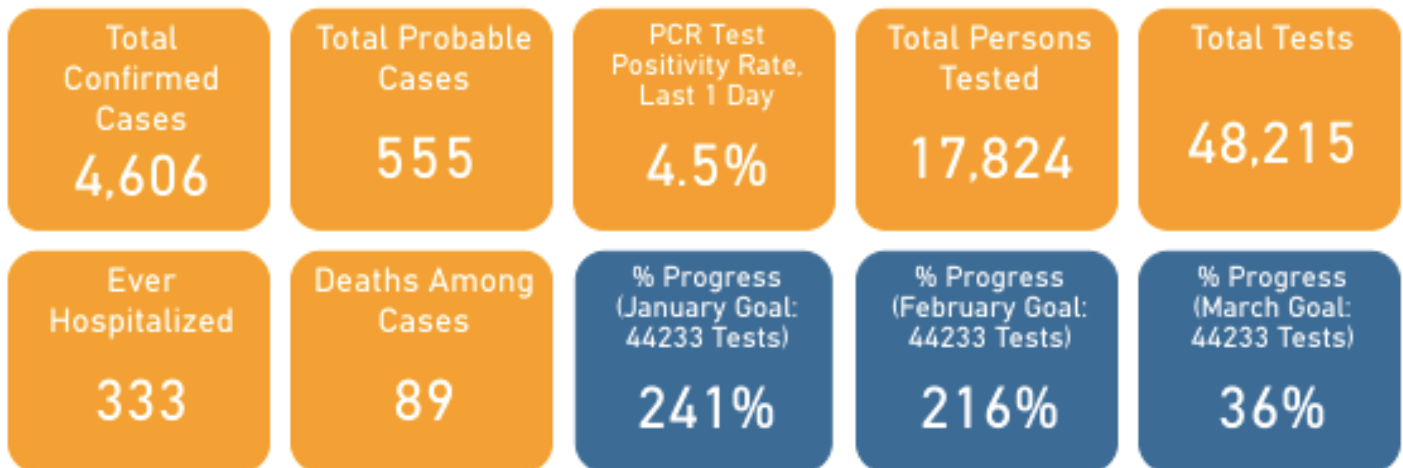
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



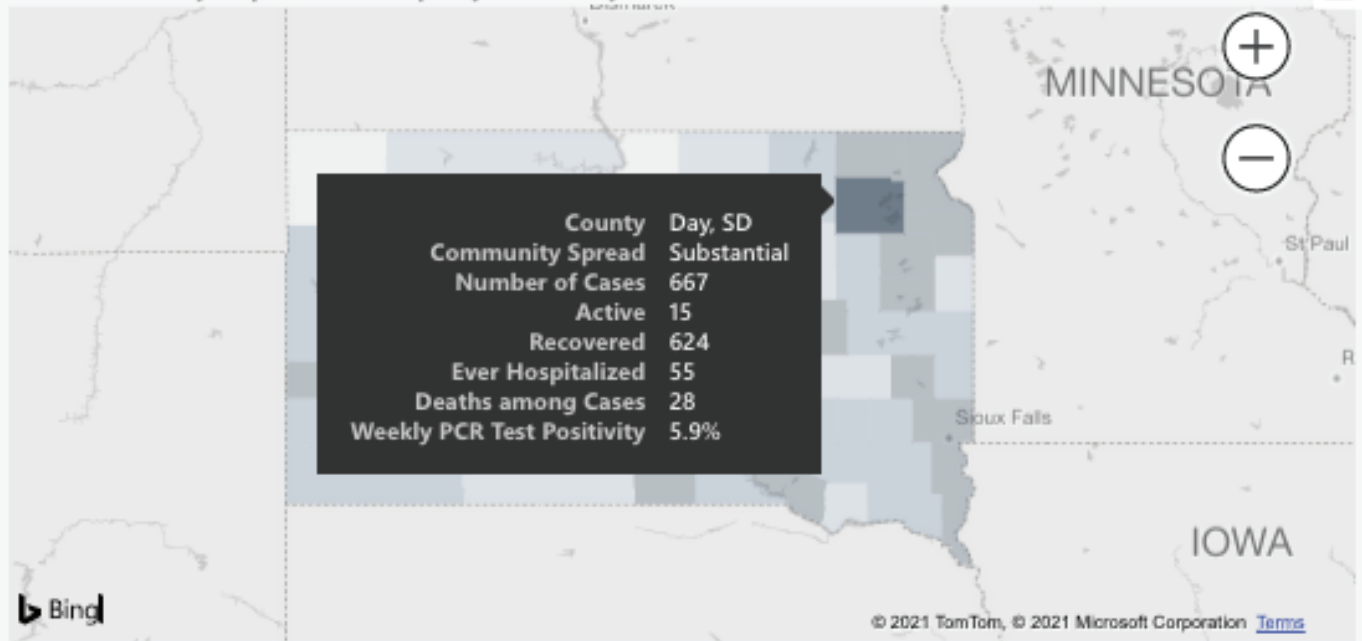
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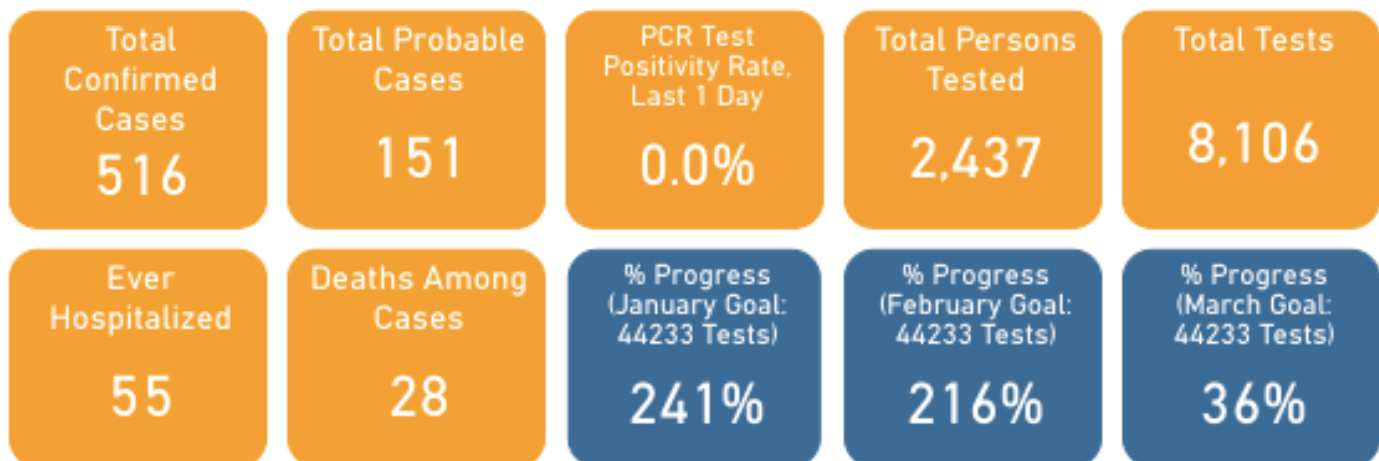
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

244,697

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	123,179
Pfizer	121,518

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

158,135

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Pfizer - Series Complete	44,718
Moderna - Series Complete	41,844
Moderna - 1 dose	39,491
Pfizer - 1 dose	32,082

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

30%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	30.39%
Series Complete	20.02%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16+ years. Includes

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	624	226	199	425
Beadle	4992	1,842	1,575	3,417
Bennett*	408	116	146	262
Bon Homme*	2513	1,113	700	1,813
Brookings	7047	2,745	2,151	4,896
Brown	11172	2,532	4,320	6,852
Brule*	1506	488	509	997
Buffalo*	118	78	20	98
Butte	1702	710	496	1,206
Campbell	868	290	289	579
Charles Mix*	2406	996	705	1,701
Clark	935	321	307	628
Clay	3659	1,159	1,250	2,409
Codington*	7558	2,454	2,552	5,006
Corson*	222	98	62	160
Custer*	2169	847	661	1,508
Davison	5793	1,635	2,079	3,714
Day*	1862	614	624	1,238
Deuel	1163	443	360	803
Dewey*	324	74	125	199
Douglas*	897	265	316	581
Edmunds	1012	312	350	662
Fall River*	2171	741	715	1,456
Faulk	800	260	270	530
Grant*	1963	793	585	1,378
Gregory*	1302	506	398	904
Haakon*	457	159	149	308

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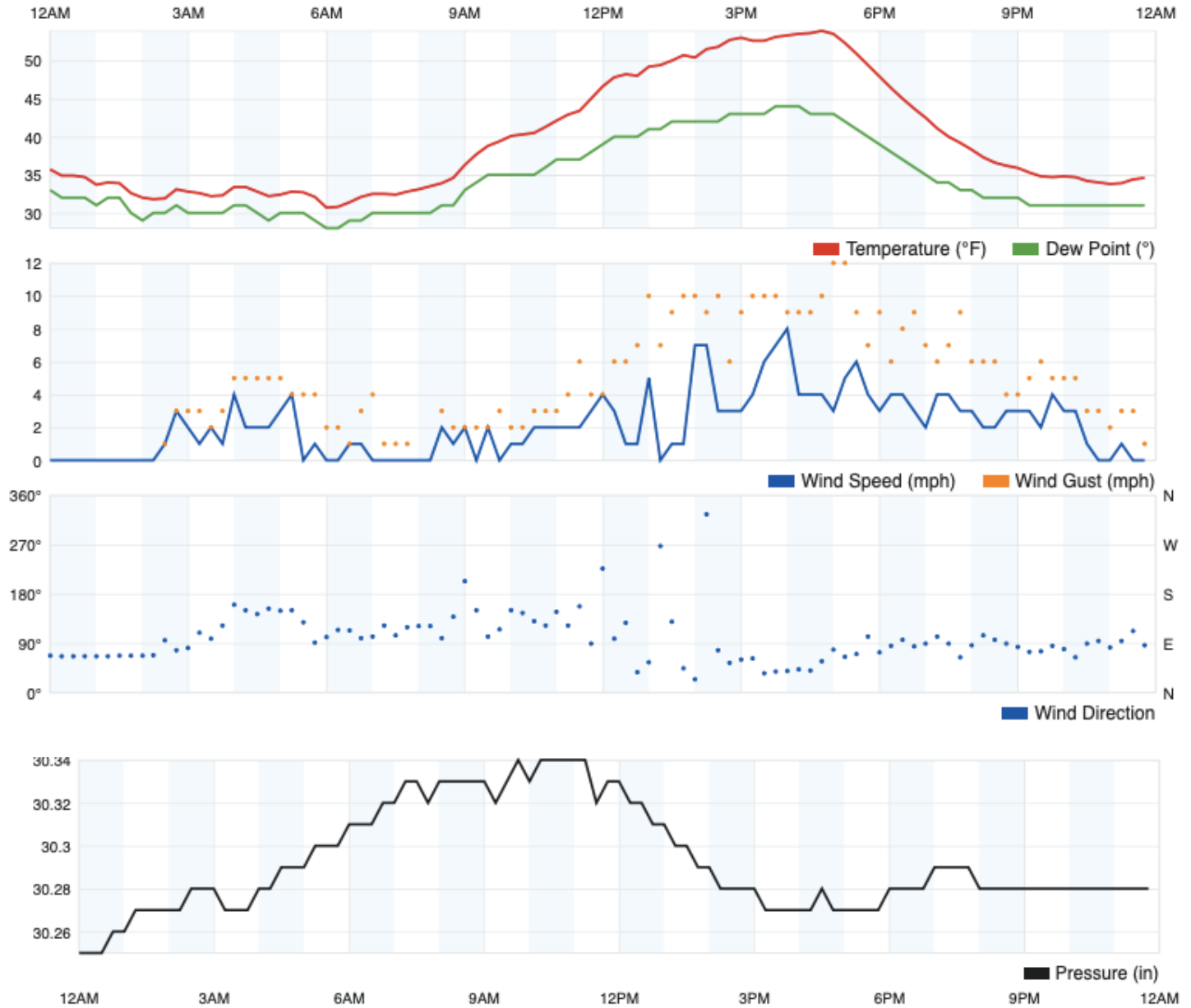
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Hamlin	1356	486	435	921
Hand	1043	379	332	711
Hanson	361	137	112	249
Harding	71	27	22	49
Hughes*	5886	1,682	2,102	3,784
Hutchinson*	2587	895	846	1,741
Hyde*	424	152	136	288
Jackson*	334	110	112	222
Jerauld	640	312	164	476
Jones*	499	147	176	323
Kingsbury	1747	735	506	1,241
Lake	2984	1,036	974	2,010
Lawrence	6357	2,391	1,983	4,374
Lincoln	20902	4,606	8,148	12,754
Lyman*	611	213	199	412
Marshall*	1144	400	372	772
McCook	1717	517	600	1,117
McPherson	190	58	66	124
Meade*	4785	1,657	1,564	3,221
Mellette*	37	17	10	27
Miner	689	221	234	455
Minnehaha*	64353	16,001	24,176	40,177
Moody*	1313	551	381	932
Oglala Lakota*	148	54	47	101
Pennington*	29122	7,926	10,598	18,524
Perkins*	439	195	122	317
Potter	664	302	181	483
Roberts*	3379	1,295	1,042	2,337
Sanborn	779	245	267	512
Spink	2384	834	775	1,609
Stanley*	898	280	309	589
Sully	263	89	87	176
Todd*	143	47	48	95
Tripp*	1672	604	534	1,138
Turner	2881	831	1,025	1,856
Union	2104	1,012	546	1,558
Walworth*	1518	472	523	995
Yankton	7652	1,616	3,018	4,634
Ziebach*	49	13	18	31
Other	4929	1,211	1,859	3,070

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Mostly Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy and Breezy	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Mostly Sunny
High: 61 °F	Low: 40 °F	High: 68 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 66 °F

Very Mild, Dry, Breezy Weekend

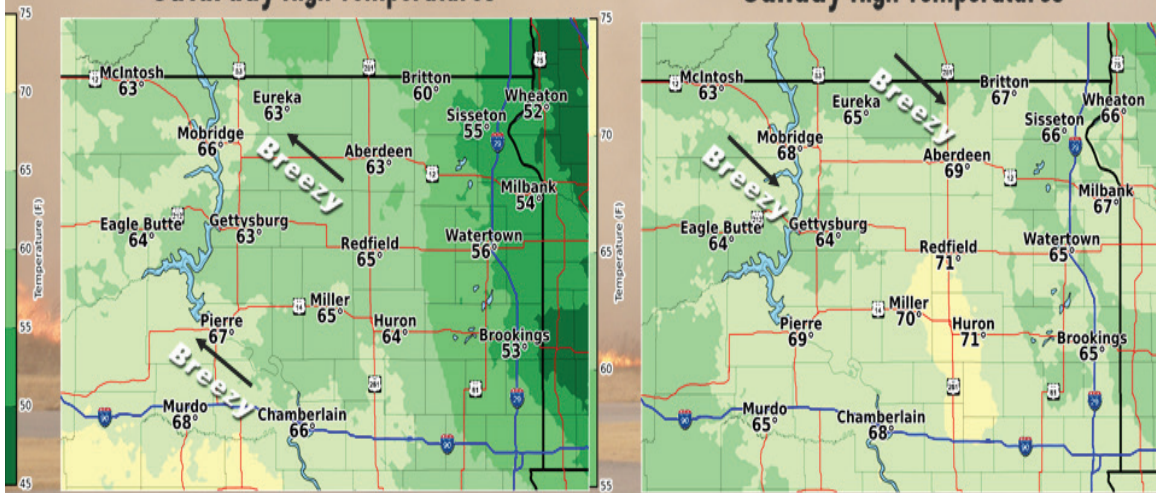
AM Saturday fog

High temps will be 15 to 30+ degrees above normal this weekend (and Monday & Tuesday)
 Dry air and fuels, combined with gusty winds yields high to very high fire danger. Please exercise caution!



Saturday High Temperatures

Sunday High Temperatures



NWS Aberdeen, SD
 Updated: 3/6/2021 5:49 AM CST

Similar to yesterday morning, areas of fog will linger this morning before giving way to abundant sunshine. A Red Flag Warning is valid this afternoon and evening across south central South Dakota, though fire danger will be high to very high across the whole area. Very mild and dry weather continues on Sunday leading to additional fire weather concerns, and the pattern doesn't break until Wednesday.

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Today in Weather History

March 6, 1987: Twenty-eight cities in the north-central U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Pickstown, South Dakota, was the hot spot in the nation with a reading of 83 degrees. The high of 71 at Saint Cloud, Minnesota, smashed their previous record by 21 degrees.

March 6, 2000: A grass fire of unknown origin was exacerbated by dry conditions and strong winds, burning 1500 acres of grassland northwest and north of Brandon in Minnehaha County. The fire threatened several homes, but no homes were damaged, although farmland and some equipment burned. In a separate event the same day, a controlled burn went out of control, exacerbated by the conditions and strong winds. The fire caused one fatality and one injury. The damage was confined to grassland.

1962: The strongest nor'easter of this century struck the Mid-Atlantic Region on March 5-9, 1962. It is known as the "Ash Wednesday Storm" and caused over \$200 million (1962 dollars) in property damage and major coastal erosion from North Carolina to Long Island, New York. In New Jersey alone, it was estimated to have destroyed or greatly damaged 45,000 homes. The Red Cross recorded that the storm killed 40 people. It hit during "Spring Tide." When the sun and moon are in phase, they produce a higher than average astronomical tide. Water reached nine feet at Norfolk (flooding begins around five feet). Houses were toppled into the ocean, and boardwalks were broken and twisted. The islands of Chincoteague and Assateague, Maryland, were completely underwater. Ocean City, Maryland, sustained significant damage mainly to the south end of the island. Winds up to 70 mph built 40-foot waves at sea. Heavy snow fell in the Appalachian Mountains. Big Meadows, southeast of Luray, recorded Virginia's greatest 24-hour snowfall with 33 inches and the most significant single storm snowfall with 42 inches. (Luray, Virginia reported 33.5 inches on March 2-3, 1994, making this later snow their maximum 24-hour snowfall total.) Roads were blocked, and electrical service was out for several days. Washington and Baltimore fell into the mixed precipitation zone. The Ash Wednesday storm is noteworthy for producing devastating tidal flooding along the Atlantic Coast as well as record snows and the interior of a Virginia. The extremely high tides and massive waves caused tremendous damage - worst in many of the hurricanes that have hit the region. Along the Atlantic Coast tide ran for 2 to 6 ft above average with 20 to 40 ft waves crashing ashore. National Airport received only 4 inches of snow with a liquid equivalent of 1.33 inches. However, close-in suburbs, such as Silver Spring, Maryland and Falls Church, Virginia and received 11 inches of snow. Outlying areas such as Rockville, Maryland received 19 inches of snow, and Leesburg, Virginia, received 20 inches of snow. Other snow totals included 15 inches at Richmond; 23 inches at Culpeper; 26 inches at Charlottesville; 32 inches at Winchester; and 35 inches at Fort Royal, Virginia, and Big Meadows on the Skyline Drive top the list with 42 inches of snow.

2014: The Great Lakes saw some of their worst ice cover in nearly four decades because of a frigid winter with months of below-freezing temperatures in large sections of the northern United States, the National Ocean, and Atmospheric Administration said. As of March 6, 2014, 92.2 percent of the five lakes were under ice, breaking a record set in 1973 but still short of the 94.7 percent established in 1979, the federal agency said.

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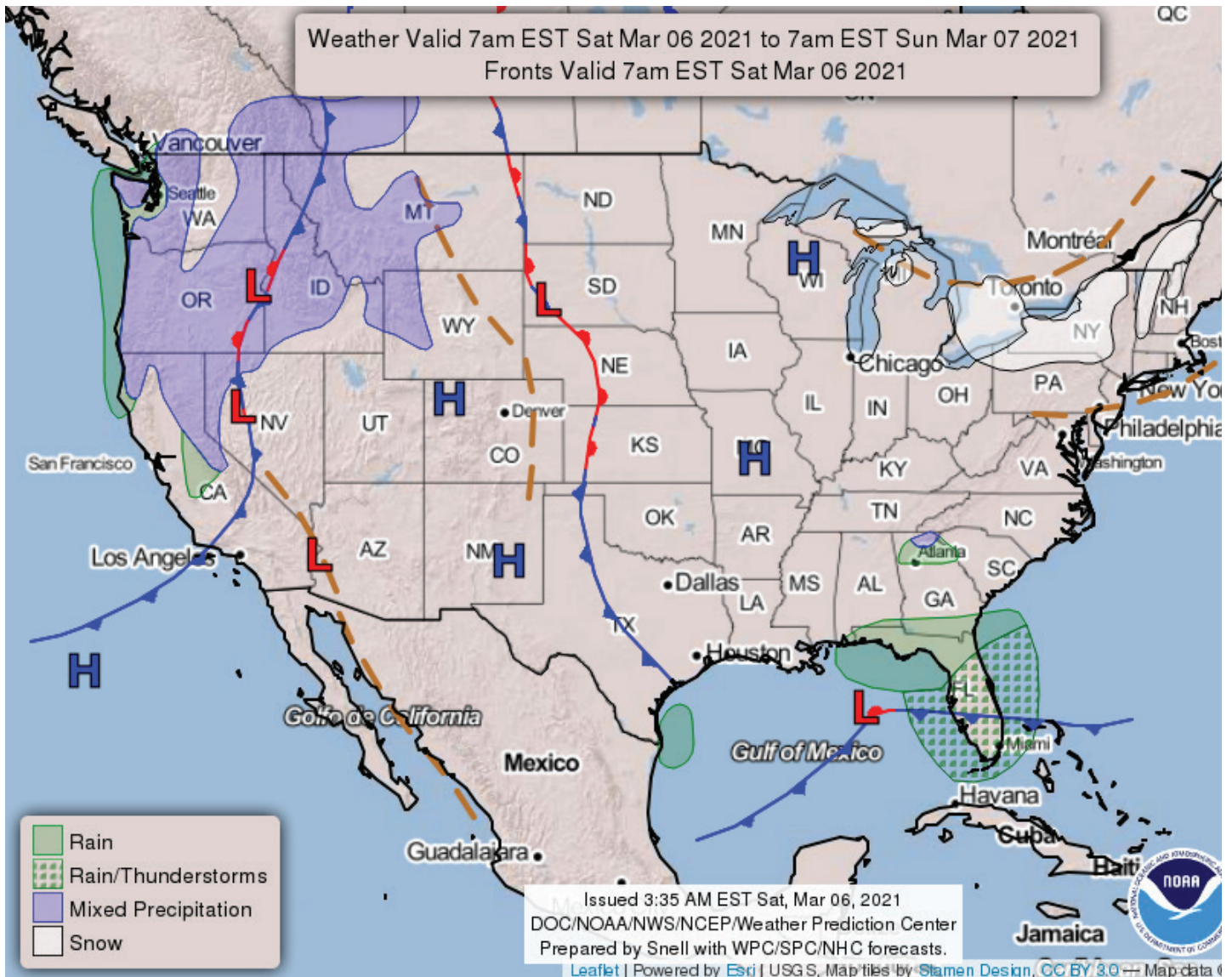
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 53.9
Low Temp: 30.7
Wind: 12 mph
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 69° in 2000
Record Low: -16° in 1899
Average High: 35°F
Average Low: 16°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.14
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 1.16
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:28 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:01 a.m.



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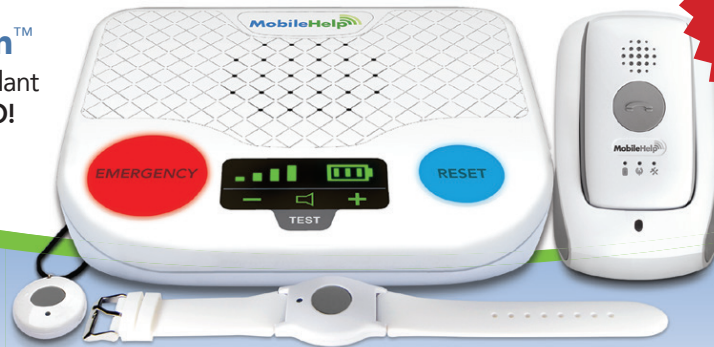
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RESTORATION

The word "want" in this Psalm covers anything and everything that we might ever desire. It is all inclusive – covering the mental, physical, and emotional as well as the spiritual areas of our lives. And if a "want" is important to us, we need to realize that it was important to God before we ever recognized it.

David knew none of our "wants" were beyond God's love, grace and mercy. Even the important need to "lie down" in "green pastures" beside "still waters" so our "souls" could be "restored" is important to the Good Shepherd! It is so important to Him that He often "makes" us take time to replenish and refresh our souls as well as ourselves.

There are times when He intervenes in our lives and causes us to "be still." Why? Not only does He want to guide us but He often has to guard us from ourselves. Jesus said, "Come apart and rest awhile." If we refuse to "rest awhile," we may "come apart" and then need Him to put us back together again so He can refresh us and use us.

The Good Shepherd loves and cares for His sheep. He not only guides them but guards them. His protection brings us His peace and with His peace comes His promise to make us "lie down beside still waters" where He will "restore" us – refresh and renew us.

In our frantic lives God expects us to rest in Him, trust in Him, take time for Him and worship Him. If we do not follow His pattern, He may even force His rest upon us in ways we would not choose. We need the benefits that come from resting in Him and with Him so we can do more for Him in worship, praise, and service.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to recognize our need to be alone with You and be renewed, refreshed, and restored. May we find our source of rest in You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. Psalm 23:1

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
- 03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/25/2021 Father/Daughter Dance (Sunday after GHS Prom)
- 05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
- 05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
- 6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
- 06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
- 07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
- 08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
- 09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
- 10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (Halloween)
- 10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
- 11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
- 12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

News from the Associated Press

Budget, smoke-outs and pot: Legislature enters its last days

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers have just four more days to work out most of the details in this year's legislative session.

As deadlines loom — and issues from the budget to medical marijuana and self-defense laws remain unsettled — many lawmakers are expecting some long nights at the Capitol in Pierre. Here are top issues to watch during the week:

THE BUDGET

South Dakota Republicans normally pride themselves on their thriftiness, but not this year. With an unprecedented amount of one-time funds — thanks largely to a windfall of federal relief money for the pandemic — Gov. Kristi Noem and lawmakers have looked to spend big. Both chambers have approved \$50 million to go towards an endowment for a needs-based scholarship, but several other priorities have yet to clear the final hurdles.

"This is a year unlike any that we've seen in statehood with the amount of dollars available and the amount of opportunities we have in front of us," said House Republican leader Kent Peterson.

The Senate has approved requests from Noem for \$75 million to expand broadband internet access and \$12 million to build an events center at the state fairgrounds. Senators have also passed their own initiative to spend \$20 million to repair a railroad line from Fort Pierre to Rapid City. But those bills have not cleared the House.

Meanwhile, House lawmakers are hoping the Senate approves \$20 million for a new facility at South Dakota State University that would research how to turn crops into new products.

As deadlines loom and ideas on using the money abound, tensions are sure to rise. The final days of the session will be marked with frenzied budget negotiations between the House and Senate. But with a week to go before the deadline hits, Republican leaders paused to congratulate themselves on the new programs at a Thursday news conference.

"We are doing some transformational things," said Sen. Mike Diedrich, the assistant majority leader. "Some things that will change the face of South Dakota."

SMOKE-OUTS

A smoke-out at the Capitol is a legislative maneuver whereby one-third of lawmakers in a chamber can resurrect a bill that has been dismissed by a committee. It's rarely used, but within the span of two days, the Senate executed three smoke-outs — revealing tensions between top Republicans in the chamber.

Senate committees rejected three controversial House bills last week: a ban on transgender women and girls from playing in female sports leagues, the governor's push to bar conservation officers from entering private land without permission and a "Stand Your Ground" bill that allows force to be used in self-defense. But each was revived by a smoke-out.

The development left several lawmakers grumbling that the committees that vetted the bills were not being respected. However, each of the revived bills also requires a majority vote to place it on the debate calendar. That means lawmakers trying to resurrect their proposals will be trying to find lawmakers willing to change their minds.

MEDICAL MARIJUANA

Pot advocates entered the legislative session cautious about how the conservative Legislature would handle a pair of ballot measures passed in November to legalize both medical and recreational marijuana.

"We feel like we gave them a prime rib dinner and they turned around and gave us some pocket lint," is how Melissa Mentele, an advocate for medical marijuana, described delays in rolling out a medical marijuana program.

Noem unveiled a plan last month to delay the legalization of medical marijuana and set up a commit-

tee to research the issue before creating a program. However, advocates and lobbyists have been active at the Capitol — taking lawmakers and the governor to task for not implementing the will of the voters.

They have been able to push some compromises like whittling the delay down from a year to six months. For advocates like Mentele, the most crucial compromise has been a provision to allow users to avoid criminal charges starting on July 1.

The Senate passed that provision, sending it to the House to decide how to handle it. If it clears the House, it would head to Noem's desk, where she would face the dilemma of signing a bill heavily amended from what she first proposed or vetoing it and allowing the full law to go into place on July 1.

"We're just trying to take responsible action, make sure we set up the program correctly, that we're doing it the right way so that we don't run into unintended consequences," Noem said.

South Dakotans relish 'extra' roles in award-winning movie

By MAKENZIE HUBER Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The last voice Jae Dale expected to hear in the opening dialogue of an award-winning indie film trailer was that of his 83-year-old mother living in Wall, South Dakota.

The 58-year-old, living in Warsaw, Indiana, heard that "Nomadland" was a shoo-in for Golden Globes and Oscar nominations. His mother, Carol Anne Hodge, never told him she was an extra in the film.

"I was in disbelief," he said. "It was her voice and her face, but I couldn't comprehend it. When you see something out of context, your brain doesn't know what to make of it."

While Hodge told her son back in 2018 that she was going to see the filming of a movie in the Badlands, she never told him she was an extra, let alone turned out to earn a speaking role.

Since "Nomadland" started winning awards in 2020, hit theaters a few weeks ago and started streaming on Hulu last weekend, Hodge has gotten phone calls from people she hasn't seen in years, or who she had only met once while working the jewelry store counter at Wall Drug.

Each time she's recognized or gets a call, she giggles. She doesn't look for notoriety, and she typically flies under the radar, she said. But she's enjoying her 15 minutes of fame, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

"I've always wanted to be an extra in a movie," she said. "When people say something, I just smile and say thank you."

Hodge is one of several South Dakotans who appear in the recently released film "Nomadland," which is currently on Hulu. Director Chloé Zhao recruits local people in her films to share their own stories through improv scenes. This is her third movie in South Dakota, each time featuring local faces.

A week ago the film won Golden Globes for best picture drama and best director. It was also nominated for best actress and best screenplay. "Nomadland" also is considered a potential Oscar contender.

His mother's short appearance in the film is priceless to Dale. It gave the world an idea of the woman he loves — full of stories and memories from a life of travel. In some way, she's memorialized, and he plans to purchase the film when it comes out on DVD.

"I would watch it again — to see my mom's scene 15 times, which is what I did already — but to also pick up on all the nuances of the story, too," Dale said.

Hodge was simply having lunch with her friend and one of the "Nomadland" cameramen when she was spontaneously cast for the film. She was telling the man the story behind each of her rings and her life as a nomad years ago.

That's what she does when she meets new people; she exchanges her stories with theirs.

"We were just there visiting," Hodge said.

But the man soon called over Zhao and "Nomadland's" lead actress, Frances McDormand, and returned with a camera. Then, Hodge repeated her stories.

She appears shortly in the film, talking about life as a nomad and explaining the importance of the wedding ring McDormand's character, Fern, wears. Hodge traveled the American West for 18 months after her second husband retired from his job in Montana and before they settled down in Arizona. She returned

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to her home state of South Dakota in 2005.

The unscripted dialogue weaves together documentary and fantasy, and it gives a glimpse into not just South Dakotans as extras in the movie, but to their lives and experiences.

"These are things that are priceless," Hodge said. "You can't go to a store and buy the memories in my head. The scenes I've seen, I can just flick that switch in my head and drive that road again, seeing it whenever I want to."

Derrick Janis was one of the few South Dakotans to have a speaking role along with Hodge. He acted as a father named Viktor, who was celebrating his daughter's birthday with his family at the Badlands campground.

The 38-year-old father isn't an actor. He works as a production manager at the KILI radio station in Porcupine, but he's been in three of Zhao's movies, including "The Rider" and "Songs My Brothers Taught Me."

Zhao prefers to use locals to tell the story of the community and area she films in, and Janis reprises his role as Viktor in each film. While he's usually pretending to be the bad guy in her films, fans of Zhao's work saw a different side of Viktor in "Nomadland."

"There's this home feeling when you have diverse characters from local places," Janis said. "There's more of a connection for the watcher as they see the people from this place themselves."

Kim Bartling poses for a picture with Linda May, who appeared in the film "Nomadland," on location in the Badlands in 2018.

There wasn't much acting for Kim Bartling in "Nomadland." The major scene for the former theatre and film instructor at USF, who now owns theatre and production companies, is in the Badlands astronomy scene, where she marvels at the South Dakota night sky.

Her reactions were genuine, since they brought in a real astronomer, and she, along with other extras, got to view seven of Jupiter's nine moons.

"Nomadland' is just a story about one woman, but it could have been any of us," Bartling said. "We all have stories to tell, and we're all interesting people."

Bartling only spent a few days filming, but she got to know the actors and crew. Zhao and McDormand both visited a camper she brought to the campground, and she gave them a tour. She joked around with supporting actor David Strathairn on set, too.

Before the crew left, McDormand gifted Bartling with a handmade potholder, just like she trades with another character in the film. Janis also received a potholder as a souvenir and thank you from the award-winning actress.

The gifts are fitting for McDormand, Bartling said. The actress was unassuming and kind, and someone she'd want to be friends with.

"The potholders are just reminders of all the things this film is about," Bartling said. "It's people coming in and out of your life. You take the good experiences from them and go on down the road."

Even in Wall Drug, Sarah Husted, vice president of Wall Drug, was excited about McDormand working on the film. McDormand's character took a seasonal position inside the kitchen and worked alongside actual Wall Drug employees.

"We were out of our minds excited," Husted said. "My stepmom is a huge Frances McDormand fan."

Her only concern was when McDormand handled the meat slicer for a scene in the kitchen.

"The last thing I want is for this award-winning actress to slice off her finger during filming at Wall Drug," Husted said.

"Nomadland" focuses on Fern and her life as a nomad, but it's also largely a love letter to South Dakota scenery, with its sweeping frames of the Badlands, glimpses of the Black Hills and peaceful sunsets in western South Dakota.

Instead of being treated as flyover country, the state is a destination.

"Just having the movie include South Dakota is a thrill to any South Dakotan, wherever you are in the state," Janis said. "You get to say, 'Hey, I'm from that state. We're not forgotten.'"

The film even had a few scenes from tourist destinations like the Reptile Gardens. Terry Phillip, a curator

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at the attraction, gave the two main characters a behind-the-scenes look at the park.

"I was hoping it'd light up my movie career," Phillip joked. "My takeaway is that we like it when we can participate in things like this. Anything that gets Reptile Gardens in front of the public is a good thing."

Simply having the movie set in South Dakota and showing such scenes and places is an advertisement and enticement itself for people to visit the state, said Melissa Boring, a Rapid City native who worked on art production and staging for "Nomadland."

"Nomadland's" setting in South Dakota only further shows that the state needs a dedicated film office and to give more film incentives to shoot in the state, she said.

"I don't think people realize what South Dakota has to offer," she said. "When films can showcase what's special and unique about South Dakota, that helps bring people in."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

10-11-17-27-54, Mega Ball: 20, Megaplier: 2

(ten, eleven, seventeen, twenty-seven, fifty-four; Mega Ball: twenty; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$55 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$138 million

Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Sioux Falls Washington 54, Brookings 23

SoDak Qualifier=

Class A=

Region 1=

Milbank 51, Groton Area 42

Sisseton 54, Tiospa Zina Tribal 41

Region 2=

Flandreau 48, Florence/Henry 44

Sioux Valley 57, Clark/Willow Lake 43

Region 3=

Dell Rapids 65, West Central 52

Sioux Falls Christian 65, Garretson 31

Region 4=

Dakota Valley 64, Tea Area 58

Vermillion 68, Lennox 43

Region 5=

Madison 64, Parkston 37

Wagner 77, Parker 70

Region 6=

Chamberlain 81, Miller 36

Mobridge-Pollock 54, Stanley County 40

Regions 7&8=

Custer def. Lakota Tech, forfeit

Rapid City Christian 45, Belle Fourche 40

St. Thomas More 70, Hill City 48

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Winner 61, Hot Springs 30
Class B=
Region 1=
Aberdeen Christian 52, Waverly-South Shore 47
Waubay/Summit 53, Warner 51
Region 2=
Lower Brule 60, Ipswich 48
Potter County 76, Herreid/Selby Area 43
Region 3=
DeSmet 60, Castlewood 40
Wessington Springs 42, Deubrook 39
Region 4=
Dell Rapids St. Mary 54, Hanson 45
Elkton-Lake Benton 54, Howard 36
Region 5=
Canistota 49, Bridgewater-Emery 43
Viborg-Hurley 66, Freeman Academy/Marion 59, OT
Region 6=
Corsica/Stickney 67, Burke 56
Platte-Geddes 62, Gregory 33
Region 7=
Lyman 58, Kadoka Area 46
White River 91, Wall 66
Region 8=
Faith 75, Dupree 52
Timber Lake 57, Lemmon 52, OT
GIRLS BASKETBALL=
State Qualifier=
Class AA=
SoDak 16=
Aberdeen Central 70, Spearfish 35
Brandon Valley 62, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 49
Harrisburg 63, Sturgis Brown 49
Mitchell 50, Watertown 33
Rapid City Central 44, Huron 43
Rapid City Stevens 49, Pierre 34
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58, Sioux Falls Lincoln 20
Sioux Falls Washington 63, Brookings 30

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Pot advocates cry foul on Noem using state funds for lawsuit

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Advocates for a voter-passed measure to legalize marijuana in South Dakota are crying foul about a taxpayer-funded lawsuit from Gov. Kristi Noem opposing it as the battle over the issue enters its final round at the state Supreme Court.

At one point during the legal proceedings, taxpayers were paying for lawyers on opposing sides of the court room. The attorney general's office was defending the constitutional amendment against lawyers for Highway Patrol Superintendent Col. Rick Miller, who was effectively acting on behalf of the Republican

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governor.

The attorney general's office has since withdrawn from the case, leaving marijuana advocates to appeal to the Supreme Court in an effort to reverse a circuit court judge's ruling. Last month, Circuit Judge Christina Klinger found the constitutional amendment — known as Amendment A — would have violated the state constitution.

South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws, the group behind voter-approved ballot campaigns to legalize both medical marijuana and recreational marijuana, has launched a fundraising effort that includes a live-streamed concert they are calling "Freedom We're On It" — poking at two idioms the Republican governor is famous for using. The group says it needs the money for its Supreme Court case.

"Advocates are working very hard to raise the funds needed to defend Amendment A in court. Unlike our opponent, Gov. Noem, we are not permitted to use taxpayer funds to pay our legal bills," said Matthew Schweich, a director of South Dakotans for Better Marijuana Laws. "We are at a disadvantage, but it is a disadvantage we have to deal with."

Ian Fury, the governor's spokesman, said the fees for the lawsuit have not been billed, but they will be paid from a fund the state maintains for extraordinary legal costs. The Legislature allotted \$400,000 to that fund this year.

In the lawsuit, Noem's administration has been represented by lawyers from the Redstone Law Firm, which holds contracts with governor's office both for lobbying the Legislature and legal representation.

The firm currently bills the governor's office for legal services at a rate of \$190 an hour for partners and \$170 an hour for associates, according to a contract with the firm. But Fury said the firm would bill for the lawsuit under a separate agreement. Two partners and one associate from the firm have been listed on court filings.

Pennington County Sheriff Kevin Thom, who filed the lawsuit alongside Miller, has made it clear that taxpayer funds are not being used to fund his lawsuit but has declined to discuss how he is funding it.

Schweich, who also works for a national organization called the Marijuana Policy Project, said the attorney general's decision to withdraw from the appeal has placed a greater burden on marijuana advocates. He said a total figure for the legal costs has not been settled, but is expected to run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

"We remain confident that the South Dakota Supreme Court will make the right decision and uphold Amendment A," he said.

Noem has remained adamant in her opposition to legalizing recreational pot, even if 54% of voters supported it in November.

"I still believe that it is a bad idea for our state," she said last month, indicating she would likely veto any efforts from the Legislature to legalize it.

The circuit court judge didn't strike down the voter-passed constitutional amendment because it legalized marijuana, but rather because of technicalities in the law's language. The judge ruled that it violated constitutional law on ballot initiatives and authority granted to the Department of Revenue, the agency that was tasked with overseeing a pot program under the amendment.

Some Republican lawmakers have acknowledged recreational pot could still become legalized on July 1, as originally required under the amendment. The Supreme Court could either reverse the lower court ruling entirely or strike certain sections from the law that are deemed unconstitutional, while keeping the parts that legalize pot.

Lawyers for both sides have agreed to an expedited schedule to file their arguments, with the marijuana advocates written arguments due to the Supreme Court by Wednesday, and opposing arguments due two weeks later.

VIRUS TODAY: Vaccinated adults await advice on family visits

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Friday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

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THE NUMBERS:

VACCINES: Nearly 54.1 million people, or 16.3% of the U.S. population, have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, according to the CDC. Some 27.7 million people have completed their vaccination, or 8.4% of the population.

CASES: The seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. decreased from 72,418 on Feb. 18 to 61,968 on Thursday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATHS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. decreased from 1,942 on Feb. 18 to 1,774 on Thursday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

POSITIVITY RATE: The seven-day rolling test positivity rate in the U.S. decreased from 5.2 on Feb. 18 to 4.2 on Thursday, according to data from the COVID Tracking Project. The three states with the highest rates of positive coronavirus tests: Idaho (24.8%), Alabama (19.8%) and Iowa (19.3%). Idaho's rate rose in the past two weeks from 21.2% to 24.8%.

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY:

— President Joe Biden has a 60% approval rating for his job performance and even more backing from Americans for his handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

— As the U.S. prioritizes teachers nationwide for coronavirus vaccines, states and many districts are not keeping track of how many school employees have received the shots.

— New York officials confirmed reports that members of Gov. Andrew Cuomo's COVID-19 task force altered a state Health Department report to omit the full number of nursing home deaths but insisted the changes were made because of accuracy concerns.

QUOTABLE: "Congress must pass the American Rescue Plan now so we can get Americans back to work." — White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki, noting slow job gains among Hispanic and Black Americans.

ON THE HORIZON: More than 27 million Americans fully vaccinated against the coronavirus are awaiting guidance from federal health officials on next steps. "I'd say the most common question I get is 'Can I visit my grandchildren?'" says Dr. Leana Wen, an emergency physician and public health professor at George Washington University.

Find AP's full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

ATF investigating in rural Meade County, nature unknown

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives isn't disclosing the nature of its investigation in rural Meade County.

Between 15 and 20 law enforcement vehicles were parked in front of a home Thursday a few miles west of the Ellsworth Air Force Base. At least one military-style vehicle could be seen leaving the area and one helicopter was flying above it.

Bureau spokeswoman Ashlee Sherrill said ATF is investigating along with local and state law enforcement partners, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Sherrill said she can't disclose anything about the investigation because the case is under seal by the U.S. Attorney's Office in South Dakota. She says more information may be available next week.

Business continued as usual on the air base.

As violence surges, some question Portland axing police unit

By SARA CLINE Associated Press/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Elmer Yarborough got a terrifying call from his sister: She wept as she told him two of his nephews may have been shot in broad daylight as they left a bar in Portland, Oregon.

He drove there as fast as he could. An officer told him one of his nephews was heading to the hospital and the other, Tyrell Penney, hadn't survived.

"My sister, Tyrell's mom, was on the phone; I just said, 'He's gone.' And I just heard the most horrific scream that you could ever imagine," Yarborough said.

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When Penney was killed last summer, unrest was roiling liberal Portland as protesters took to the streets nightly to demand racial justice and defunding police. At the same time, one of the whitest major cities in America was experiencing its deadliest year in more than a quarter-century — a trend seen nationwide — with shootings that overwhelmingly affected the Black community.

Responding to the calls for change in policing, the mayor and City Council cut several police programs from the budget, including one Yarborough believes could have saved his nephew. A specialized unit focused on curbing gun violence, which had long faced criticism for disproportionately targeting people of color, was disbanded a month before Penney, a 27-year-old Black man visiting from Sacramento, California, was killed on July 25.

Yarborough and some other families wonder if ending the unit is partly to blame for Portland's dramatic spike in shootings, but officials and experts attribute increased gun violence in cities nationwide to the hardships of the coronavirus pandemic, unemployment, economic anxiety and stress on mental health.

"Without a doubt, I think it is a possibility that my nephew could still be alive if (the Gun Violence Reduction Team) was not dissolved," said Yarborough, a crisis response volunteer for Portland police who responds to shootings to support victims' families.

"I cannot say for sure if he would, but what I will tell you is had it not been my nephew that was saved, it probably could have saved the life of someone else," he said.

More people died of gunfire last year in Portland — 40 — than the entire tally of homicides the previous year. The number of shootings — 900 — was nearly 2 1/2 times higher than the year before. The spike has continued this year, with more than 150 shootings, including 45 people wounded and 12 killed so far.

Police had warned of possible repercussions of ending the unit, pointing out cautionary tales in other cities that had made a similar choice.

Portland police quoted former Salinas, California, Police Chief Kelly McMillin: "Not to be overly dramatic, but if you lose the unit which focuses on removing firearms from the hand of violent offenders, people will die. It's really just that simple."

Stockton, California, began disbanding and defunding police units dedicated to gun violence in 2010. In 2011 and 2012, the city's homicide rates reached record highs. After the city restored the units, homicides significantly declined, according to data reported by police.

While policing has been refocused in Portland, experts and officials say it's unlikely those changes caused spikes in gun violence.

"I believe if (the Gun Violence Reduction Team) were (around) today, we would still see a substantial, if not identical increase, in shootings in Portland," Mayor Ted Wheeler said in January. "This is clearly part of a larger national trend."

Wheeler, who is also police commissioner, announced the unit's disbanding last June and reassigned its 34 officers to patrol. He described it as an opportunity to reimagine policing and redirected \$7 million in police funds toward communities of color.

The push was led by Jo Ann Hardesty, the first Black woman elected to the City Council. She cited a 2018 audit showing nearly 60% of people stopped by the gun violence team were Black — though they make up less than 6% of the city's population.

Nearly half of the 55 total homicide victims in 2020 were people of color, many of them from Portland's historically Black neighborhoods, according to city statistics.

So far this year, there have been 17 homicides — a concerning number considering there had only been one homicide in the same period in 2020.

Among the people of color shot to death last year were a 23-year-old Iraqi refugee stopping to pick up an Uber fare; an 18-year-old recent high school graduate; and a 53-year-old woman caught in gang crossfire and killed in front of her husband.

The violence has left leaders and community members scrambling for solutions. Some say the loss of the unit's seasoned detectives has hurt the city, while others push for new approaches.

Last month, police launched a squad of 15 officers and six detectives focusing on gun violence investigations. Officials say it's only part of the solution, as leaders partner with community groups, work to

increase transparency and use proactive approaches that don't rely on the stop-and-frisk tactic.

That's little solace to Penney's three children, the friends he was visiting in Portland or his family, who moved to California when he was child to avoid the exact reason he died — gun violence.

Yarborough, Penney's uncle, was a gang member in the 1990s and had been arrested by officers with Portland's gun violence team. Despite that, he described the unit as "the CIA" of the police department and said they often stopped shootings before they happened because of their deep community knowledge.

"They built relationships with gang members and knew who the perpetrators were," Yarborough said. "They ... were able to band together to stop it, or at least refer people impacted to programs to help change their lives."

Cline is a corps member for The Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Europe staggers as infectious variants power virus surge

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

MILAN (AP) — The virus swept through a nursery school and an adjacent elementary school in the Milan suburb of Bollate with amazing speed. In a matter of just days, 45 children and 14 staff members had tested positive.

Genetic analysis confirmed what officials already suspected: The highly contagious coronavirus variant first identified in England was racing through the community, a densely packed city of nearly 40,000 with a chemical plant and a Pirelli bicycle tire factory a 15-minute drive from the heart of Milan.

"This demonstrates that the virus has a sort of intelligence. ... We can put up all the barriers in the world and imagine that they work, but in the end, it adapts and penetrates them," lamented Bollate Mayor Francesco Vassallo.

Bollate was the first city in Lombardy, the northern region that has been the epicenter in each of Italy's three surges, to be sealed off from neighbors because of virus variants that the World Health Organization says are powering another uptick in infections across Europe. The variants also include versions first identified in South Africa and Brazil.

Europe recorded 1 million new COVID-19 cases last week, an increase of 9% from the previous week and a reversal that ended a six-week decline in new infections, WHO said Thursday.

"The spread of the variants is driving the increase, but not only," said Dr. Hans Kluge, WHO regional director for Europe, citing "also the opening of society, when it is not done in a safe and a controlled manner."

The variant first found in the U.K. is spreading significantly in 27 European countries monitored by WHO and is dominant in at least 10 countries: Britain, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Israel, Spain and Portugal.

It is up to 50% more transmissible than the virus that surged last spring and again in the fall, making it more adept at thwarting measures that were previously effective, WHO experts warned. Scientists have concluded that it is also more deadly.

"That is why health systems are struggling more now," Kluge said. "It really is at a tipping point. We have to hold the fort and be very vigilant."

In Lombardy, which bore the brunt of Italy's spring surge, intensive care wards are again filling up, with more than two-thirds of new positive tests being the UK variant, health officials said.

After putting two provinces and some 50 towns on a modified lockdown, Lombardy's regional governor announced tightened restrictions Friday and closed classrooms for all ages. Cases in Milan schools alone surged 33% in a week, the provincial health system's chief said.

The situation is dire in the Czech Republic, which this week registered a record-breaking total of nearly 8,500 patients hospitalized with COVID-19. Poland is opening temporary hospitals and imposing a partial

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lockdown as the U.K. variant has grown from 10% of all infections in February to 25% now.

Two patients from hard-hit Slovakia were expected to arrive Saturday for treatment in Germany, where authorities said they had offered to take in 10 patients.

Kluge cited Britain's experience as cause for optimism, noting that widespread restrictions and the introduction of the vaccine have helped tamp down the variants there and in Israel. The vaccine rollout in the European Union, by comparison, is lagging badly, mostly because of supply problems.

In Britain, the emergence of the more transmissible strain sent cases soaring in December and triggered a national lockdown in January. Cases have since plummeted, from about 60,000 a day in early January to about 7,000 a day now.

Still, a study shows the rate of decline slowing, and the British government says it will tread cautiously with plans to ease the lockdown. That process begins Monday with the reopening of schools. Infection rates are highest in people ages 13 to 17, and officials will watch closely to see whether the return to class brings a spike in infections.

While the U.K. variant is dominant in France, forcing lockdowns in the French Riviera city of Nice and the northern port of Dunkirk, the variant first detected in South Africa has emerged as the most prevalent in France's Moselle region, which borders Germany and Luxembourg. It represents 55% of the virus circulating there.

Austria's health minister said Saturday the U.K. variant is now dominant in his country. But the South Africa variant is also a concern in a district of Austria that extends from Italy to Germany, with Austrian officials announcing plans to vaccinate most of the 84,000 residents there to curb its spread. Austria is also requiring motorists along the Brenner highway, a major north-south route, to show negative test results.

The South Africa variant, now present in 26 European countries, is a source of particular concern because of doubts over whether the current vaccines are effective enough against it. The Brazilian variant, which appears capable of reinfecting people, has been detected in 15 European countries.

WHO and its partners are working to strengthen the genetic surveillance needed to track variants across the continent.

The mayor of Bollate has appealed to the regional governor to vaccinate all 40,000 residents immediately, though he expects to be told the vaccine supply is too tight.

Bollate has recorded 3,000 positive cases and 134 deaths — mostly among the elderly — since Italy was stricken a year ago. It took the brunt in the resurgence in November and December, and was caught completely off guard when the U.K. variant arrived, racing through schoolage children before hitting families at home.

"People are starting to get tired that after a year there is no light at the end of the tunnel," Vassallo said.

AP correspondents Jill Lawless in London, Karel Janicek in Prague, Vanessa Gera in Warsaw, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Sylvie Corbet in Paris, Geir Moulson in Berlin and Jovana Gec in Belgrade contributed.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Protests, tear gas in Myanmar after UN envoy urges action

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Security forces in Myanmar again used force Saturday to disperse anti-coup protesters, a day after a U.N. special envoy urged the Security Council to take action to quell junta violence that this past week left more than 50 peaceful demonstrators dead and scores injured.

Protests were reported Saturday morning in the country's biggest city, Yangon, where stun grenades and tear gas were used against demonstrators. On Wednesday, 18 people were reported killed there.

Protests also took place in several other cities, including Mandalay, the second-biggest city, Myitkyina, the capital of the northern state of Kachin, Myeik in the far south, where police fired tear gas at students, and Dawei in the southeast, where tear gas was also used.

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Demonstrators in the city of Monywa poured cans of beer over their feet and those of passers-by to show their contempt for the brewery's owners — the military. Myanmar Beer is one of a number of business concerns in the country that are linked to the generals and has seen its sales plummet in the weeks following the coup. It's also lost its Japanese partner, Kirin, which announced it was pulling out of the joint venture as a result of the power grab.

Officials are believed to have exhumed the body of a young woman who was killed during Wednesday's suppression of protests in Mandalay. The woman, Kyal Sin, had been photographed taking part in the protests before her death, and images of her on the front lines have made her a high-profile martyr.

Security forces on Friday night sealed off the cemetery where she was buried, and when residents visited in the morning, her grave was freshly plastered over and shovels and other evidence of digging were found at the site. There was no official explanation of the incident, but media close to the military had earlier reported that the authorities had questioned the conclusion that she had been shot dead by police, and intended to investigate.

The escalation of violence has put pressure on the world community to act to restrain the junta, which seized power on Feb. 1 by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi. The coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar, which for five decades had languished under strict military rule that led to international isolation and sanctions.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party led a return to civilian rule with a landslide election victory in 2015, and with an even greater margin of votes last year. It would have been installed for a second five-year term last month, but instead Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and other members of the government were placed in military detention.

Large protests have occurred daily across many cities and towns, and security forces have responded with greater use of lethal force and mass arrests. At least 18 protesters were shot and killed last Sunday and 38 on Wednesday, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office. More than 1,000 have been arrested, the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said.

U.N. special envoy for Myanmar Christine Schraner Burgener said in her briefing to Friday's closed Security Council meeting that council unity and "robust" action are critical "in pushing for a stop to the violence and the restoration of Myanmar's democratic institutions."

"We must denounce the actions by the military," she said. "It is critical that this council is resolute and coherent in putting the security forces on notice and standing with the people of Myanmar firmly, in support of the clear November election results."

She reiterated an earlier appeal to the international community not to "lend legitimacy or recognition to this regime that has been forcefully imposed, and nothing but chaos has since followed."

The Security Council took no immediate action. Council diplomats said Britain circulated a draft presidential statement for consideration, a step below a legally binding resolution.

Any kind of coordinated action at the U.N. will be difficult because two permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia, are likely to veto it.

Earlier in the week, Schraner Burgener warned Myanmar's army that the world's nations and the Security Council "might take huge, strong measures."

"And the answer was, 'We are used to sanctions, and we survived those sanctions in the past,'" she said. When she warned that Myanmar would become isolated, Schraner Burgener said "the answer was, 'We have to learn to walk with only a few friends.'"

A decree issued by the junta and published in state media Friday increased the potential costs of opposition, declaring that members of a self-styled alternative government formed by elected lawmakers whom the army barred from taking their seats were committing high treason, which is punishable by death.

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, Myanmar's Parliament, wants foreign countries and international organizations to recognize it instead of the junta. It also claims to have won the loyalty of local bodies inside Myanmar. The junta's announcement said that people who collude with the committee would be subject to seven years' imprisonment.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies urged immediate protection for all Red Cross volunteers and health workers.

The statement came after video from a surveillance camera that was circulated widely on social media showed members of an ambulance crew in Yangon being savagely beaten after they were taken into custody by police on Wednesday.

"We express profound sadness that Myanmar Red Cross volunteers have been injured while on duty providing lifesaving first aid treatment to wounded people, in line with fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality and impartiality. Red Cross volunteers should never be targeted," the federation said.

Officer's trial could reopen intersection where Floyd died

By MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press/Report for America

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — During a group's recent meeting at the now-vacant Speedway gas station near where George Floyd died, children roasted marshmallows on a fire pit while adults discussed topics ranging from activism to snow removal.

"Black joy is a form of protest," said Marcia Howard, one of the group's organizers, referencing plans for celebrating Arctic explorer Matthew Henson as part of Black History Month.

But the agenda on this chilly Thursday morning in February quickly segued to more immediate concerns: Who would pick up skis and broomball sticks for an event being planned at a nearby park? And what's to be done about the snow piling up at the site's greenhouse that preserves plants left in Floyd's memory?

Such is life at George Floyd Square, the place where former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck for about nine minutes. Although many in the community consider the place where the Black man died to be a sacred space, it also has presented some headaches for the city.

The square sprang up organically in the days after Floyd's death. As people gathered to express their grief and anger, including leaving offerings, community members set up barricades of refrigerators, trash cans and wooden pallets to block traffic. The city eventually replaced those with concrete barriers.

Amid concerns that the barricaded square was decimating businesses and making the neighborhood less safe at night, city leaders recently pledged to reopen it after Chauvin's murder trial. Jury selection starts Monday, and the trial is expected to stretch into April.

The residents and activists who serve as unofficial leaders and organizers of George Floyd Square say they won't step aside unless the city meets their list of 24 demands. Among them: recall the county prosecutor, fire the head of the state's criminal investigative agency, and spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on programs to create jobs, combat racism and support affordable housing. They also are demanding that the square remain closed until the trials scheduled for August of the other three officers charged in Floyd's death.

Since the city asserted it would reopen the square after Chauvin's trial, the caretakers of the space have declined to talk in detail about negotiations to reopen it. Jeanelle Austin, a racial justice leadership coach and a lead caretaker of the memorial area, said the demands that fall within the city's control aren't unreasonable.

"The thing about it is that a lot of the different demands are asks from different people, and Black folks aren't monolithic," said Austin, who is Black. "So it's really incumbent upon our city leadership to really look at the needs behind the asks, and really fulfilling those needs."

A towering steel sculpture of a raised fist dominates the middle of the intersection, a replacement for the wooden sculpture that first went up. Murals memorializing Floyd or marking the struggle against discrimination have overtaken nearly every vertical surface. Warming houses are available at the barricades, and so is hand sanitizer in a nod to COVID-19 safety precautions. A small library, a community closet for clothing and food shelves are among various services available to visitors.

Howard, a 47-year-old retired Marine who lives around the corner from the square, was so affected by Floyd's death that she took a leave from her job as a high school English teacher to more or less watch over the square. Howard said the neighborhood has been largely supportive of volunteers, with many

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residents cooking food for them.

A video on her TikTok account shows a resident's child giving her a cupcake as the family left the square, bringing Howard to tears.

"I haven't had to grocery shop in six months," she said.

But the support isn't total.

Andrea Jenkins, one of two City Council members representing parts of the neighborhood, said some of her constituents have complained about gunshots and the frequent sound of police helicopters overhead.

"The neighbors deserve to have a level of comfort that does not include gunshots every night, and muggings and carjackings, and all the violent crimes we have been witnessing in this community," Jenkins said.

Violent crime at the intersection and the blocks immediately surrounding it rose dramatically in 2020, though crime also increased citywide. There were 19 nonfatal and fatal shootings in the area in 2020, including 14 shootings from May 1 through Aug. 31. That's compared with three shootings in all of 2019 and none during the summer months.

Mayor Jacob Frey and Police Chief Medaria Arradondo last month disputed frequent characterizations of the square as an "autonomous zone" but cited those perceptions as a major reason it must be reopened.

Jenkins said officers have been met with "protests, resistance, opposition" that have sometimes led them to avoid policing the area. Howard and other leaders dispute that anyone in the square has impeded officers.

A flashpoint of that argument was the fatal shooting of Dameron Chambers at the square when many people had gathered to celebrate the Juneteenth holiday.

A city document says emergency services workers were unable to get to Chambers and that police "ultimately had to pull Mr. Chambers to an area where the ambulance could access the area." The Floyd Square caretakers say it was police who delayed emergency workers, and their demands include an investigation of his death.

"The narrative will be, to this day, that the people blocked the EMS," Howard said. "Show me the bodycam footage of people blocking emergency services vehicles for a dying Black man. You won't have it, because it doesn't exist."

Jenkins and others also argue that businesses in the area are being hurt by the street closure. She said business occupancy in the area has fallen from more than 90% last March to "probably less than 50%" nearly a year later, although it's difficult to discern the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on those numbers.

The Speedway is now closed, with a sign that once displayed gas prices now showing a countdown to Chauvin's trial, and other storefronts lay vacant. Several businesses do remain open, including a couple of restaurants, a salon and a laundromat.

Members of Howard's group say that while they're hoping Chauvin gets convicted, the occupation of the square is about far more than the case against him.

"Injustice closed these streets, and only justice can open them back up," Howard said.

This story was corrected to reflect that there are three other officers besides Chauvin, not four, who are charged in Floyd's death.

Mohamed Ibrahim is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

The Latest: Pope Francis delivers sermon in Baghdad church

BAGHDAD, Iraq (AP) — The Latest on Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq, aimed at rallying the country's dwindling Christian community after decades of war and unrest (all times local):

6:40 p.m.

Pope Francis is reminding Iraq's Chaldean Catholics of one of the core tenets of the Catholic faith: that those who are persecuted, poor and mourn are blessed.

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Francis honored Iraq's persecuted Christians by celebrating Mass on Saturday at the Chaldean Catholic cathedral in Baghdad. It was the first time a pope has celebrated a Mass using the Chaldean rite that is known to most Iraqi Catholics.

Despite concerns about coronavirus infections, the church was full, stuffy with incense and a maskless choir sang hymns and chanted Scripture readings. Francis, who is vaccinated against COVID-19, did not wear a mask, but priests and faithful did.

For his sermon, Francis delivered a meditation on the Beatitudes, taken from Jesus' sermon that in God's eyes, those who are blessed are not the wealthy, powerful or famous, but "the poor, those who mourn, the persecuted."

He said: "Love is our strength, the source of strength for those of our brothers and sisters who here too have suffered prejudice, indignities, mistreatment and persecutions for the name of Jesus."

Francis is visiting Iraq to give a spiritual boost to its dwindling Christian communities who were routed from their homes by the Islamic State group and face continued threat from Shiite militias. Chaldean Catholics are believed to represent around 80 percent of the estimated 300,000 Christians left in Iraq.

6:30 p.m.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken says he is pleased to see the historic visit by Pope Francis to Iraq. In a tweet, he says the U.S. believes his visit will inspire hope and "help promote religious harmony and understanding among members of the different religions in Iraq and around the world."

Pope Francis is on a four-day visit to Iraq, brushing aside security concerns and rising coronavirus infections in the Arab country to show support for its shrinking Christian community.

He and Iraq's top Shiite cleric delivered a powerful message of peaceful coexistence Saturday, urging Muslims in the war-weary Arab nation to embrace Iraq's long-beleaguered Christian minority during a historic meeting in the holy city of Najaf.

6:20 p.m.

Pope Francis is celebrating Mass in Baghdad's Chaldean Catholic cathedral, which was full of mask-wearing faithful despite concerns about possible coronavirus contagion.

Iraqi and Vatican church officials had promised social distancing and other health measures would be enforced during Francis' four-day visit to Iraq, especially at his indoor events. Organizers said an estimated 180 people could fit safely in the St. Joseph's Chaldean Church.

They crowded toward the center aisle as a maskless Francis processed toward the altar, flanked by other priests. A choir sang and incense wafted around. Francis and the Vatican delegation are vaccinated, but the majority of Iraqis are not.

Francis is in Iraq to encourage its minority Christians to remain and help the country rebuild, despite having endured years of persecution by the Islamic State, discrimination by the Muslim majority and continued threats from Shiite militias.

He went ahead with the trip despite rising COVID-19 cases in Iraq, which went into a modified lockdown in mid-February.

5:15 p.m.

Iraq's prime minister has declared March 6 a National Day of Tolerance and Coexistence in Iraq after Pope Francis' meeting with Iraq's top Shiite cleric and a landmark inter-religious gathering,

Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has announced the declaration in a tweet, saying it was "in celebration" of the pontiff's two events Saturday, which al-Kadhimi called "historic."

The central message of Francis' weekend visit to Iraq has been a call for the country to accept its diversity and ensure minorities equal rights. The pope hopes to ensure the place of Iraq's Christian population, dwindling under years of violence and discrimination.

Francis met Saturday with Shiite Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the holy city of Najaf and attended an inter-religious gathering in the Plains of Ur, traditional birthplace of Abraham, the patriarch revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

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12:15 p.m.

Pope Francis is urging Iraq's Muslim and Christian religious leaders to put aside animosities and work together for peace and unity during an interfaith meeting in the traditional birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, father of their faiths.

He told the gathering: "This is true religiosity: to worship God and to love our neighbor."

Francis traveled to the ruins of Ur in southern Iraq on Saturday to reinforce his message of interreligious tolerance and fraternity during the first-ever papal visit to Iraq, a country riven by religious and ethnic divisions.

With a magnificent ziggurat nearby, Francis told the faith leaders that it was fitting that they come together in Ur, "back to our origins, to the sources of God's work, to the birth of our religions" to pray together for peace as children of Abraham, the prophet common to Muslims, Christians and Jews.

He said: "From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters. Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion."

He said there could never be peace as long as Iraqis viewed people of different faiths as the "other."

He said: "Peace does not demand winners or losers, but rather brothers and sisters who, for all the misunderstandings and hurts of the past, are journeying from conflict to unity."

11:15 a.m.

Pope Francis has arrived in the ancient city of Ur for an interfaith meeting aimed at urging Iraq's Muslims, Christians and other believers to put aside historic animosities and work together for peace and unity.

Francis traveled Saturday to traditional birthplace of the Prophet Abraham, revered by Muslims, Christians and Jews, to reinforce his message of interreligious tolerance and fraternity during the first-ever papal visit to Iraq.

The meeting was taking place in the shadow of Ur's magnificent ziggurat, the 6,000-year-old archaeological complex near Nasiriyah in southern Iraq.

Francis' interfaith meeting in Ur came after his historic encounter in nearby Najaf with Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Senate works through night, virus aid on path to passage

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Bleary-eyed lawmakers worked through a mountain of amendments Saturday as the Senate plodded toward passage of a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill that President Joe Biden and Democrats say is crucial for hoisting the country out of the pandemic.

The Senate commenced a dreaded "vote-a-thon" — a continuous series of votes on amendments — shortly before midnight Friday, and by midmorning Saturday had dispensed with over two dozen. Democrats were hoping for final passage by around midday so the Senate could send the modestly revamped bill back to the House, and then to Biden this coming week for his signature.

The Senate had been in session since 9 a.m. EST Friday. Its work on the bill was proving to be a test of both lawmakers' physical stamina and Democrats' ability to pass legislation backed by every senator in the party. The chamber is divided 50-50, with Vice President Kamala Harris' tiebreaking vote their only edge, and Republicans are arrayed against the legislation.

Overnight, the Senate was like an experiment in the best techniques for staying awake. Several lawmakers appeared to rest their eyes or doze at their desks, often burying their faces in their hands. At one point, Sen. Brian Schatz, D-Hawaii, at 48 one of the younger senators, trotted into the chamber and did a prolonged stretch.

The huge package — its total spending is nearly one-tenth the size of the entire U.S. economy — is Biden's biggest early priority. It stands as his formula for addressing the deadly virus and a limping economy,

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twin crises that have afflicted the country for a year.

The bill carries direct payments of up to \$1,400 for most Americans, extended emergency unemployment benefits, and lots of spending for COVID-19 vaccines and testing, states and cities, schools and ailing industries, along with tax breaks to help lower-earning people, families with children and consumers buying health insurance.

But the measure was delayed repeatedly as Democrats struck deals and made eleventh-hour changes aimed at balancing demands by their competing moderate and progressive factions.

The lengthy standoffs underscored the headaches confronting party leaders over the next two years — and tensions within the party — as they try moving their agenda through the Congress with their slender majorities.

The measure follows five earlier ones totaling about \$4 trillion that Congress has enacted since last spring and comes amid signs of a potential turnaround. Vaccine supplies are growing, deaths and caseloads have eased but remain frighteningly high, and hiring was surprisingly strong last month, though the economy remains 10 million jobs smaller than its pre-pandemic levels.

“Without a rescue plan, these gains are going to slow,” Biden said Friday. “We can’t afford one step forward and two steps backwards. We need to beat the virus, provide essential relief, and build an inclusive recovery.”

But Republicans oppose the bill as a wasteful gift to Democrats’ liberal allies that ignores indications of improvement.

“Democrats inherited a tide that was already turning,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

Work on the bill ground to a halt Friday after a deal among Democrats on extending emergency jobless benefits seemed to collapse. But nearly 12 hours later, top Democrats and West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, perhaps the chamber’s most conservative Democrat, said they had a deal and the Senate approved it on a party-line 50-49 vote.

Under their compromise, \$300 weekly emergency unemployment checks — on top of regular state benefits — would be renewed, with a final payment made Oct. 6. There would also be tax breaks on some of those payments, helping people the pandemic abruptly tossed out of jobs and risked tax penalties on the benefits.

The House’s COVID-19 relief bill, largely similar to the Senate measure, provided \$400 weekly benefits through August. The current \$300 per week payments expire March 14, and Democrats want to have the bill on Biden’s desk by then to avert a lapse.

Manchin and Republicans have asserted that higher jobless benefits discourage people from returning to work, a rationale most Democrats and many economists reject.

Manchin is a kingmaker in the 50-50 Senate, but Democrats cannot tilt too far center to win his vote without endangering progressive support in the House, where they have a mere 10-vote edge.

That agreement wasn’t the only move that helped cement support from party moderates.

The Senate voted on Friday to eject a House-approved boost in the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour by 2025, a major defeat for progressives. Eight Democrats opposed the increase, suggesting that Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and other progressives vowing to continue the effort in coming months will face a difficult fight.

In one of many late deals, party leaders restricted eligibility for the \$1,400 stimulus checks that will go to most Americans. That amount would be gradually reduced until, under the Senate bill, it reaches zero for people earning \$80,000 and couples making \$160,000. Those amounts were higher in the House version.

Most of the overnight and morning amendments were by Republicans and were defeated. Many amendments were either attempts to force Democrats to cast politically awkward votes or for Republicans to demonstrate their zeal for issues that appeal to GOP voters.

These included defeated efforts to bar the bill’s education funds from going to schools closed for the pandemic that don’t reopen their doors, or from schools that let transgender students born male to participate in female sports. One amendment would have blocked aid to so-called sanctuary cities, where

local authorities balk at helping federal officials round up immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally.

Friday's gridlock over unemployment benefits gridlock wasn't the first delay on the relief package. On Thursday Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., forced the chamber's clerks to read aloud the entire 628-page relief bill, an exhausting task that took staffers 10 hours and 44 minutes and ended shortly after 2 a.m. EST Friday.

Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Bye, Bismarck: 144 cities could lose status as metro areas

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

Bye-bye, Bismarck. So long, Sheboygan.

Those cities in North Dakota and Wisconsin, respectively, are two of 144 that the federal government is proposing to downgrade from the metropolitan statistical area designation, and it could be more than just a matter of semantics. Officials in some of the affected cities worry that the change could have adverse implications for federal funding and economic development.

Under the new proposal, a metro area would have to have at least 100,000 people in its core city to count as an MSA, double the 50,000-person threshold that has been in place for the past 70 years. Cities formerly designated as metros with core populations between 50,000 and 100,000 people, like Bismarck and Sheboygan, would be changed to "micropolitan" statistical areas instead.

A committee of representatives from federal statistical agencies recently made the recommendations to the Office of Management and Budget, saying it's purely for statistical purposes and not to be used for funding formulas. As a practical matter, however, that is how it's often used.

Several housing, transportation and Medicare reimbursement programs are tied to communities being metropolitan statistical areas, or MSAs, so the designation change concerns some city officials.

In Corvallis, Oregon, the state designates certain funding sources to metropolitan statistical areas and any change to the city's status could create a ripple effect, particularly when it comes to transportation funding, said Patrick Rollens, a spokesman for the city that is home to Oregon State University.

"I won't lie. We would be dismayed to see our MSA designation go away. We aren't a suburb of any other, larger city in the area, so this is very much part of our community's identity," Rollens said in an email. "Losing the designation would also have potentially adverse impacts on recruitment for local businesses, as well as Oregon State University."

If the proposal is approved, it could be the first step toward federal programs adjusting their population thresholds when it comes to distributing money to communities, leading to funding losses for the former metro areas, said Ben Ehreth, community development director for Bismarck.

"It won't change any formulas ... but we see this as a first step leading down that path," Ehreth said. "We anticipate that this might be that first domino to drop."

Rural communities are concerned that more micropolitan areas would increase competition for federal funding targeting rural areas. The change would downgrade more than a third of the current 392 MSAs.

Statisticians say the change in designations has been a long time coming, given that the U.S. population has more than doubled since 1950. Back then, about half of U.S. residents lived in metros; now, 86% do.

"Back in the 1950s, the population it took to create a metro area is different than it would be to create a metro area in 2020," said Rob Santos, president of the American Statistical Association.

Nancy Potok, a former chief statistician of the Office of Management and Budget who helped develop the new recommendations, acknowledged that officials in some cities will be upset with the changes because they believe it could hurt efforts to lure jobs or companies to their communities.

"There are winners and losers when you change these designations," Potok said. "A typical complaint comes from economic development when you are trying to attract investments. You want to say you are part of a dynamic MSA. There's a perception associated with it. If your area gets dumped out of an MSA, then you feel disadvantaged."

Officials in some cities said they needed to research the impact of the change. Others were surprised

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to find their metro was on the list in the first place.

"Perhaps they made a mistake," Brian Wheeler, director of communications for the city of Charlottesville, Virginia, said in an email.

While the city of Cape Girardeau, which is on the list, has a resident population north of 40,000 people, as a regional hub for southeastern Missouri, it can have a daytime population of more than 100,000 people, said Alex McElroy, executive director of the Southeast Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"It kind of seems misleading," McElroy said of the designation change.

In a letter to the federal budget office, the mayor of Opelika, Alabama, urged that the proposal be dropped.

"The risk to vital services within our community, our state and the millions of impacted Americans across this country far outweigh any limited statistical value that might be gained from this proposal," Mayor Gary Fuller said.

In a separate proposal, the U.S. Census Bureau is considering a change to the definition of an urban area. The proposal made public last month would use housing instead of people for distinguishing urban from rural. An area will be considered urban if it has 385 housing units per square mile, roughly the equivalent of 1,000 people per square mile, under the new proposal. The current standard is 500 people per square mile.

The Census Bureau says the changes are needed to comply with new privacy requirements that aim to prevent people from being identified through publicly released data and it offers a more direct measure of density.

Some demographers aren't sold on the idea of changing the definition of a metro area.

"It seems like everything is ad hoc, rather than having been determined by serious research," said Kenneth Johnson, a senior demographer at the University of New Hampshire. "The definitions have been relatively stable since 1950. All of the sudden, they change these, and at least in my mind, there isn't a compelling research-based process that has driven this decision."

In Corvallis, Rollens joked that he was intrigued by the possibility of the city becoming a micropolitan area, suggesting the community could benefit from thinking small.

"We enjoy our small-batch craft beers and locally grown produce here in Corvallis, so I have no doubt that we would find a creative way to market our region if we ended up with a 'micropolitan' designation," Rollens said.

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>.

Open spaces, no pharmacies: rural US confronts vaccine void

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

SURRY, Va. (AP) — When Charlome Pierce searched where her 96-year-old father could get a COVID-19 vaccine in January, she found zero options anywhere near their home in Virginia. The lone medical clinic in Surry County had none, and the last pharmacy in an area with roughly 6,500 residents and more land mass than Chicago closed years ago.

To get their shots, some residents took a ferry across the sprawling James River to cities such as Williamsburg. Others drove more than an hour past farms and woodlands - the county got its first stoplight in 2007 - to reach a medical facility offering the vaccine.

At one point, Pierce heard about a state-run vaccination event 45 minutes away, No more appointments were available, which perhaps was for the best: the wait there reportedly could last up to seven hours.

"That would have been a daunting task," she said, citing her father's health conditions and frequent need to use the bathroom. "I could not have had him sit in a car and wait for something that might happen. We're not in a Third World country."

As the nation's campaign against the coronavirus moves from mass inoculation sites to drugstores and doctors' offices, getting vaccinated remains a challenge for residents of "pharmacy deserts," communities without pharmacies or well-equipped health clinics. To improve access, the federal government has part-

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nered with 21 companies that run free-standing pharmacies or pharmacy services inside grocery stores and other locations.

More than 40,000 stores are expected to take part, and the Biden administration has said that nearly 90% of Americans live within five miles of one, from Hy-Vee and Walmart to Costco and Rite-Aid.

But there are gaps in the map: More than 400 rural counties with a combined population of nearly 2.5 million people lack a retail pharmacy that's included in the partnership. More than 100 of those counties either have no pharmacy or have a pharmacy that historically did not offer services such as flu shots, and possibly lacks the equipment or certified staff to vaccinate customers.

Independent pharmacies that have traditionally served rural areas have been disappearing, casualties of mail-order prescriptions and more competition from chains like Walgreen's and CVS with greater power to negotiate with insurance companies, according to Keith Mueller, director of the University of Iowa's RUPRI Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis.

"There are a lot of counties that would be left out" of the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program, said Mueller, whose research center compiled the pharmacy data on the 400 counties. "In the Western states in particular, you have a vast geography and very few people."

Challenges to obtaining a vaccine shot near home aren't limited to rural areas. There is a relative dearth of medical facilities in some urban areas, particularly for Black Americans, according to a study published in February by the University of Pittsburgh's School of Pharmacy and the West Health Policy Center.

The study listed 69 counties where Black residents were much more likely to have to travel more than a mile to get to a potential vaccination site, including a pharmacy, a hospital or a federally qualified health center. One-third of those counties were urban, including the home counties of cities such as Atlanta, Houston, Dallas, Detroit and New Orleans.

Additionally, the study identified 94 counties where Black residents were significantly more likely than white residents to have to go than 10 miles to reach a potential vaccination site. The counties were mostly heavily concentrated in the southeastern U.S. — Virginia had the most of any state with 16 — and in Texas.

The shortage of pharmacies and other medical infrastructure in some of the nation's rural areas highlights the health care disparities that have become more stark during the coronavirus pandemic, which has disproportionately affected members of racial minority and lower-income groups.

The former drug store in Surry County, where about 40% of the residents are Black, is now a café. No one seems to remember exactly when the Surry Drug Co. closed, but café co-owner Sarah Mayo remembers going there as a child. Now, she drives 45 minutes to a Walmart or CVS.

"I don't know if more people would take the vaccine" if the pharmacy still existed, Mayo, 62, said. "But at least you would have a local person that you trust who would explain the pros and cons."

Surry County residents also used to pick up prescriptions at Wakefield Pharmacy in neighboring Sussex County until it, too, closed in November. The owner, Russell Alan Garner, wanted to retire and couldn't find a buyer.

"We've become dinosaurs," Garner said.

In January, Surry County officials saw vaccines arrive in other parts of Virginia that had more people or more coronavirus cases. Fearing doses might not arrive for months, if ever, they began to pressure state officials.

In a letter to the governor's office, Surry joined with surrounding communities to express concerns about vaccine "equity," particularly for low-income and other disadvantaged populations. Some of those communities said they had reallocated money to support vaccination efforts.

"The thing about living in a rural community is that you're often overlooked by everybody from politicians right on through to the agencies," said county Supervisor Michael Drewry.

Surry County Administrator Melissa Rollins wrote to the regional health district, stating that driving outside the county wasn't practical for most residents. She said Surry was willing to sponsor a mass vaccination site, had devised a plan to recruit people who could administer shots and make sure that eligible residents would be ready.

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The first clinic in Surry County was held Feb. 6 at the high school in the small town of Dendron. The school district was inoculating teachers and other staff members when officials with the county and regional health district staff learned of extra doses, prompting a rush to get the word out.

Surry already had a waitlist of eligible people through a survey it designed to reach vulnerable residents. It used its emergency alert telephone system, since internet access is spotty.

Pierce got the call and quickly headed out with her father, Charles Robbins. It was a 20-minute drive to the high school and a two-hour wait. Pierce, 64, also got a shot, along with about 240 other people that day.

Three more vaccination clinics have been held in the county. And the regional health district had administered 1,080 doses there as of March 2. The number makes up the majority of doses that county residents have received, although several hundred received their shots outside of the county.

All told, about 1,800 county residents have received at least one dose. That's about 28% of the population and was almost twice the state's average rate. About half the people who've received vaccines are Black.

The Virginia Department of Health said that vaccine distribution has been based on population and COVID rates. But moving forward, the department said it's considering tweaks to ensure more geographical and racial equity.

Pierce and her father were relieved to get their second shots in late February. But she said Surry's rural character placed it at a disadvantage in the beginning.

"I have close friends, people who are essential workers, who've had to go as far away as an hour to get a shot," she said. "You shouldn't be marginalized by your zip code."

But driving vast distances is a way of life for many in rural areas, said Bruce Adams, a cattleman and commissioner for Utah's San Juan County, which is nearly the size of New Jersey and overlaps with the Navajo Nation.

"I got both shots, and I had to drive 44 miles roundtrip for each one to a public health center," Adams, 71, said. "I don't think it's any more of a problem than anything else we do normally in our lives...going to the doctor, the dentist, getting your haircut."

Italian prosecutor seeks life for US men charged with murder

ROME (AP) — An Italian prosecutor on Saturday requested life in prison for two young American men charged with slaying an Italian police officer in central Rome.

Prosecutor Maria Sabina Calabretta asked the court to find the two defendants — Finnegan Lee Elder, 21, and Gabriel Natale-Hjorth, 20 — guilty and to impose Italy's maximum sentence for the July 26, 2019, stabbing death of Vice Brigadier Mario Cerciello Rega. Calabretta called the attack "disproportionate and deadly."

The defense will make its closing arguments beginning March 18, before the court decides the verdict and sentence.

The two Americans were on vacation in Rome when they were confronted by a pair of plainclothes Carabinieri officers at what the pair believed was going to be a meeting with the go-between in a cocaine deal that had gone bad.

Elder has claimed self-defense, testifying this month that he stabbed the victim because he feared he was being strangled by a thug.

Cerciello Rega, 35, and his partner had been assigned to respond to what prosecutors allege was a small-scale extortion attempt by the Americans, after the friends had paid for cocaine that they did not receive. In reprisal, the Americans snatched the go-between's knapsack with his phone inside and set up a rendezvous to exchange it for the 80 euros (\$96) they had lost in the bad drug deal.

Cerciello Rega's partner, Andrea Varriale, testified that he tried to stop blood pouring out like a "fountain" from his partner. The slain officer, who was unarmed, was stabbed 11 times.

Varriale has also testified that he heard his partner cry out "Carabinieri!" as Elder and the slain officer struggled in the street.

But Elder told the court he heard no such cry of identification.

Pope, top Iraq Shiite cleric hold historic, symbolic meeting

By NICOLE WINFIELD and QASSIM ABDUL-ZAHRA Associated Press

PLAINS OF UR, Iraq (AP) — Pope Francis and Iraq's top Shiite cleric delivered a powerful message of peaceful coexistence Saturday, urging Muslims in the war-weary Arab nation to embrace Iraq's long-beleaguered Christian minority during a historic meeting in the holy city of Najaf.

Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani said religious authorities have a role in protecting Iraq's Christians, and that Christians should live in peace and enjoy the same rights as other Iraqis. The Vatican said Francis thanked al-Sistani for having "raised his voice in defense of the weakest and most persecuted" during some of the most violent times in Iraq's recent history.

Al-Sistani, 90, is one of the most senior clerics in Shiite Islam and his rare but powerful political interventions have helped shape present-day Iraq. He is a deeply revered figure in Shiite-majority Iraq and his opinions on religious and other matters are sought by Shiites worldwide.

The historic meeting in al-Sistani's humble home was months in the making, with every detail painstakingly discussed and negotiated between the ayatollah's office and the Vatican.

Early Saturday, the 84-year-old pontiff, travelling in a bullet-proof Mercedes-Benz, pulled up along Najaf's narrow and column-lined Rasool Street, which culminates at the golden-domed Imam Ali Shrine, one of the most revered sites in Shiite Islam. He then walked the few meters (yards) to al-Sistani's modest home, which the cleric has rented for decades.

A group of Iraqis wearing traditional clothes welcomed him outside. As a masked Francis entered the doorway, a few white doves were released in a sign of peace. He emerged just under an hour later, still limping from an apparent flare-up of sciatica nerve pain that makes walking difficult.

The "very positive" meeting lasted a total of 40 minutes, said a religious official in Najaf, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to brief media.

The official said al-Sistani, who normally remains seated for visitors, stood to greet Francis at the door of his room — a rare honor. Al-Sistani and Francis sat close to one another, without masks. Al-Sistani, who rarely appears in public — even on television — wore black robes and a black turban, in simple contrast to Francis' all-white cassock.

The official said there was some concern about the fact that the pope had met with so many people the day before. Francis has received the coronavirus vaccine but al-Sistani has not. The aging ayatollah, who underwent surgery for a fractured thigh bone last year, looked tired.

The pope removed his shoes before entering al-Sistani's room and was served tea and a plastic bottle of water. Al-Sistani spoke for most of the meeting. Francis paused before leaving al-Sistani's room to have a last look, the official said.

The pope arrived later in the ancient city of Ur for an interfaith meeting in the traditional birthplace of Abraham, the biblical patriarch revered by Christians, Muslims and Jews.

"From this place, where faith was born, from the land of our father Abraham, let us affirm that God is merciful and that the greatest blasphemy is to profane his name by hating our brothers and sisters," Francis said. "Hostility, extremism and violence are not born of a religious heart: they are betrayals of religion."

Religious leaders stood to greet him. While Francis wore a mask, few of the leaders on the tented stage did. The meeting was held in the shadow of Ur's magnificent ziggurat, the 6,000-year-old archaeological complex near the modern city of Nasiriyah.

The Vatican said Iraqi Jews were invited to the event but did not attend, without providing further details. Iraq's ancient Jewish community was decimated in the 20th century by violence and mass emigration fueled by the Arab-Israeli conflict, and only a handful remain.

Ali Thijeel, a resident of the nearby city of Nasiriyah who attended the event, said he hoped the pope's visit would encourage investment in the area to attract pilgrims and tourists. "This is what we were waiting for," he said. "This is a message to the government and politicians. They should take care of this city and pay attention to our history."

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The Vatican said the visit to al-Sistani was a chance for Francis to emphasize the need for collaboration and friendship between different religious communities.

In a statement issued by his office after the meeting, al-Sistani affirmed that Christians should "live like all Iraqis, in security and peace and with full constitutional rights." He pointed out the "role that the religious authority plays in protecting them, and others who have also suffered injustice and harm in the events of past years."

Al-Sistani wished Francis and the followers of the Catholic Church happiness, and thanked him for taking the trouble to visit him in Najaf, the statement said.

For Iraq's dwindling Christian minority, a show of solidarity from al-Sistani could help secure their place in Iraq after years of displacement — and, they hope, ease intimidation from Shiite militiamen against their community.

Iraqis cheered the meeting of two respected faith leaders.

"We welcome the pope's visit to Iraq and especially to the holy city of Najaf and his meeting with Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani," said Najaf resident Haidar Al-Ilyawi. "It is a historic visit and hope it will be good for Iraq and the Iraqi people."

Francis arrived in Iraq on Friday and met with senior government officials on the first-ever papal visit to the country. It is also his first international trip since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, and his meeting Saturday marked the first time a pope had met a grand ayatollah.

On the few occasions where he has made his opinion known, the reclusive al-Sistani has shifted the course of Iraq's modern history.

In the years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion he repeatedly preached calm and restraint as the Shiite majority came under attack by al-Qaida and other Sunni extremists. The country was nevertheless plunged into years of sectarian violence.

His 2014 fatwa, or religious edict, calling on able-bodied men to join the security forces in fighting the Islamic State group swelled the ranks of Shiite militias, many closely tied to Iran. In 2019, as anti-government demonstrations gripped the country, his sermon led to the resignation of then-prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.

Iraqis have welcomed the visit and the international attention it has given the country as it struggles to recover from decades of war and unrest. Iraq declared victory over the Islamic State group in 2017 but still sees sporadic attacks.

It has also seen recent rocket attacks linked to the standoff between the U.S. and Iran following the Trump administration's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord and its imposition of crippling sanctions on Iran. President Joe Biden has said he wants to revive the deal.

Francis' visit to Najaf and nearby Ur traverses provinces that have seen recent instability. In Nasiriyah, where the Plains of Ur are located, protest violence left at least five dead last month. Most were killed when Iraqi security forces used live ammunition to disperse crowds.

Protest violence was also seen in Najaf last year, but abated as the mass anti-government movement that engulfed Iraq gradually petered out.

Abdul-Zahra reported from Baghdad. Associated Press journalists Anmar Khalil in Najaf, Iraq, and Samya Kullab in Baghdad contributed.

Biden getting 1st shot at making mark on federal judiciary

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has two seats to fill on the influential appeals court in the nation's capital that regularly feeds judges to the Supreme Court.

They are among the roughly 10% of federal judgeships that are or will soon be open, giving Biden his first chance to make his mark on the American judiciary.

Barring an improbable expansion of the Supreme Court, Biden won't be able to do anything about the

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high court's entrenched conservative majority any time soon. Justice Clarence Thomas, at 72, is the oldest of the court's conservatives and the three appointees of former President Donald Trump, ranging in age from 49 to 56, are expected to be on the bench for decades.

Democrats traditionally have not made the judiciary a focus, but that is changing after four years of Trump and the vast changes he made. Biden's appointments are also the only concrete moves he has right now to affect the judiciary at large, though there is talk about expanding the number of judges on lower courts.

The nearly 90 seats that Biden can fill, which give their occupants life tenure after Senate confirmation, are fewer than former Trump inherited four years ago. That's because Republicans who controlled the Senate in the final two years of the Obama White House confirmed relatively few judges.

Included in the tally are 10 seats on federal courts of appeals where nearly all appeals, other than the few dozen decided by the Supreme Court each year, come to an end.

One seat is held by Merrick Garland, whose confirmation as attorney general is expected in the coming days. Another longtime judge on the court, David Tatel, has said he is cutting back on his duties, a change that allows Biden to appoint his successor.

Chief Justice John Roberts, Justice Brett Kavanaugh and Thomas were appellate judges at the courthouse at the bottom of Capitol Hill before they joined the high court atop the Hill.

The late Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg also served on the appeals court, where they first formed their lasting friendship.

Following Scalia's death just over five years ago. President Barack Obama nominated Garland to the Supreme Court, but Senate Republicans didn't give him even a hearing, much less a vote.

When Trump took office in January 2017, he had a high court vacancy to fill. Trump ended up making three Supreme Court appointments to go along with 54 appellate court picks and 174 trial judges, aided by then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's determination to, as he put it, "leave no vacancy behind."

Democrats and their progressive allies say they've learned a lesson or two from the Republicans, and intend to make judicial nominations a greater focus than in past Democratic administrations.

"It's an exceptional situation where you have a president and the people around him people who really see this as a high priority," said former Sen. Russ Feingold, the Wisconsin Democrat who served with Biden in the Senate for 16 years. Feingold now is president of the American Constitution Society.

"I think President Biden knows that a part of his legacy will be undoing the damage done by Trump to the extent possible," Feingold said.

So far, liberal groups are encouraged by the signals the White House is sending. White House counsel Dana Remus wrote senators in December that recommendations for new judges should come within 45 days of a vacancy.

Biden already has pledged to name a Black woman to the Supreme Court if a seat opens up. Justice Stephen Breyer, 82, is the oldest member of the court and could retire, but he has not announced any plans.

Democrats are in search of several kinds of diversity, following the Trump years in which more than 75 percent of judicial nominees were men and 85 percent were white.

In addition to race and gender, liberal groups are pushing for diversity of experience so that public defenders and public interest lawyers are considered along with big law firm lawyers and prosecutors who have predominated in recent administrations.

"Our view is we would like to see them prioritize experiential diversity, which would be new and different from the two previous Democratic administrations," said Nan Aron, president of the liberal Alliance for Justice, referring to the Obama and Clinton presidencies.

So far, the judges who have announced they are retiring or taking senior status, the term for a reduced workload, have mainly been appointees of Democratic presidents. Some appear to have put off retirement until Trump left the White House.

An additional four dozen or so are eligible to take senior status or will be before Biden's term ends in 2025. Such judges must be at least 65 years old and with 15 years of service on the bench.

But Democrats also are eyeing a major expansion of the judiciary for the first time in 30 years. The cre-

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ation of new judgeships to deal increased caseloads in parts of the country could draw bipartisan support, though it might provide a windfall of judicial appointments for Biden in the short term.

Idaho Republican Sen. Mike Crapo recently wrote about the need for another federal judge for his state, and Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., backs the addition of judges in California and other states.

"There is broad agreement here on the dais on both sides," Issa said last month during a House Judiciary subcommittee hearing on court expansion.

But some Republicans and conservative groups are wary about what Democrats might try to do now that they control Congress and the White House. If Democrats conclude "that the courts are somehow out of whack and create judgeships to fill them to skew the courts, I'm not OK with that," said the Heritage Foundation's John Malcolm, who helped compile a list of potential Supreme Court nominees for Trump.

At the same hearing, Rep. Steve Chabot, R-Ohio, said Democrats controlled the House in the last two years of Trump's term, but held no hearings and proposed no legislation on expansion. "I wonder why?" he asked.

Fighting Biden virus aid, GOP rekindles Obama-era strategy

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans have one goal for President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package: erode public support for the rescue plan by portraying it as too big, too bloated and too much wasteful public spending for a pandemic that's almost over.

Senate Republicans prepared Saturday to vote lockstep against the relief bill, taking the calculated political risk that Americans will sour on the big-dollar spending for vaccination distribution, unemployment benefits, money for the states and other outlays as unnecessary, once they learn all the details.

Reviving a page from their 2009 takedown of President Barack Obama's costly recovery from the financial crisis, they expect their opposition will pay political rewards, much like the earlier effort contributed to the House Republicans' rise to power.

It's a tested strategy but comes at an uncertain, volatile time for the nation. Americans are experiencing flickers of optimism at the one-year anniversary of the deadly outbreak as more people are vaccinated. But new strains of the virus and a still shaky economy could unleash another devastating cycle of infections, lockdowns and deaths. More than 500,000 Americans have died.

So far, public support for Biden's approach to the pandemic is high. Overall, 70% of Americans back the Democratic president's handling of the virus response, including 44% of Republicans, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Biden and Democrats warn that now is not the time to let up on aid, and that it's better to risk doing too much than too little. They say the costs of paring back the rescue risk stalling out the economic recovery, as many believe happened in 2009.

"When the house is in flames, you don't argue about how much of the fire to put out," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., during Friday's session.

"You do whatever it takes until the crisis is over," she said. "And you do it as fast as you can."

The debate in Congress reflects a fundamental divide in the country over how to contain and crush the pandemic and get the nation back to normal.

Nearly 10 million jobs have been lost and some 11 million households face evictions. While Democratic leaders generally side with health professionals supporting social distancing restrictions and easing into school and workplace reopenings, congressional Republicans have been more eager to conduct business as close to usual as possible.

The U.S. is not alone in confronting the daunting dilemma that holds serious ramifications about the size and scope of aid that's needed to prevent further economic catastrophe.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who is leading his minority party toward the "no" vote, said Biden's 628-page bill is a Democratic "wish list" doesn't meet the moment because the pandemic is lifting and the economy is ready for a "roaring recovery."

"We are already on track to bounce back from the crisis," he said.

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Republicans argue Congress has already approved historic sums to counter the pandemic and worry the big spending will overheat the economy, spiking inflationary fears, though economists are mixed on those concerns. They have an opening with voters who the polling shows are skeptical of Biden's handling of the economy.

McConnell expressed similar optimism last spring when he hit "pause" on new spending after approval of the initial round of aid. Around that time, then-President Donald Trump pledged that Americans would be all but back to normal by Easter Sunday.

But as Texas announced this past week it would seek to end face-mask wearing requirements, one of the key strategies public health officials say helps stop the spread of the virus, familiar political fault-lines and anxieties are resurfacing. Texas was among the first states to reopen in May, loosening restrictions at the start of the pandemic's second wave that coursed through summer.

Jason Furman, the former chairman of Obama's Council of Economic Advisers who now teaches at Harvard, agrees that parts of Biden's package are too big, suggesting the \$350 billion to states and cities could be reduced or have stricter guardrails against waste. But he said the bigger economic danger is in not doing enough.

Vaccines alone are not enough to ensure a healthy economy, he said. Households are struggling and businesses are confronting changing consumer habits and spending. The Biden package offers \$1,400 direct payments to individuals, phased out for those earning \$80,000 a year.

"If you add up the financial needs of households and the shortfalls facing states the American Rescue Plan overfills these," he said by email. "But no legislation is perfect and, as I said, if the downside is families get a little more money in one particular year that is much less bad than if Congress fails to act."

As Biden embarked on a go-it-alone partisan strategy, relying on Democratic votes for passage, Republicans are in fighting mode.

Senate Republicans forced an all-night reading of the bill Thursday, delaying the start of debate.

On Friday, senators launched an overnight session on amendments, most from Republicans, designed in part to change the bill, but also to highlight costly expenditures and less popular provisions. By early Saturday, most were failing.

Democrats' own amendment, to reduce extra jobless benefits from \$400 a week to \$300, was splitting their ranks and causing further delays, before it eventually was accepted.

Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., who forced the bill reading, used charts and props to help Americans understand the size of the \$1.9 trillion package.

"The human mind can't really contemplate what a trillion is," he said, before launching into examples. He suggested a stack of \$1 bills would extend the distance half way to the moon.

GOP Sen. Mike Braun of Indiana said by the time they're done they hope to turn public opinion around.

"We're going to expose every ugly detail of it," he said.

The White House is well aware of the challenges ahead. Many of Biden's staff members are veterans of the 2009 battles.

Press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday that at the time they didn't do enough to explain to the American people the benefits in ways "that people would be talking about at their dinner tables."

Associated Press writers Josh Boak and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

Vaxi Taxi targets vaccine anxiety as UK minority uptake lags

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The Vaxi Taxi was a godsend for Leslie Reid.

The 48-year-old stagehand wanted to get a COVID-19 shot, but he was worried about riding public transport to the vaccination center because his immune system had been weakened by a bout with flesh-eating bacteria that almost cost him his arm.

So Reid jumped at the opportunity when his doctor called and offered him the shot, together with door-to-door transportation.

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"I was one of the fortunate ones," he said after being inoculated inside a black van cab at a community vaccination event in north London. "I'm sure there are plenty more vulnerable people than me that should have gotten this. What can I say? I'm very glad."

The "Vaxi Taxi" that ferried Reid to his appointment and whisked him home again is just one initiative doctors and community organizers are promoting as they try to make sure everyone gets inoculated. While Britain has engineered one of the world's most successful coronavirus vaccination programs, delivering at least one dose to more than 30% of its population, minority groups and deprived communities are lagging behind.

A recent survey commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care found that just 72.5% of Black people in England either have received or would accept the vaccine. That compares with 87.6% for Asians and 92.6% for whites.

That disparity is the product of a variety of issues ranging from concerns about vaccine safety and past discrimination in Britain's healthcare system to simple ones like transportation.

But community leaders are trying home-grown solutions to fill the gap.

Dr. Sharon Raymond is one of the activists trying to remove vaccination barriers. The GP and head of the Covid Crisis Rescue Foundation helped organize Sunday's pop-up vaccination event at Cambridge Gardens, a triangle of grass and trees in a northwest London neighborhood where half the residents are from ethnic minorities.

Her aim was to create an inviting space where people would feel comfortable coming forward to ask questions and discuss their concerns.

"It brings it to a place that's familiar. It becomes much more accessible," Raymond said. "That's why this model of bringing the vaccination out to communities in familiar places in an unthreatening way, I think, is the way forward."

So on a chilly, late winter afternoon people got their shots under a heated, bright yellow tent festooned with balloons. Neighbors munched on sandwiches, sipped drinks and stopped to talk to the doctors, nurses and firefighters on hand.

Vaccines Minister Nadhim Zahawi praised such local initiatives, describing them as part of a national strategy that aimed to organize uptake down to the postal code. He told The Associated Press that data is showing that people want access to the vaccine at a time of their choice and in a place they trust.

"We demonstrated our ability to organize and deploy at scale in the Olympics," he said with enthusiasm. "This is even bigger. This is the largest vaccination program in the history of the (National Health Service), in the history of United Kingdom. But I do think it's suited to our DNA on these isles."

And for those who needed a little help to get to the park earlier this week, there was the Vaxi Taxi. People didn't even need to leave the back seat in order to receive their inoculation if they didn't want to.

Raymond, who has crowd-funded many of her initiatives, hopes to get more support to get iconic black cabs rolling out to help across the capital. Since they have screens, they provide a shield for those inside, are accessible for the disabled and, with few tourists these days, there are plenty of cabbies willing to take part.

"This is my vision of London," Raymond said. "The black cab saves the day!"

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at:
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>
<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Royalty TV: UK monarchy and television have complex ties

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's royal family and television have a complicated relationship.

The medium has helped define the modern monarchy: The 1953 coronation of Queen Elizabeth II was

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Britain's first mass TV spectacle. Since then, rare interviews have given a glimpse behind palace curtains at the all-too-human family within. The fictionalized take of Netflix hit "The Crown" has molded views of the monarchy for a new generation, though in ways the powerful, image-conscious royal family can't control.

"The story of the royal family is a constructed narrative, just like any other story," said Phil Harrison, author of "The Age of Static: How TV Explains Modern Britain."

And it's a story that has changed as Britain moved from an age of deference to an era of modern social mores and ubiquitous social media.

"The royals, particularly the younger royals, have moved from the realm of state apparatus to the realm of celebrity culture in recent decades," Harrison said. "That's worked well for them up to a point — but celebrity culture takes as well as gives and is notoriously fickle."

So anticipation and apprehension are both high ahead of Oprah Winfrey's interview with Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan — the Duke and Duchess of Sussex — a year after they walked away from official royal life, citing what they described as the intrusions and racist attitudes of the British media toward the duchess, who is biracial. A clip released by CBS ahead of Sunday's broadcast shows Meghan, a former TV star, appearing to suggest the royal family was "perpetuating falsehoods" about her and Harry.

A look at some other major royal television moments, and their impact:

PRINCESS DIANA

The 1981 wedding of 32-year-old Prince Charles and 20-year-old Lady Diana Spencer at St. Paul's Cathedral was a fairy-tale spectacle watched by an estimated 750 million people around the world.

But the relationship soon soured. The couple separated in 1992, and in 1995 Diana gave a candid interview to the BBC's Martin Bashir, discussing the pressure of media scrutiny and the breakdown of her marriage.

"There were three of us in that marriage," Diana said, referring to Charles' relationship with Camilla Parker-Bowles.

The interview prompted a wave of sympathy for Diana, seen by many as a woman failed by an uncaring, out-of-touch royal establishment — a pattern some say has repeated itself with Meghan.

Charles and Diana divorced in 1996; Diana was killed in a car crash in Paris the following year, triggering intense public mourning and a period of reflection for the monarchy, which has since tried to appear more modern and relatable — with mixed results.

PRINCE ANDREW

The biggest scandal to engulf the family in decades stems from the friendship between the queen's second son, Andrew, and wealthy convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, who died in a New York jail in August 2019 while awaiting trial on sex-trafficking charges.

One woman who says she was a victim of Epstein alleges she had sex with Andrew when she was 17, a claim the prince denies.

The prince tried to undo the damage by giving an interview to the BBC's "Newsnight" program in November 2019. It backfired spectacularly. Andrew appeared uncomfortable and evasive, and failed to convey empathy for those who say they were exploited by Epstein, even as he defended his friendship with the man.

He called Epstein's behavior "unbecoming," a term interviewer Emily Maitlis suggested was an understatement.

Charlie Proctor, editor of the Royal Central website, said at the time that the interview was "a plane crashing into an oil tanker, causing a tsunami, triggering a nuclear explosion-level bad."

After the interview, Andrew announced he was "stepping back" from public duties. He has not returned.

SARAH, DUCHESS OF YORK

Like Diana before her and Meghan since, Sarah Ferguson was a young woman who had a bruising collision with the royal family.

She was initially welcomed as a breath of fresh air for the stuffy royals when she wed Prince Andrew in 1986. But she quickly became a tabloid target, dubbed "Freeloading Fergie" for allegedly scooping up

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freebies and spending more time vacationing than performing public duties.

Some saw snobbery in coverage of a woman who, before and after her marriage, worked for a living and was open about her problems with weight, relationships and money.

After her 1996 divorce, the duchess used television to speak out — frequently. She appeared on Winfrey's show in 1996, saying palace life was "not a fairy tale." She spoke to Winfrey again in 2010 after being caught on video offering access to her ex-husband for \$724,000. The duchess said she had been drinking and was trying to help a friend who needed money. The following year she appeared in her own reality show, "Finding Sarah," on Winfrey's OWN network.

The duchess was not invited to the 2011 wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton, in what was widely seen as a royal snub.

"THE CROWN"

It may be fiction, but Netflix's "The Crown" is the most influential depiction of the royals in years. Over four seasons that have covered Elizabeth's reign up to the 1980s, its portrait of a dutiful queen, prickly Prince Philip, oversensitive Prince Charles and the rest of the clan has brought the royal soap opera to a new generation.

It is widely seen as helping the royals by humanizing them, though British Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden suggested it should come with a warning that it's drama, not history.

Prince Harry has defended the show — while underscoring that it's fiction — telling TV host James Corden that he was "way more comfortable with 'The Crown' than I am seeing stories written about my family or my wife."

Now Harry and Meghan are getting their chance to tell their story. It's a high-stakes strategy, especially since the interview is airing as 99-year-old Prince Philip, Harry's grandfather, in a London hospital after a heart procedure — timing critics have called insensitive.

"I think this particular interview, like so many of those interviews, is going to do a great deal more harm to Harry and Meghan than anything to do with the British monarchy," said royal historian Hugo Vickers.

Manchin, key Senate swing vote, boosts West Virginia's hopes

By CUNEYD DIL Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — West Virginia has long proclaimed itself "Almost Heaven," a nod to a song and soaring mountaintop vistas. Now some joke the state name-checked in "Take Me Home, Country Roads" could take things up a notch as Democratic U.S. Sen Joe Manchin bargains his way through Congress.

"Maybe we'll get to heaven status," said longtime Democratic Party official Nick Casey.

Reviving West Virginia's economically battered coal towns and reversing a persistent population decline is a tall order. But Manchin, who grew up in the mountain town of Farmington, has emerged as a key swing vote in a divided Senate. Now he has his best shot in years to steer federal dollars back home.

Manchin put himself in the middle of things again this week over the COVID relief bill making its way through Congress, singlehandedly halting work on the measure Friday as Democrats sought to placate his concerns about the size and duration of an expanded unemployment benefit.

As for his own agenda, Manchin has dropped hints publicly about "common sense" infrastructure investments sorely needed back home: expanding rural broadband and fixing roads among them. He declared that West Virginia could supply the manufacturing firepower to "innovate our way to a cleaner climate." And more than once, he's said coal miners can build the best solar panels if given a chance.

Some wonder if his newfound clout might help him do something former President Donald Trump promised but couldn't deliver — reignite a state economy long overly dependent on a coal industry in freefall.

Manchin's Senate colleagues have good reason to study the needs of small towns beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. Manchin, 73, was already a recognized dealmaker on Capitol Hill, but deference to the most conservative Democrat in a 50-50 Senate has ratcheted up since November. A senator from Hawaii recently teased him as "your highness." The guessing game of which way he'll vote has become fodder

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for late night television.

In recent days, Manchin's opposition helped sink Neera Tanden as President Joe Biden's nominee to lead the federal Office of Management and Budget.

Not since Robert Byrd's death in 2010 has a senator from West Virginia wielded this much influence. Over half a century, Byrd brought home billions of dollars in federal buildings, landmarks and roads, many bearing his name.

"This is hardscrabble country, man — our population is dropping, the demise of coal," said Casey, an attorney and former chair of the state Democratic Party. "We got a guy now who can maybe do something legacy-wise. And I think there's a lot of hope and some expectation that Joe's going to do things that are significant, exceptional."

Pam Garrison, a retired cashier, said she told Manchin at a meeting seeking a \$15 federal minimum wage that Byrd has universities and hospitals named after him because "when he got into power, he used that power for the good of the people."

"If you do what's good for the people, even after you're gone, you're going to be remembered."

Manchin, though, sees himself not as a seeker of pork-barrel projects but as a champion for policies that aid Appalachia and the Rust Belt.

"What we have to do now, and I think it's appropriate — we show the need, and that the base has been left behind," he said.

He started down that road by joining Michigan Democratic Sen. Debbie Stabenow in co-sponsoring a proposal for \$8 billion in tax credits to boost clean energy manufacturing for coal communities and the auto industry.

Robert Rupp, a political history professor at West Virginia Wesleyan College, says Manchin can use his position in a 50-50 Senate to put his small state in the forefront of everyone's mind.

"He's at the center of attention, and he could assert power," Rupp said.

A former governor, Manchin has deep roots in West Virginia politics. That helps explain why he is the last Democrat to hold statewide office in a state Trump carried twice by large margins.

Manchin maintains an air of unpredictability. He opposed a \$15 minimum wage provision in the \$1.9 billion pandemic stimulus package, even after activists rallied outside his state office in Charleston, leaving some to question his future legacy.

"We're either going to smell like a rose in West Virginia, or we're going to smell like crap, and it's going to be attributed to Joseph Manchin," said Jean Evansmore, 80, an organizer with the Poor People's Campaign in West Virginia.

Days later, the Senate parliamentarian ruled an increase couldn't be included in the COVID-19 relief bill. That was a win for Manchin and his reverence for Senate customs, including the filibuster, which helps sustain a 60-vote hurdle to advancing most legislation.

Manchin has vowed never to support ending the filibuster.

On a recent morning in Charleston outside the golden-domed state Capitol, saving it was a rallying cry for anti-abortion advocates, who held signs stating, "Thank you Senator Manchin."

"We need to encourage him to stand strong," said Marilyn Musgrave, who works for the Susan B. Anthony List, an anti-abortion nonprofit.

Musgrave's group looks to Manchin now after campaigning against his 2018 bid for a second full term, which he won with just under 50% of the vote. Manchin opposes public funding for abortions but stops short of supporting an outright ban. Still, he typically scores a low rating from abortion-rights groups, which puts him more in line with West Virginians who collectively have sent mixed signals on abortion.

With his centrist instincts in such a red state, Manchin has occasionally been the subject of rumors he'll switch parties.

"Republicans kind of have this day-dream that just because he's conservative on some issues that would mean he would jump parties," Rupp said.

That's unlikely, especially given Manchin's newfound clout, he said. And that's fine with Matt Kerner, a

54-year-old West Virginian who wants Manchin to never forget that 16% of the people in his state live below the poverty line, the sixth-highest rate in the nation, according to the U.S. Census.

"We're hoping Senator Manchin remembers that he represents some of the poorest people in this country," Kerner said.

Pope to visit Iraq church damaged by IS militants

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

The scenes are seared in the memory of the Rev. Ammar Altony Yako: A church that for decades has been the pride of the town of Qaraqosh, a center for Christian life in Iraq, stood badly scarred.

Yako saw it in 2016 when Qaraqosh was liberated from more than two years of Islamic State group rule. Scrawled on a wall was the proclamation, the "Islamic State will remain." Strewn amid the rubble in a courtyard were bullet-riddled mannequins and other telltale signs of a militants' makeshift firing range for target practice.

On Sunday, a new scene will play out for the world to watch at the Church of the Immaculate Conception and new memories will be created. Where the extremists once damaged, Pope Francis will now pray.

"I never could have imagined that his holiness, the pope, would visit this church, not even in my dreams," said Yako, who has been overseeing reconstruction at the church. "It's a very, very unexpected event and a very happy one."

It is also one rich in symbolism.

Coming amid a pandemic and security challenges, the pope's historic trip is taking him to Christian communities, like Yako's, ravaged by the IS onslaught in 2014. Christians in the area were forced to escape ancestral towns and villages as the militants swept through northern Iraq. Many have since scattered abroad, their exodus fueling existential anxieties about Iraq's already dwindling Christian population.

Many hope the pope's trip can focus attention on their struggles and send a message of encouragement, but they also point to security, economic and social challenges deterring many Christians from returning.

Even now, some returnees wrestle with one particularly fraught question: Stay, helping keep ancient communities alive, or seek better lives abroad if they can?

Religious and historic sites of all kinds — including mosques, tombs, shrines and churches — suffered under IS. The extremist group damaged or destroyed whatever it considered contrary to its interpretation of Islam.

For Christians, the IS reign dealt a blow to a population already shrinking since the security breakdown and rise of militancy that followed the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq prompted many to leave. Iraqi Christians belong to various churches — such as Chaldean, Syriac, Assyrian and others -- and trace the roots of their faith in the country back almost to the dawn of the religion itself.

In Qaraqosh, the Syriac Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception — "al-Tahira al-Kubra" in Arabic — became a symbol of its community's losses, and now of its efforts to bounce back.

After the area was taken back from IS, walls in the church were found charred, crosses broken, prayer books burned and the tower damaged, Yako said.

"It was so painful to see the church where we prayed and that we saw as part of our history looking like that," he said. "At the same time, there was happiness that at least we were able to return and see it once more."

Scars were erased as restoration happened with the help of international Christian organizations, Yako said. But some were kept to bear witness to the IS era, including pockmarked walls in the courtyard.

The church was built between 1932 and 1948. Local farmers set aside money from their harvest and women donated pieces of gold jewelry to help fund it, Yako said.

"Its construction was reliant on people volunteering and donating. Just like people think of building their own homes, they were building the house of God," he said. "We call it the 'mother church.' Everyone feels like this church is their mother."

More recently, local artists and others have been helping spruce up the church.

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On 14 church windows, one artist has painted scenes from the Way of the Cross, evoking Jesus' suffering on his way to be crucified.

Sculptor Thabet Mekhael made a statue of Virgin Mary, her palms open and her head adorned with a crown. The statue, around 4 meters (13 feet) tall, now stands atop the church's tower surrounded by four crosses and looking out over Qaraqosh.

"The statue is a symbol of return and a symbol of our presence as Christians," Mekhael said. "We've rebuilt the tower and made it even prettier than before."

On a recent day, Sister Hayat Alkasmosa of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, Iraq was among a group of volunteers hard at work sweeping and mopping the church's floor.

"This church is like the heart of the area," she said by phone. "It's our life, our heritage, our mother."

Alkasmosa's voice cracked with emotion as she recalled crying when she learned the pope would visit Qaraqosh, also known as Bakhdida or Baghdeda.

"There's a need for this kind of peace and consolation," she said. "His presence is healing."

Francis' stop at the church, she said, will send a poignant message:

"Darkness cannot triumph and evil cannot win," she said. "The last word is not for death; the last word is for life."

Associated Press photographer Hadi Mizban in Qaraqosh contributed to this report.

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Shiite powerhouse al-Sistani helped shape today's Iraq

By The Associated Press undefined

One highlight of Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq is his meeting Saturday with a revered religious leader for Shiite Muslims, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.

Francis has spent years trying to improve Christian relations with Muslims and has already forged close ties with a prominent Sunni figure, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, grand imam of Al-Azhar, the seat of Sunni learning in Cairo.

Here's a look at the grand ayatollah.

The 90-year-old al-Sistani is the top Shiite cleric in Iraq and a powerhouse in the Shiite world. Millions of Shiites the world over revere him as a spiritual guide, turning to him on all sorts of questions from day-to-day matters to complex theological issues.

His influence, derived from his moral and spiritual authority, stretches beyond the religious.

After the 2003 ouster of Saddam Hussein, al-Sistani emerged as a powerful voice in Iraq's political process — a symbol of the ascent of Iraq's Shiite majority after the war.

His status is belied by his reclusiveness — he generally eschews public appearances and puts out messages through representatives — and the modesty of his home near the gold-domed Imam Ali Shrine in the Shiite holy city of Najaf.

He has weighed in with calculated interventions at critical junctures during Iraq's tumult. His positions forced Iraq's post-Saddam U.S. administrators to significantly revise their transition plans.

In 2004, it took his return from London, where he was treated for a heart condition, to end fighting in Najaf between a Shiite militia and U.S. and Iraqi forces. He has called for unity and peaceful dialogue during times of sectarian strife and violence.

Al-Sistani belongs to a school of thought that doesn't subscribe to Iranian-style rule by clerics, and he is seen by many as a counterbalance to Tehran's influence in Iraq.

In 2014, he called on able-bodied Iraqis to volunteer and join security forces to fight the onslaught of the Islamic State group. The call was widely heeded and the mobilization helped defeat the militants.

But it also swelled the ranks of Shiite militias, many of which are loyal to Iran and have been accused of worsening sectarian tensions.

In 2019, al-Sistani's call on lawmakers to reconsider their support for the government led to the resignation of then-prime minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi amid pressure from anti-government protests.

The cleric, who wears a white beard and a black turban, was born in the Iranian city of Mashhad in 1930, where he began learning the Quran at age 5, according to the biography on his website. He embarked on formal religious studies in the Iranian city of Qom, a path that he continued when he later moved to Najaf in Iraq.

When in 2020, al-Sistani underwent surgery for a fractured bone, his well-wishers included officials from both Iran and the United States, bitter rivals for influence in Iraq.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Diplomats: UN fails to approve call to end Tigray violence

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — An attempt to get U.N. Security Council approval for a statement calling for an end to violence in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region and to spotlight the millions in need of humanitarian assistance was dropped Friday night after objections from India, Russia and especially China, U.N. diplomats said.

Three council diplomats said Ireland, which drafted the statement, decided not to push for approval after objections from the three countries.

The press statement would have been the first by the U.N.'s most powerful body on the Tigray crisis, which is entering its fourth month. Fierce fighting reportedly continues between Ethiopian and allied forces and those supporting the now-fugitive Tigray leaders who once dominated Ethiopia's government and alarm is growing over the fate of Tigray's 6 million people. No one knows how many thousands of civilians have been killed.

On Tuesday, U.N. humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock warned that "a campaign of destruction" is taking place, saying at least 4.5 million people need assistance and demanding that forces from neighboring Eritrea accused of committing atrocities in Tigray leave Ethiopia.

The proposed statement made no mention of foreign forces or sanctions -- two key issues -- but did call "for an end to violence in Tigray."

The draft statement also noted "with concern" the humanitarian situation in Tigray, "where millions of people remain in need of humanitarian assistance" and the challenge of access for aid workers. It called for "the full and early implementation" of the Ethiopian government's statements on Feb. 26 and March 3 committing to "unfettered access."

Council diplomats, speaking on condition of anonymity because consultations were private, said China wanted the statement to focus only on the humanitarian situation, with no reference to the violence in Tigray. India only wanted a minor change, and Russia reportedly supported its ally China at the last minute, the diplomats said.

Accounts of a massacre of several hundred people by Eritrean soldiers in the holy city of Axum in Tigray have been detailed in reports by The Associated Press and then by Amnesty International. Federal government and regional officials in Tigray both believe that each other's governments are illegitimate after elections disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human Rights Watch echoed the reports on Friday, saying Eritrean armed forces "massacred scores of civilians, including children as young as 13," in the historic town of Axum in Tigray in November 2020. It called on the U.N. to urgently establish an independent inquiry into war crimes and possible crimes against humanity in Tigray.

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Biden White House: keeping control of the daily message

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — No news conference. No Oval Office address. No primetime speech to a joint session of Congress.

President Joe Biden is the first executive in four decades to reach this point in his term without holding a formal question and answer session. It reflects a White House media strategy meant both to reserve major media set-pieces for the celebration of a legislative victory and to limit unforced errors from a historically gaffe-prone politician.

Biden has opted to take questions about as often as most of his recent predecessors, but he tends to field just one or two informal inquiries at a time, usually in a hurried setting at the end of an event.

In a sharp contrast with the previous administration, the White House is exerting extreme message discipline, empowering staff to speak but doing so with caution. Recalling both Biden's largely leak-free campaign and the buttoned-up Obama administration, the new White House team has carefully managed the president's appearances, trying to lower the temperature from Donald Trump's Washington and to save a big media moment to mark what could soon be a signature accomplishment: passage of the COVID-19 bill.

The message control may serve the president's purposes but it denies the media opportunities to directly press Biden on major policy issues and to engage in the kind of back-and-forth that can draw out information and thoughts that go beyond the administration's curated talking points.

"The president has lost some opportunity, I think, to speak to the country from the bully pulpit. The volume has been turned so low in the Biden White House that they need to worry about whether anyone is listening," said Frank Sesno, former head of George Washington University's school of media. "But he's not great in these news conferences. He rambles. His strongest communication is not extemporaneous."

Other modern presidents took more questions during their opening days in office.

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Biden has given five interviews as opposed to nine from Reagan and 23 from Obama.

"Biden came in with a plan for how they wanted to disseminate information. When you compare him with Trump, Biden has sense of how you use a staff, that a president can't do everything himself," Kumar said. "Biden has a press secretary who gives regular briefings. He knows you hold a news conference when you have something to say, in particular a victory. They have an idea of how to use this time, early in the administration when people are paying attention, and how valuable that is."

The new president had taken questions 39 times, according to Kumar's research, though usually just one or two shouted inquiries from a group of reporters known as the press pool at the end of an event in the White House's State Dining Room or Oval Office.

Those exchanges can at times be clunky, with the cacophony of shouts or the whir of the blades of the presidential helicopter idling on the South Lawn making it difficult to have a meaningful exchange.

"Press conferences are critical to informing the American people and holding an administration accountable to the public," said Associated Press reporter Zeke Miller, president of the White House Correspondents' Association. "As it has with prior presidents, the WHCA continues to call on President Biden to hold formal press conferences with regularity."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Friday defended the president's accessibility to the media and suggested that a news conference was likely by the end of March.

"I would say that his focus is on getting recovery and relief to the American people and he looks forward to continuing to engage with all of you and to other members of the media who aren't here today," Psaki said. "And we'll look forward to letting you know, as soon as that press conference is set."

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His use of the phrase "Neanderthal thinking" this week to describe the decision by the governors of Texas and Mississippi to lift mask mandates dominated a new cycle and drew ire from Republicans. That created the type of distraction his aides have tried to avoid and, in a pandemic silver lining, were largely able to dodge during the campaign because the virus kept Biden home for months and limited the potential for public mistakes.

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Delaying the news conference and joint address also, symbolically, have kept open the first chapter of Biden's presidency and perhaps extended his honeymoon. His approval rating stood at 60% in a poll released Friday from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Tobe Berkovitz, a professor at Boston University's college of communications, said Biden's "rope-a-dope" strategy was right for the moment.

"Presidential press conferences are not on the top of the agenda for Americans who are worried about COVID and the economic disaster that has befallen so many families," he said.

Lemire reported from New York.

California OKs reopening of ball parks, Disneyland

By ADAM BEAM and KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California has cleared a path for fans to hit the stands at opening-day baseball games and return to Disneyland nearly a year after coronavirus restrictions shuttered major entertainment spots.

The state on Friday relaxed guidelines for reopening outdoor venues as a fall and winter surge seemed to be ending, with COVID-19 infection rates, hospitalizations and deaths plummeting and vaccination rates rising.

New public health rules would allow live concerts at stadiums and sports arenas to reopen with limited attendance April 1. Amusement parks also will be permitted to reopen in counties that have fallen from the state's purple tier — the most restrictive — to the red tier.

In all cases, park capacities will be limited, and COVID-19 safety rules such as mask-wearing requirements will apply.

The move followed a week of milestones, with California ramping up vaccinations for the poorest neighborhoods, counties reopening more businesses and Gov. Gavin Newsom passing a measure aimed at encouraging schools that have restricted students to online learning to reopen classrooms this month.

"Steady opening is consistent with the data. As cases decline, we want to return to work and school," said Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, clinical professor of preventive medicine at the University of Southern California. "Outdoor activities in particular have always been low risk. Opening these sites makes sense."

The reopening can't come too soon for Kenny King Jr., a resident of Pleasant Hill in the San Francisco Bay Area who became an annual Disneyland passholder a decade ago. He typically takes his family to the Southern California park five times a year, but the last visit was just over a year ago for his birthday.

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King, 38, lives in said he's excited to return with his 8-year-old daughter, who had just started enjoying rides such as Big Thunder Mountain Railroad and Space Mountain, and to take his 2-year-old son, who was mesmerized by the lights and sounds when he visited last year.

"That's something that we just made our family thing — Disney trips," King said. "We'll sit there at the house sometimes and we'll be like 'man, I just miss Disneyland.'"

Also applauding were the thousands of workers who were laid off by Disneyland, Universal Studios Hollywood, Knott's Berry Farm and other big locations. Ten thousand lost their jobs alone at Disneyland and its related attractions in Orange County, not to mention the knock-on effect to nearby restaurants and hotels.

Andrea Zinder, president of the local United Food and Commercial Workers Union that represents Disney workers, said employees are "excited to go back to work and provide Californians with a bit more magic in their lives."

Most of the major theme parks are in Southern California, which is still in the purple category. However, Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties there were expecting to reopen within the next few weeks as their COVID-19 numbers fall.

Only 16 of 58 counties currently are in the red tier, and two small counties are in the orange tier. None are yet in the yellow tier, the lowest and least restrictive.

Theme parks in the red tier will be limited to 15% capacity.

Outdoor sports will be limited to 100 people in the purple tier but will increase up to 67% in the yellow tier.

The San Diego Padres, Los Angeles Angels and Oakland A's all announced they will have fans in the stands for opening day April 1. The Los Angeles Dodgers and San Francisco Giants both start their seasons on the road and said they would announce their plans later.

Teams and event organizers can only sell tickets regionally in the purple tier. In the other tiers, teams and organizers can sell tickets to anyone living in California. No concessions will be allowed in the purple tier, while in others, concession sales will only be available at seats.

Richard Haick of San Pablo, California, already bought ticket vouchers for the Oakland A's return and hopes to take his 10-year-old son to a game soon. His son plays Little League baseball and is very excited to attend games.

"It's nice to have, even in a reduced capacity, some sense of normal," said Haick, a 45-year-old photographer.

The quicker pace of reopening is tied to a new plan to vaccinate California's most vulnerable residents. Once 2 million people across 400 ZIP codes in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods receive at least one vaccine dose, it will be easier for counties to exit the state's most restrictive tier. Once 4 million people in those neighborhoods are vaccinated, counties will be able to open up even more.

It all puts California in a drastically different position than a year ago, when Gov. Gavin Newsom imposed the statewide stay-at-home order that restricted travel, shuttered businesses and forced millions of people onto unemployment. California still has among the most severe restrictions of any state and continues to discourage out-of-state visitors.

The state is pinning its hopes of a full reopening on inoculating enough of its 40 million residents to halt widespread COVID-19 infections.

More than 10 million doses had been given only three months since the first shot was given, the Department of Public Health said.

Just over 3 million people have been fully vaccinated, or about 10% of the population 16 and older.

There are hopeful signs. This week, the seven-day average rate of positive results from tests dropped this week to 2.2%, a record low.

Although pressure has been building to reopen the economy, health officials said the changes in guidelines were a cautious and measured rather than a wholesale approach.

"We will keep our foot on the brake, not the gas, our eyes on the road, hands on the wheel and navigate based on data and science," said Dr. Mark Ghaly, secretary of the state Health and Human Services Agency.

Associated Press writer Janie Har in San Francisco contributed to this story.

Senate Dems strike jobless aid deal, relief bill OK in sight

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate leaders and moderate Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin struck a deal late Friday over emergency jobless benefits, breaking a logjam that had stalled the party's showpiece \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill.

The compromise, announced by the West Virginia lawmaker and a Democratic aide, seemed to clear the way for the Senate to begin a climactic, marathon series of votes and, eventually, approval of the sweeping legislation.

The overall bill, President Joe Biden's foremost legislative priority, is aimed at battling the killer pandemic and nursing the staggered economy back to health. It would provide direct payments of up to \$1,400 to most Americans and money for COVID-19 vaccines and testing, aid to state and local governments, help for schools and the airline industry and subsidies for health insurance.

The Senate next faced votes on a pile of amendments that were likely to last overnight, mostly on Republican proposals virtually certain to fail but designed to force Democrats to cast politically awkward votes.

More significantly, the jobless benefits agreement suggested it was just a matter of time until the Senate passes the bill. That would ship it back to the House, which was expected to give it final congressional approval and whisk it to Biden for his signature.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden supports the compromise on jobless payments.

The day's lengthy standoff underscored the headaches confronting party leaders over the next two years — and the tensions between progressives and centrists — as they try moving their agenda through the Congress with their slender majorities.

Manchin is probably the chamber's most conservative Democrat, and a kingmaker in the 50-50 Senate. But the party can't tilt too far center to win Manchin's vote without endangering progressive support in the House, where they have a mere 10-vote edge.

Aiding unemployed Americans is a top Democratic priority. But it's also an issue that drives a wedge between progressives seeking to help jobless constituents cope with the bleak economy and Manchin and other moderates who have wanted to trim some of the bill's costs.

Biden noted Friday's jobs report showing that employers added 379,000 workers — an unexpectedly strong showing. That's still small compared to the 10 million fewer jobs since the pandemic struck a year ago.

"Without a rescue plan, these gains are going to slow," Biden said. "We can't afford one step forward and two steps backwards. We need to beat the virus, provide essential relief, and build an inclusive recovery."

The overall bill faces a solid wall of GOP opposition, and Republicans used the unemployment impasse to accuse Biden of refusing to seek compromise with them.

"You could pick up the phone and end this right now," Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said of Biden.

But in an encouraging sign for Biden, a poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 70% of Americans support his handling of the pandemic, including a noteworthy 44% of Republicans.

The House approved a relief bill last weekend that included \$400 weekly jobless benefits — on top of regular state payments — through August. Manchin was hoping to reduce those costs, asserting that level of payment would discourage people from returning to work, a rationale most Democrats and many economists reject.

As the day began, Democrats asserted they'd reached a compromise between party moderates and progressives extending emergency jobless benefits at \$300 weekly into early October.

That plan, sponsored by Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., also included tax reductions on some unemployment benefits. Without that, many Americans abruptly tossed out of jobs would face unexpected tax bills.

But by midday, lawmakers said Manchin was ready to support a less generous Republican version. That

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led to hours of talks involving White House aides, top Senate Democrats and Manchin as the party tried finding a way to salvage its unemployment aid package.

The compromise announced Friday night would provide \$300 weekly, with the final check paid on Sept. 6, and includes the tax break on benefits.

Before the unemployment benefits drama began, senators voted 58-42 to kill a top progressive priority, a gradual increase in the current \$7.25 hourly minimum wage to \$15 over five years.

Eight Democrats voted against that proposal, suggesting that Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and other progressives vowing to continue the effort in coming months will face a difficult fight.

That vote began shortly after 11 a.m. EST and was not formally gaveled to a close until nearly 12 hours later as Senate work ground to a halt amid the unemployment benefit negotiations.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell chided Democrats, calling their daylong effort to work out the unemployment amendment a "spectacle."

"What this proves is there are benefits to bipartisanship when you're dealing with an issue of this magnitude," McConnell said.

Republicans criticized the overall relief bill as a liberal spend-fest that ignores that growing numbers of vaccinations and signs of a stirring economy suggest that the twin crises are easing.

"Democrats inherited a tide that was already turning," McConnell said.

Democrats reject that, citing the job losses and numerous people still struggling to buy food and pay rent.

"If you just look at a big number you say, 'Oh, everything's getting a little better,'" said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "It's not for the lower half of America. It's not."

Friday's gridlock over unemployment benefits gridlock wasn't the first delay on the relief package. On Thursday Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wis., forced the chamber's clerks to read aloud the entire 628-page relief bill, an exhausting task that took staffers 10 hours and 44 minutes and ended shortly after 2 a.m. EST.

Democrats made a host of other late changes to the bill, designed to nail down support. They ranged from extra money for food programs and federal subsidies for health care for workers who lose jobs to funds for rural health care and language assuring minimum amounts of money for smaller states.

In another late bargain that satisfied moderates, Biden and Senate Democrats agreed Wednesday to make some higher earners ineligible for the direct checks to individuals.

Associated Press staff writer Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

Biden White House: message discipline, no news conference

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In a sharp contrast with the previous administration, the White House is exerting extreme message discipline, empowering staff to speak but doing so with caution. Recalling both Biden's largely leak-free campaign and the buttoned-up Obama administration, the new White House team has carefully managed the president's appearances, trying to lower the temperature from Donald Trump's Washington and to save a big media moment to mark what could soon be a signature accomplishment: passage of the COVID-19 bill.

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Lemire reported from New York.

New York cinemas reopen, brightening outlook for theaters

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After growing cobwebs for nearly a year, movie theaters in New York City reopen Friday, returning film titles to Manhattan marquees that had for the last 12 months instead read messages like "Wear a mask" and "We'll be back soon."

Shortly after noon at the Angelika Film Center on Houston Street, Holly Stillman was already feeling emotional coming out of the first New York showing of Lee Isaac Chung's tender family drama "Minari." "My mask is drenched," she said.

But she was equally overwhelmed by being back in a cinema. Though Stillman feared the experience would be too restrictive because of COVID-19 protocols, she instead found it euphoric.

"It was just you and the movie screen," said Stillman. "It was wonderful to smell the popcorn as soon as I got into the theater — even though I don't eat popcorn."

Less than half of movie theaters are open nationwide, but reopenings are quickening. Theaters in many other areas reopened last summer around the release of Christopher Nolan's "Tenet," but that attempted comeback fizzled. Throughout, theaters remained shut in the five boroughs. For a year almost to the date, one of the world's foremost movie capitals stayed dark.

For a theatrical business that has been punished by the pandemic, the resumption of moviegoing in New York — is a crucial first step in revival.

"It's a symbolic moment," said Michael Barker, co-president of the New York-based Sony Pictures Classics, which on Friday released the Oscar contenders "The Father" and "The Truffle Hunters" in Manhattan theaters. "It says that there is hope for the theatrical world to reactivate itself."

For some moviegoers who consider the big screen the only way to see a movie, the long-in-coming day had almost religious significance.

"Moviegoing for me is like going to church," said JM Vargas, who had tickets Friday to "Minari," "The Last Dragon" and "Chaos Walking." "I've been waiting a year to go back to church."

Cinemas in the city are currently operating at only 25% capacity, with a maximum of 50 per each auditorium. As in other places, mask wearing is mandatory, seats are blocked out and air filters have been upgraded.

Many theaters were caught off guard when Gov. Andrew Cuomo said cinemas could, under those conditions, reopen. Some of the city's prominent theaters, including the Film Forum, the Alamo Drafthouse, the Metrograph and Regal Cinemas were targeting openings in the coming weeks. Some needed more time to prepare. After sitting dormant all winter, the Cinema Village in Manhattan two weeks earlier burst a pipe, flooding the lobby — one last bit of bad luck in a grueling year.

"This was the worst horror movie. I don't think any Hollywood director could have dreamed it up," said Nicolas Nicolaou, owner of the Cinema Village and theaters in Queens and New York. "We didn't realize we'd be 100% shutdown for this long."

New York, along with Los Angeles (where theaters are still closed), is one of the top movie markets. For smaller films, it's a vital epicenter of word-of-mouth. For blockbusters, it's a lucrative necessity. Without New York or Los Angeles open, Hollywood studios have pushed most of their larger productions until more theaters are open, or they've steered films to streaming services.

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"The New York opening is very significant to the theater business in New York, in the nation and in the globe," says John Fithian, president of the National Association of Theater Owners. "We in the movie theater business live off of movies that play all around the country and all around the world. We keep seeing those movies leave the theatrical release schedule to move to later dates because there just haven't been enough markets. New York is the most important of those markets."

Lately, with President Biden's prediction that every adult can be vaccinated by the end of May, the outlook for theaters has been brightening for the first time in a long time. Last weekend, "Tom & Jerry" overperformed at the box office with \$14.1 million in ticket sales, even while it streamed on HBO Max. Though Universal Pictures pushed the "Fast & Furious" sequel "F9" from late May to late June, other movies have moved up on the calendar, reversing the postponement tide.

Sony Pictures said it will release "Peter Rabbit 2: The Runaway" in May. Paramount Pictures' "A Quiet Place II" moved into the May 28 date vacated by "F9." The Walt Disney Co.'s "Black Widow" currently remains slated for May 7. Adding to the optimism: Southern California theaters are expected to reopen over the next few weeks.

"It's not that we're going back to record-breaking business this summer," said Fithian. "We're going to crawl, then we're going to walk and then we're going to run. It's going to take into 2022 before sustained profitability comes back into the business."

But at least on Friday, New York's cinema lobbies were, if not crowded, again bustling. Sold-out signs for the evening adorned box-office windows. Even a little star power returned. Liam Neeson was to stop by the AMC at Lincoln Square to introduce "The Marksman."

At the IFC Center in Greenwich Village, masked moviegoers flocked to films to play catch up — even if the movies were streaming. IFC is hosting a four-week "What'd We Miss?" series of movies the theater couldn't play over the last 12 months, including "First Cow" and "MLK/FBI."

"We're used to being present for the birth of these movies for New York audiences when they move into the public realm," said John Vanco, senior vice president of the IFC Center. The circumstances, he granted, weren't ideal. But they were better than nothing. "I don't look at 25% as being not good enough," said Vanco. "I look at it as better than 0%."

At the IFC, Tykon Herman settled in for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," and had tickets for a 5 p.m. of "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

"I'm one of the very few that don't have Netflix," said Herman, laughing. "I'm just old-fashioned. I've loved the theater experience from the time I saw 'E.T.' It's not going to be the same but sitting down in front of this screen makes me feel like things may be getting back to normal soon."

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Protesters defy Myanmar security forces as UN action urged

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Demonstrators defied growing violence by Myanmar security forces and staged more anti-coup rallies Friday, while the U.N. special envoy for the country called for urgent Security Council action, saying about 50 peaceful protesters were killed and scores were injured in the military's worst crackdowns this week.

The escalation of violence has put pressure on the world community to act to restrain the junta, which seized power on Feb. 1 by ousting the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Large protests against military rule have occurred daily in many cities and towns. Security forces escalated their crackdown with greater use of lethal force and mass arrests. At least 18 protesters were shot and killed Sunday and 38 on Wednesday, according to the U.N. Human Rights Office. More than 1,000 have been arrested, the independent Assistance Association for Political Prisoners said.

Protests continued in the biggest cities of Yangon and Mandalay and elsewhere Friday. They were met again with force by police, and gunfire was heard. In Mandalay, Zaw Myo was fatally shot as the 26-year-old and other residents sought to protect a march by a group of engineers.

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U.N. special envoy Christine Schraner Burgener said in her briefing to a closed Security Council meeting that council unity and "robust" action are critical "in pushing for a stop to the violence and the restoration of Myanmar's democratic institutions."

"We must denounce the actions by the military," she said in her briefing, as released by the U.N. "It is critical that this council is resolute and coherent in putting the security forces on notice and standing with the people of Myanmar firmly, in support of the clear November election results."

Schraner Burgener reiterated an earlier appeal to the international community not to "lend legitimacy or recognition to this regime that has been forcefully imposed and nothing but chaos has since followed."

She urged council members to hear "the voices of the people of Myanmar" and support Kyaw Moe Tun, the country's U.N. ambassador who was terminated by the military after denouncing the coup in a dramatic speech to the General Assembly. The military appointed his deputy, who resigned a day later and Tun has said he remains Myanmar's permanent representative to the U.N.

The Security Council took no immediate action. Council diplomats said Britain circulated a draft presidential statement for consideration, a step below a legally binding resolution.

Any kind of coordinated action at the U.N. will be difficult because two permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia, are likely to veto it.

Schraner Burgener, a veteran Swiss diplomat, said she hopes to visit Myanmar and use her "good offices" to find a peaceful solution through dialogue.

Meanwhile, the U.S. State Department said Friday that the government has taken action to prevent Myanmar's military from improperly accessing more than \$1 billion in Myanmar government funds held in the United States.

And YouTube removed five channels run by Myanmar's military for violating its guidelines and said it is watching for any further violations. It earlier pulled dozens of channels as part of an investigation into content uploaded in a coordinated influence campaign.

The decision by YouTube followed Facebook's earlier announcement that it has removed all Myanmar military-linked pages from its site and Instagram, which it owns.

Many cases of targeted brutality by security forces in the streets have been captured in photos and videos that have circulated widely on social media. Videos have showed security forces shooting people at point-blank range and chasing down and savagely beating demonstrators.

The U.S. called the images appalling, the U.N. human rights chief said it was time to "end the military's stranglehold over democracy in Myanmar," and the world body's independent expert on human rights in the country, Tom Andrews, urged Security Council members to watch the videos.

While many abuses are committed by police, there is even greater concern about military forces — notorious for decades of brutal counterinsurgency tactics and human rights abuses — being deployed in Myanmar's cities.

They include members of the army's 77th Light Infantry Division, which was also sent to the streets in 2007 to suppress anti-junta rallies, firing on protesters and ramming them with trucks, witnesses told Human Rights Watch.

The 99th Light Infantry Division also has been deployed, including in Mandalay. It is infamous for its counterinsurgency campaigns against ethnic minorities, including spearheading the response that led to a brutal crackdown that caused more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to flee from Rakhine state to Bangladesh. It also has been accused of war crimes in Shan state, another ethnic minority area, in 2016 and early 2017.

A leader of barred lawmakers who say they are the legitimate representatives of the country released a letter to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urging the Security Council to help end the violence and restore the ousted government. The letter asked for outside parties to help prevent human rights violations, sanctions on military leaders and military-linked businesses, a total arms embargo and penalties for perpetrators of atrocities.

The letter is signed by Dr. Sasa, who uses one name, on behalf of the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, Myanmar's Parliament, which the military has barred from convening. The lawmakers

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want foreign countries and international organizations to recognize them instead of the junta.

Schraner Burgener said earlier this week she warned Myanmar's army that the world's nations and the Security Council "might take huge, strong measures."

"And the answer was, 'We are used to sanctions, and we survived those sanctions in the past,'" she said. When she also warned that Myanmar would become isolated, Schraner Burgener said, "the answer was, 'We have to learn to walk with only a few friends.'"

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations has urged a halt to violence and the start of talks on a peaceful solution in Myanmar.

The 10-member regional group, which includes Myanmar, is constrained from enacting serious measures by a tradition of acting by consensus and reluctance to interfere in each other's internal affairs.

However, one member, Singapore, was outspoken Friday in criticizing Myanmar's coup.

"It is the height of national shame for the armed forces of any country to turn its arms against its own people," Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said in Parliament.

But he also warned that the approach favored by some Western nations of pressuring Myanmar's generals with sanctions would not be effective.

"Despite all our fervor and earnest hopes of reconciliation ... the keys ultimately lie within Myanmar. And there's a limit to how far external pressure will be brought to bear," he said.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in tweeted that the use of violence against the people of Myanmar must stop.

"There should not be any more loss of lives. We condemn the violent suppression of protests by the military and the police forces and strongly call for the immediate release of all those detained including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi," he said.

NASA's new Mars rover hits dusty red road, 1st trip 21 feet

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA's newest Mars rover hit the dusty red road this week, putting 21 feet on the odometer in its first test drive.

The Perseverance rover ventured from its landing position Thursday, two weeks after setting down on the red planet to seek signs of past life.

The roundabout, back and forth drive lasted just 33 minutes and went so well that more driving was on tap Friday and Saturday for the the six-wheeled rover.

"This is really the start of our journey here," said Rich Rieber, the NASA engineer who plotted the route. "This is going to be like the Odyssey, adventures along the way, hopefully no Cyclops, and I'm sure there will be stories aplenty written about it."

In its first drive, Perseverance went forward 13 feet (4 meters), took a 150-degree left turn, then backed up 8 feet (2.5 meters). During a news conference Friday, NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, shared photos of its tracks over and around small rocks.

"I don't think I've ever been happier to see wheel tracks and I've seen a lot of them," said engineer Anais Zarifian.

Flight controllers are still checking all of Perseverance's systems. So far, everything is looking good. The rover's 7-foot (2-meter) robot arm, for instance, flexed its muscles for the first time Tuesday.

Before the car-size rover can head for an ancient river delta to collect rocks for eventual return to Earth, it must drop its so-called protective "belly pan" and release an experimental helicopter named Ingenuity.

As it turns out, Perseverance landed right on the edge of a potential helicopter landing strip — a nice, flat spot, according to Rieber. So the plan is to drive out of this landing strip, ditch the pan, then return for Ingenuity's highly anticipated test flight. All this should be accomplished by late spring.

Scientists are debating whether to take the smoother route to get to the nearby delta or a possibly tougher way with intriguing remnants from that once-watery time 3 billion to 4 billion years ago.

Perseverance — NASA's biggest and most elaborate rover yet — became the ninth U.S. spacecraft to

successfully land on Mars on Feb. 18. China hopes to land its smaller rover — currently orbiting the red planet — in another few months.

NASA scientists, meanwhile, announced Friday that they've named Perseverance's touchdown site in honor of the late science fiction writer Octavia E. Butler, who grew up next door to JPL in Pasadena. She was one of the first African Americans to receive mainstream attention for science fiction. Her works included "Bloodchild and Other Stories" and "Parable of the Sower."

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Giuliani probe awaits Garland as he nears AG confirmation

By JIM MUSTIAN, ERIC TUCKER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With Merrick Garland poised to be confirmed as attorney general as early as next week, one of the first major questions he is likely to encounter is what to do about Rudy Giuliani.

A federal probe into the overseas and business dealings of the former New York City mayor and close ally of former President Donald Trump stalled last year over a dispute over investigative tactics as Trump unsuccessfully sought reelection and amid Giuliani's prominent role in subsequently disputing the results of the contest on Trump's behalf.

But the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan has since returned to the question of bringing a criminal case against Giuliani, focusing at least in part on whether he broke U.S. lobbying laws by failing to register as a foreign agent related to his work, according to one current and one former law enforcement official familiar with the inquiry. The officials weren't authorized to discuss the ongoing case and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The arrival of a new leadership team in Washington is likely to guarantee a fresh look at the investigation. No matter how it unfolds, the probe ensures that a Justice Department looking to move forward after a tumultuous four years will nonetheless have to confront unresolved, and politically charged, questions from the Trump era — not to mention calls from some Democrats to investigate Trump himself.

The full scope of the investigation is unclear, but it at least partly involves Giuliani's Ukraine dealings, the officials said.

Giuliani was central to the then-president's efforts to dig up dirt against Democratic rival Joe Biden and to press Ukraine for an investigation into Biden and his son, Hunter — who himself now faces a criminal tax probe by the Justice Department. Giuliani also sought to undermine former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine Marie Yovanovitch, who was pushed out on Trump's orders, and met several times with a Ukrainian lawmaker who released edited recordings of Biden in an effort to smear him before the election.

The Foreign Agents Registration Act requires people who lobby on behalf of a foreign government or entity to register with the Justice Department. The once-obscure law, aimed at improving transparency, has received a burst of attention in recent years, particularly during an investigation by former special counsel Robert Mueller that revealed an array of foreign influence operations in the U.S.

Federal prosecutors in Manhattan pushed last year for a search warrant for records, including some of Giuliani's communications, but officials in the Trump-era Justice Department would not sign off on the request, according to multiple people familiar with the investigation who insisted on anonymity to speak about an ongoing investigation.

Officials in the deputy attorney general's office raised concerns about both the scope of the request, which they thought would contain communications that could be covered by legal privilege between Giuliani and Trump, and the method of obtaining the records, three of the people said.

The Justice Department requires that applications for search warrants served on lawyers be approved by senior department officials.

"They decided it was prudent to put it off until the dust settled, and the dust has settled now," said Kenneth F. McCallion, a former federal prosecutor who represents Ukrainian clients relevant to the inquiry

and has been in contact with federal authorities about the investigation.

McCallion declined to identify his clients, saying he had not been authorized to do so. He previously has represented former Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

Giuliani's attorney Robert J. Costello told The Associated Press he has "heard nothing" from federal prosecutors concerning Giuliani.

It is possible that Giuliani could try to argue that his actions were taken at the behest of the president rather than a foreign country, and therefore registration would not be required under federal law.

Giuliani wrote in a text message Thursday to the AP that he "never represented a foreign anything before the U.S. government."

"It's pure political persecution," he said of the investigation. The U.S. attorney's office declined to comment.

McCallion said federal authorities were asking questions concerning a wide range of Giuliani's international business dealings, and that "everything was on the table" as it pertained to his work in Ukraine. He said the inquiry was not entirely focused on Ukraine, but declined to elaborate.

The investigation of Giuliani's lobbying first came to light in October 2019, when The New York Times reported that federal prosecutors were investigating Giuliani's efforts to oust Yovanovitch, who was recalled amid Trump's bid to solicit dirt from Ukraine to pressure Ukraine into helping his reelection prospects.

Federal prosecutors also have investigated Giuliani as part of a criminal case brought against his former associates, Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, Soviet-born business partners from Florida who played key roles in Giuliani's efforts to launch the Ukrainian corruption investigation against the Bidens.

Parnas and Fruman were charged in a scheme to make illegal campaign donations to local and federal politicians in New York, Nevada and other states to try to win support for a new recreational marijuana business.

Giuliani has said he had no knowledge of illegal donations and hadn't seen any evidence that Parnas and Fruman did anything wrong.

Tucker and Balsamo reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Larry Neumeister contributed to this report from New York.

EXPLAINER: 5 key takeaways from the February jobs report

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's job market delivered a burst of strength in February. It lifted hopes that the rollout of viral vaccines, the distribution of federal aid and the increasing willingness and ability of consumers to go out and spend will invigorate the economy as the weather warms up.

Employers added 379,000 jobs, the government said Friday, the most since October and far surpassing economists' predictions. The unemployment rate, which dipped to 6.2%, has now dropped nearly every month since it peaked at 14.8% in April of last year after the pandemic erupted in the United States and inflicted breathtaking job losses.

Shut down for much of last year, the economy has been gradually reopening as more people are vaccinated and fewer are being infected. The number of confirmed new coronavirus cases has dropped to an average below 60,000 a day from nearly 250,000 in early January, according to Johns Hopkins University.

A government aid package late last year also delivered \$600 checks to most adults, coming on top of an even bigger economic rescue last spring. President Joe Biden is seeking to give households yet another boost with a \$1.9 trillion relief package that would add benefits for the unemployed and send \$1,400 to most families.

"Improving health conditions, expanding vaccine distribution and generous fiscal stimulus will form a powerful cocktail that lifts real (economic) growth to 7% in 2021," reversing last year's 3.5% drop, Gregory Daco and Lydia Boussour of Oxford Economics said in a research note. They expect the economy to add an average of roughly 580,000 jobs a month this year.

Here are five takeaways from the February jobs report:

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RESTAURANTS REBOUND

No area of the economy endured more devastation from the pandemic recession than the leisure and hospitality sector. Now, as more bars, restaurants and hotels reopen to fuller capacity, this industry has been regaining many of its lost jobs.

In February, leisure and hospitality added 355,000 jobs — more than 90% of the economy's total gain. The added jobs included 286,000 at restaurants and bars alone.

Many of those jobs are returning as California and Texas — the two most-populous states — more fully reopen their economies, along with some other states. Yet so deep were last year's job losses in leisure and hospitality that the sector is still down 3.5 million jobs from its pre-pandemic level. Even if February's torrid pace could be maintained, it would take 10 more months for the leisure and hospitality industry to regain its pre-pandemic level of jobs. And that doesn't even include the additional jobs this sector would have added over the past year under normal circumstances.

AN EARLY SPRING

February's job growth was about twice the number that economists had expected. And the landscape looked better in the rear-view mirror, too. The government's revised estimates added a net 38,000 jobs for December and January combined.

Most economists also shrugged off one dose of bad news in Friday's report: A loss of 61,000 construction jobs that was probably a temporary consequence of freezing winter weather and power outages in Texas and elsewhere. And the shedding of 86,000 government jobs in February reflected, in part, technical issues involved in accounting for school closings and re-openings in the face of the pandemic.

A LOST YEAR

One year ago, the pandemic had yet to strike the United States hard. As a result, last month's data illustrates just how much damage the virus did to the job market in 12 months. The comparisons to the pre-pandemic days are ugly.

Despite last month's impressive gain, the economy is still down roughly 9.5 million jobs from February 2020. And the proportion of adults who are either working or looking for work — the so-called labor force participation rate — was 61.4% in February, down sharply from 63.3% a year earlier. This proportion is now close to where it was back in the mid-1970s, before a huge influx of women entered the American workforce. What's more, February's 6.2% unemployment rate, though down significantly from last spring, is still high compared with 3.5% one year earlier.

RACIAL INEQUALITY

February's job growth did nothing to reduce the chronic disparities between white Americans and minorities that reflect broader economic inequalities.

The unemployment rate for Black Americans rose last month for the first time since April, surging from 9.2% in January to 9.9% in February. The number of African Americans who said they were employed fell by 164,000. And the number who said they were unemployed rose by 129,000.

By contrast, unemployment fell slightly last month for whites (from 5.7% to 5.6%, a rate much lower than for minorities) and for Hispanics (from 8.6% to 8.5%).

GONE FOR GOOD

Employers continued to call back workers they had furloughed after the virus hit last year. But many jobs appear to be gone for good, and those who held those positions could remain out of work indefinitely.

The number of Americans on temporary layoff plunged by 517,000 last month to 2.2 million. At the same time, the ranks of the permanently unemployed remained stuck at a lofty 3.5 million, down just 6,000 from January. The permanent job losers have now outnumbered the temporarily jobless every month since September.

Study finds mask mandates, dining out influence virus spread

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A new national study adds strong evidence that mask mandates can slow the spread of the coronavirus, and that allowing dining at restaurants can increase cases and deaths.

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released the study Friday.

"All of this is very consistent," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said during a White House briefing on Friday. "You have decreases in cases and deaths when you wear masks, and you have increases in cases and deaths when you have in-person restaurant dining."

The study was released just as some states are rescinding mask mandates and restaurant limits. Earlier this week, Texas became the biggest state to lift its mask rule, joining a movement by many governors to loosen COVID-19 restrictions despite pleas from health officials.

"It's a solid piece of work that makes the case quite strongly that in-person dining is one of the more important things that needs to be handled if you're going to control the pandemic," said William Hanage, a Harvard University expert on disease dynamics who was not involved in the study.

The new research builds on smaller CDC studies, including one that found that people in 10 states who became infected in July were more likely to have dined at a restaurant and another that found mask mandates in 10 states were associated with reductions in hospitalizations.

The CDC researchers looked at U.S. counties placed under state-issued mask mandates and at counties that allowed restaurant dining — both indoors and at tables outside. The study looked at data from March through December of last year.

The scientists found that mask mandates were associated with reduced coronavirus transmission, and that improvements in new cases and deaths increased as time went on.

The reductions in growth rates varied from half a percentage point to nearly 2 percentage points. That may sound small, but the large number of people involved means the impact grows with time, experts said.

"Each day that growth rate is going down, the cumulative effect — in terms of cases and deaths — adds up to be quite substantial," said Gery Guy Jr., a CDC scientist who was the study's lead author.

Reopening restaurant dining was not followed by a significant increase in cases and deaths in the first 40 days after restrictions were lifted. But after that, there were increases of about 1 percentage point in the growth rate of cases and — later — 2 to 3 percentage points in the growth rate of deaths.

The delay could be because restaurants didn't re-open immediately and because many customers may have been hesitant to dine in right after restrictions were lifted, Guy said.

Also, there's always a lag between when people are infected and when they become ill, and longer to when they end up in the hospital and die. In the case of dining out, a delay in deaths can also be caused by the fact that the diners themselves may not die, but they could get infected and then spread it to others who get sick and die, Hanage said.

"What happens in a restaurant doesn't stay in a restaurant," he said.

CDC officials stopped short of saying that on-premises dining needs to stop. But they said if restaurants do open, they should follow as many prevention measures as possible, like promoting outdoor dining, having adequate indoor ventilation, masking employees and calling on customers to wear masks whenever they aren't eating or drinking.

The study had limitations. For example, the researchers tried to make calculations that accounted for other policies, such as bans on mass gatherings or bar closures, that might influence case and death rates. But the authors acknowledged that they couldn't account for all possible influences — such as school re-openings.

"It's always very, very hard to thoroughly nail down the causal relationships," Hanage said. "But when you take this gathered with all the other stuff we know about the virus, it supports the message" of the value of mask wearing and the peril of restaurant dining, he added.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Jump in hiring fuels optimism for US economic recovery

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

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WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. hiring accelerated more quickly than expected last month, evidence that a year after the pandemic took hold, the economy is strengthening as virus cases drop and vaccinations ramp up.

A government report Friday showed that employers added a robust 379,000 jobs in February, driven by a sharp increase at beleaguered restaurants and bars. That suggests Americans are starting to venture out and spend more as progress is made against the coronavirus and states relax business restrictions.

The February gain marked a sharp pickup from the 166,000 jobs that were added in January and the loss of 306,000 in December. Yet it represents just a fraction of the roughly 9.5 million that the economy must regain to get back to where it was before the crisis.

Unemployment fell from 6.3% to 6.2%, the Labor Department said. That is down dramatically from 14.8% last April, just after the virus erupted in the United States. But it's well above the pre-pandemic rate of 3.5%.

"The recovery really has some legs, some momentum now," said Odeta Kushi, deputy chief economist at First American Financial Corp.

Stocks see-sawed through the day but ended sharply higher, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average rising 572 points, or about 1.9%, and the S&P 500 moving up nearly 2%.

In suggesting the economy is on the mend, the report could complicate President Joe Biden's struggle to push through his \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package, which passed the House and is before the Senate.

It would provide, among other things, \$1,400 checks to most adults, hundreds more in weekly unemployment benefits and another round of aid to small businesses at a time when many Americans have seen their income shrivel and have fallen behind on rent, mortgages and other bills.

Biden said Friday that previous government aid had contributed to February's job gains, and he insisted the new package is needed to help keep the recovery going.

"Without a rescue plan, the gains are going to slow," he said. "We can't afford one step forward and two steps backward."

About 4 million people who have lost their jobs have stopped looking for work and so are not classified as unemployed. If they were included, along with a separate group that was misclassified as working, the unemployment rate would be 9.3%, according to Oxford Economics.

Still, economists are increasingly optimistic that hiring will accelerate in the coming months as Americans seize the opportunity to once again travel, shop, attend sporting events, go to the movies and eat at restaurants.

Households as a whole have accumulated a huge pile of savings as Americans slashed their spending. Much of that is expected to be spent once people feel more comfortable about going out.

Last month's job growth was driven by a steady recovery of bars, restaurants and hotels. Bars and restaurants, in particular, snapped back, adding 286,000 jobs as business restrictions eased in California and other states. This week, Texas joined some other states in announcing it will fully reopen its economy.

Also hiring last month were retailers, which added 41,000 jobs, health care companies, with 46,000, and manufacturers, with 21,000. On the other hand, construction companies shed 61,000 jobs, most likely in part because of the severe storms and power outages in Texas.

Stefan Coker, the owner of What's Pop-In, a gourmet popcorn company in Buffalo, New York, said people seem increasingly comfortable about shopping in person. His online sales are also growing, and he hopes to strike a deal with the grocery chain Wegman's to sell in those stores.

To meet growing demand, he is moving into a larger storefront with warehouse space, and he plans to hire two or three more workers in the coming months.

"I'm seeing a major difference now in in-store sales," Coker said. "Walk-in traffic has doubled. It's been amazing to see."

With the pandemic easing, he said, the company is also fielding more inquiries about custom bags for weddings and baby showers.

The virus has killed more than a half-million Americans. Deaths and new cases per day have plummeted over the past two months, though they are still running alarmingly high. The U.S. is averaging nearly 1,800 deaths and 62,000 newly confirmed infections per day.

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The U.S. has administered over 82 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, according to the Centers Disease Prevention and Control. More than 21% of the nation's adults have received at least one shot, and close to 11% have been fully vaccinated.

"The best stimulus is vaccination," said Constance Hunter, chief economist at KPMG. "My hope is that we don't backslide on the virus" as states reopen.

The job gains last month were sharply uneven. The unemployment rate among whites fell slightly, to 5.6%, and among Hispanics, to 8.5%. Among Asians it dropped to 5.1%. But for Black Americans it jumped from 9.2% to 9.9%.

Women fared slightly better than men, with unemployment dropping among women from 6.3% to 6.1%, while men's unemployment fell one-tenth of a percentage point to 6.3%. More women started looking for work, though millions of them have had to stop their job searches to care for children during the outbreak.

Lane S. Fulton, who lives in Bloomington, Indiana, has been mostly unemployed since the crisis began last March.

He said he has applied for roughly 600 government positions after earning a graduate degree in public administration from Indiana University in the fall of 2019. But state and local governments have slashed 1.4 million jobs since the pandemic erupted, including 86,000 last month, and most have instituted hiring freezes.

Fulton was also thrown out of work from his part-time job at Panera Bread last March.

The federal government's moratorium on collecting student loans allowed him to redirect his \$600 monthly payment to more urgent bills.

"That pause was what allowed me to survive when I wasn't getting unemployment," he said.

With so much money being pumped into the economy, Oxford Economics forecasts that growth will reach 7% for all of 2021, which would be the fastest calendar-year expansion since 1984. The Congressional Budget Office projects the nation will add a substantial 6.2 million jobs this year.

Still, the size of the Biden relief package, coming as the economy is already showing improvement, has stoked fears that growth could overheat and accelerate inflation, possibly leading the Federal Reserve to jack up interest rates. Those fears have roiled financial markets for the past two weeks.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell sought to assuage those concerns on Thursday — without success, based on sharp selloffs in the stock and bond markets — when he suggested that any meaningful rise in inflation would probably prove temporary and that the Fed would be in no hurry to raise its benchmark short-term rate.

Sounding an optimistic note, he said: "There's good reason to expect job creation to pick up in the coming months."

Associated Press Writer Josh Boak contributed to this report.

Reporter faces trial in case seen as attack on press rights

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — An Iowa journalist faces trial Monday on charges stemming from her coverage of a protest against racial injustice, a case that prosecutors have pursued despite international condemnation from free press advocates who say she was just doing her job.

The case of Des Moines Register reporter Andrea Sahouri, who was pepper sprayed and arrested while reporting on a clash between protesters and police, will highlight an aggressive response by Iowa authorities against those who organized and attended protests that erupted last summer and occasionally turned violent.

Sahouri and her former boyfriend are charged with failure to disperse and interference with official acts, misdemeanors that could bring fines and up to 30 days in jail. They face a two-day trial at Drake University in what the U.S. Press Freedom Tracker says could be the first for a working journalist nationwide since 2018.

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Sahouri's newspaper, the Iowa Freedom of Information Council and Amnesty International are among press advocates that have demanded Polk County drop the charges, which they call an abuse of power that violates the Constitution's First Amendment.

"This is outrageous. Reporting at a protest scene as a working member of the media is not a crime. It is a right that must be protected," Amnesty International said.

But Des Moines police and County Attorney John Sarcone's office argue that Sahouri wasn't wearing press credentials and appeared to be a participant in an unlawful assembly, saying journalists do not have a free pass to ignore dispersal orders. The only such order identified in court documents was issued roughly 90 minutes before the arrest.

At a pre-trial hearing Friday, prosecutor Bradley Kinkade argued that Sahouri's employment as a reporter "is irrelevant to her charges."

"This is a standard misdemeanor trial," he said.

Sahouri, recently honored by the Iowa Newspaper Association as one of the state's best young reporters, has continued to cover public safety while the charges have loomed.

While 126 journalists were arrested or detained during 2020's unrest, most either weren't charged or had charges dropped, the Press Freedom Tracker says. Fourteen still face charges.

The determination to prosecute Sahouri has baffled observers, who note Iowa's courts have a backlog of felony cases due to the coronavirus pandemic. Critics say authorities seem to be seeking a conviction to justify an officer's decision to unnecessarily use force against a reporter known for building trust with crime victims and underrepresented communities.

"It's like somebody with their hand in the cookie jar: They can't admit that they made a mistake," said Des Moines civil rights attorney Glen Downey, who is not involved in Sahouri's case. "The case is important because of the journalism aspect, but it's also emblematic of how they are treating all the protesters."

Sahouri, 25, was covering a Black Lives Matter protest at Merle Hay mall when tensions escalated between participants and police. Her then-boyfriend, Spenser Robnett, accompanied her for safety reasons.

Protesters vandalized a Target store, broke windows, blocked an intersection and threw water bottles and rocks at officers in riot gear.

Sahouri covered the protest live on Twitter, reporting that officers charged into a shoe store with rifles and shot tear gas to disperse the crowd.

Sahouri said she was running from the gas when Robnett was hit with a projectile and she stopped briefly to check on him before continuing around the corner of a Verizon store. That's when officer Luke Wilson approached, shot pepper spray into her face and restrained her with zip ties, she says.

Sahouri repeatedly identified herself as press but was nonetheless taken to jail. She reported her arrest live from the back of a police van.

Wilson has claimed he was unaware Sahouri was a reporter until he was detaining her and Robnett intervened, saying she worked for the Register and tried to pull her away. Wilson says he failed to activate his body camera.

Judge Lawrence McLellan ordered prosecutors Friday to give body camera training materials to Sahouri's defense that he said should have been turned over in response to an earlier court order.

The defense argues that Wilson could and should have retrieved video of the arrest after the fact but declined to do so, potentially in order to avoid embarrassment. McLellan said he will rule later on whether to instruct jurors that the evidence had been destroyed.

Des Moines Register executive editor Carol Hunter said Sahouri's lack of press credentials, which she left in her car, is a "red herring" because police knew immediately she was a journalist and a press badge isn't required to enjoy constitutional protections. Reporters must be free to witness protests and hold participants and police accountable, Hunter said.

"Freedom of the press rests on newsgathering," she said. "This really is an attack on a fundamental part of being able to bring people the news."

The newspaper is funding Sahouri's defense, which is led by former U.S. Attorney Nick Klinefeldt.

Prosecutors obtained and may try to show jurors text messages between Sahouri and protest leader

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Matè Muhammad from a week after her arrest. Her lawyers say the texts are irrelevant and show a reporter's routine fact-gathering with a source.

Muhammad, who has been fighting charges stemming from protests, said he didn't know Sahouri when she was arrested but the two have since developed a professional relationship. He called her "extremely diligent" in vetting information and gathering different perspectives.

"We enjoy working with her not because we view her as an activist or on our side," he said, "but because we view her as fair."

AP-NORC poll: Americans largely back Biden's virus response

By JULIE PACE and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Joe Biden is enjoying an early presidential honeymoon, with 60% of Americans approving of his job performance thus far and even more backing his handling of the coronavirus pandemic, according to a new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

At a moment of deep political polarization in America, support for Biden's pandemic response extends across party lines. Overall, 70% of Americans back the Democratic president's handling of the virus response, including 44% of Republicans.

Still, Biden faces more skepticism from Americans on the economy, which has been battered by the pandemic. Fifty-five percent of Americans approve of Biden's approach to the economy thus far, and 63% say the U.S. economy is in poor shape, the AP-NORC survey shows. Republicans are also less likely to back Biden on the economy than they are on the pandemic, with just 17% supporting his fiscal stewardship.

Less than two months into his presidency, Biden has made the pandemic his central focus, urging Americans to follow stringent social distancing and mask guidelines and vowing to speed up distribution of critical vaccines. He's also argued that until the spread of the virus is under control, the economy won't fully recover.

To address financial shortfalls in the meantime, he's asking Congress to pass a \$1.9 trillion pandemic rescue plan that would provide direct payments to millions of Americans and surge funds into state and local governments.

The measure has already passed the House. But Biden is having to make compromises to keep all Democratic senators in support of the measure, including agreeing this week to narrow eligibility for \$1,400 stimulus checks. In a concession to moderate Democratic senators, Biden agreed that individuals making more than \$80,000 annually and couples making more than \$160,000 won't receive any benefits. Biden's original proposal extended the stimulus funds to Americans with higher annual wages.

The administration estimates that 158.5 million households will still receive checks under the Senate compromise.

The prospect of a pandemic relief bill is welcome news to John Villegas, 58, an Illinois Democrat who supports Biden's handling of both the virus response and the economy.

"With the closure of so many businesses, there are a lot of people suffering," said Villegas, who called Biden's approach a "180 degree shift" from his predecessor, Donald Trump.

Trump argued that the U.S. economy couldn't afford the hit that came from enacting restrictions on business and travel. The worst fears of economists were averted as Republican-led states followed Trump's lead and resisted restrictions, but COVID-19 cases skyrocketed. More than 520,000 people have died in the United States from the virus over the past year.

Despite their differing approaches to managing the economy during the pandemic, Biden's approval ratings on the economy are similar to Trump's, whose handling of the economy since the virus took hold was consistently backed by about half of Americans. The key difference: That level of support made the economy Trump's strongest issue, while it's a relative weakness for Biden compared with Americans' views of his handling of the pandemic and other issues.

In a reflection of the partisanship that continues to rage in the U.S., many Americans' views of the economy have flipped since the new president was inaugurated. In December, 67% of Republicans and just 15%

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of Democrats described the economy as good. Now, 35% of Republicans and 41% of Democrats describe the economy positively. There's been little change in overall growth or unemployment over that time.

Biden's handling of the pandemic may well determine the course of his presidency and the political capital he has to pursue significant legislation on other matters. Democrats are working urgently to tee up bills addressing infrastructure investment, policing reforms and voting rights. Biden has also vowed to tackle climate change and build on the sprawling health insurance measure signed into law when he served as Barack Obama's vice president.

His promises of action have garnered him solid approval ratings on some of those fronts. For example, about 6 in 10 Americans say they approve of Biden's handling of health care and race relations.

Overall, 48% of Americans say the country is headed in the right direction, compared with 37% who said that in December. The poll also shows that 43% of Americans expect things in the country overall to get better in the next year, while 34% think things will get worse and 23% think they will remain about the same.

Biden himself has been purposefully cautious in predicting when life in the U.S. will return to a pre-pandemic normal. Even as he promises that the U.S. will have enough vaccine supply for all Americans by the end of May, he's said it could be the end of the year or early 2022 before Americans can stop wearing masks or fully return to normal activities.

His team's goal in setting expectations? Underpromise, then overdeliver.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,434 adults was conducted Feb. 23-March 1 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

Online:

AP-NORC Center: <http://www.apnorc.org/>.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

No evidence Pelosi invested \$1.5 million in 'foreign oil stock'

CLAIM: House Speaker Nancy Pelosi bought \$1.5 million in "foreign oil stock" before President Joe Biden halted the construction of the Keystone XL pipeline.

THE FACTS: A post that circulated on Facebook falsely claimed Pelosi had bought foreign oil stock a day before President Joe Biden signed a Jan. 20 executive order revoking the permit for the Keystone XL pipeline. The 1,700-mile (2,735-kilometer) pipeline was planned to carry roughly 800,000 barrels of oil a day from Alberta to the Texas Gulf Coast, passing through Montana, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas and Oklahoma. "Well WELL WELL. PELOSI buys 1.5 m in foreign oil stock day before shutdown of american line..." said a post with the erroneous information, falsely suggesting Pelosi committed insider trading. In fact, there is no record Pelosi bought significant stock shares recently. The House Speaker filed a Periodic Transaction Report on Jan. 21, 2021, which disclosed stock shares or call options made by her husband, Paul Pelosi. There are no oil companies listed on the form. Paul Pelosi invested in four companies: AllianceBernstein, Apple, Tesla and Disney, according to the form. Periodic Transaction Reports must be filed no later than 45 days after a member of Congress or their spouse or child makes a transaction greater than \$1,000 and within 30 days of the member receiving notification that the transaction occurred. Henry V. Connelly, a spokesperson for Pelosi, told the AP in an email that the information in the claim is false. Members of the House are allowed to buy and sell stocks but are barred from using private information

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from their jobs to inform investment decisions, the STOCK Act of 2012 states.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

Biden did answer questions from House Democrats at virtual event

CLAIM: The White House cut President Joe Biden's feed at a virtual event with top House Democrats because they did not have confidence in him answering questions.

THE FACTS: Posts online are falsely suggesting that a video clip of Biden's introductory remarks at the House Democratic Caucus Virtual Issues Conference shows that the White House is limiting the president's talking time. The 15-second clip was taken from comments Biden made praising Democratic leaders for their support and addressed the need to tackle issues related to racial injustice, confidence in the American government and the climate. During the conference, Biden praised House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Conservative accounts shared the clip of Biden with captions meant to further propel a narrative pushed during the election that he is unfit for office. "The White House doesn't even have enough confidence in Joe Biden to answer questions? Wow," Charlie Kirk, founder of Turning Point USA, a conservative student group, tweeted. "BIDEN APPEARS TO BE NOTHING MORE THAN A PUPPET PRESIDENT," another post said. In the clip, viewed more than 1.6 million times on Twitter, Biden says he would be happy to take questions. "And I'm happy to take questions if that's what you — I'm supposed to do, Nance," he says before the feed ends. "Whatever you want me to do." The video feed of Biden then ends. But comments circulating with the clip misrepresent what was behind the cut. On Wednesday, pool reporters were allowed to attend the introductory remarks made by Biden, but the session was then closed to the press for the president to take questions from House Democrats. The AP confirmed that Biden did take questions from House Democrats including one on systemic racism and another on the child tax credit.

— Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

Left-wing protesters didn't 'storm' Georgia Capitol

CLAIM: Video shows left-wing protesters storming Georgia's Capitol building in Atlanta or engaging in an insurrection over a bill that would require photo ID for absentee voting.

THE FACTS: There is no evidence that protests at Georgia's state Capitol on Feb. 26 amounted to a storming of the Capitol or an insurrection. Yet a video clip of the protest circulated widely on social media this week with claims exaggerating what happened. The 45-second clip showed a Georgia state trooper using a bullhorn to instruct protesters to disperse, citing a state law that allows arrests for disruptive protests at the Capitol. As the officer was speaking, Democratic Georgia Rep. Park Cannon approached him and put her ear up to the bullhorn, blocking it. Another officer moved her away by the arm, telling her to "step aside." Cannon then engaged in an argument with the officers. Social media users on Monday likened the protest in the video to the violent siege of the United States Capitol on Jan. 6, which resulted in five deaths and hundreds of arrests. "Leftists STORM Georgia Capitol In Response to ID Required for Absentee Ballots," conservative commentator Dinesh D'Souza wrote in a headline alongside the video on the video-sharing website Rumble. Others on Twitter called the protest in the video an "insurrection" in tweets shared thousands of times. However, the Georgia Department of Public Safety confirmed to the AP that the protesters entered the state Capitol lawfully and remained peaceful, unlike the rioters in the violent Jan. 6 insurrection in Washington. "No one was arrested," spokesperson Franka Young wrote. "The protesters were asked to disperse and they left peacefully on their own." According to AP reporting, the Feb. 26 protest began after Democrats were not given a chance to speak on the House floor against House Bill 531, which would make multiple changes to restrict voting, including requiring photo ID to cast absentee ballots. During a lunch break, protesters gathered in the atrium of the Capitol. When Cannon put her ear up to a state trooper's bullhorn, another trooper asked her to step aside. Cannon demanded a public apology from the officer and began shouting complaints that quickly evolved into an attack on the voting bills. Cannon then sat down and a group of more than a dozen Democrats, mostly House members, joined her. They remained on the steps for two hours, eating lunch, taking pictures, sending social media messages

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and leaving an aisle open for traffic. On Monday, the Georgia House passed House Bill 531, sending it to the Senate for further debate. Civil rights groups gathered at the Capitol to protest. As with the Feb. 26 protest, those who gathered on Monday entered the Capitol lawfully and were nonviolent, Young said.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in Seattle contributed this report.

Vaccines are needed to end the pandemic, prevent serious illness

CLAIM: There is absolutely no need for vaccines to extinguish the pandemic and people who aren't at risk from the disease should not be vaccinated.

THE FACTS: A misleading quote by Michael Yeadon, a retired British doctor who previously worked for Pfizer, found new life on Facebook this week, circulating on a widely shared post. The quote was taken from an op-ed Yeadon wrote in a U.K.-based blog in October that made false claims while arguing against government restrictions for the coronavirus. The post, which was shared over 5,000 times, falsely states: "There is absolutely no need for vaccines to extinguish the pandemic. I've never heard such nonsense talks about vaccines. You do not vaccinate people who aren't at risk from a disease. You also don't set about planning to vaccinate millions of fit and healthy people with a vaccine that hasn't been extensively tested on human subjects." The quote almost perfectly matches a passage from Yeadon's op-ed, though the post misidentifies him as a former vice president and chief scientist at Pfizer, when in fact he was a former vice president and chief scientist of Pfizer's allergy and respiratory research. David Hamer, professor of global health and medicine at the Boston University School of Public Health and School of Medicine, told The Associated Press in a call that aggressive vaccination — even with populations who may not appear to be at high risk of serious illness or death from COVID-19 — is critical to decreasing circulation of the virus. Hamer said that the reality is we can't tell who among seemingly healthy people is at risk for getting sick from COVID-19, how severe the case will be or whether it will lead to long-term illness. "This pandemic is far from over," Hamer said. "There's still large populations that are not immune, so the risk of continued transmission remains." Hamer said that historically vaccines have been used for viral infections for people that "may not have been at risk or may have been at low risk," like for measles, mumps and rubella. "Not immunizing a portion of the population means that you have that population serving as a sort of a pool for continued transmission." Viruses can mutate when they infect people, making reinfection more likely, Hamer said. "Having a lot of virus circulating gives the virus more opportunities to mutate and to be able to basically change enough that reinfection is more feasible," Hamer explained. That is why medical experts say it is critical to vaccinate the population as quickly as possible before further mutations develop and spread. Around the world, health officials are trying to vaccinate enough people to stop the spread of COVID-19 and to achieve "herd immunity," where enough people have immunity, either from past infection or vaccine, to stop the uncontrolled spread. Many experts say that the threshold for herd immunity is 70% or higher. Yeadon left Pfizer nine years ago when the company phased out some of its research and development activities in Sandwich, the town in southeast England where he worked, the AP reported. Yeadon does not speak for the company and was not working for Pfizer when the company was developing its vaccine for COVID-19. Yeadon did not respond to a request for comment.

— Arijeta Lajka

Video makes false claims about Morgellons disease and COVID-19 tests

CLAIM: Nasal swabs used for COVID-19 tests contain Morgellons disease fibers that are being put in your brain when you are tested for the virus.

THE FACTS: Since the pandemic was declared last year, posts online have falsely speculated that COVID-19 tests are being used to inject Americans with microchips, nanoparticles and now disease "fibers" into the brain. A recent TikTok video making the false claim was viewed more than 1.7 million times and liked more than 120,000 times. In the TikTok post, a woman plays a video on her computer screen that was first shared on Facebook in January. The woman claims the video shows a nurse who took apart a swab used in COVID-19 tests and found that the fibers were moving on their own because they were fibers

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from Morgellons disease. Morgellons sufferers say the condition appears as a crawling sensation on their skin or skin sores with fibers. She goes on to say that people administering COVID-19 tests are putting Morgellons fibers on patients' brains. "They are not going to want you to see this," she says after the video plays. But the claims in the video are false. The claim that the fibers from the COVID-19 test swab appear to be moving are undermined by the fact that the entire video shakes, suggesting the camera was moving. The swabs shown in the video are CLASSIQSwabs, which contain rayon, polyester and cotton. There is no evidence of disease particles in those swabs, nor is there COVID research that indicates there is any truth to this video, said Neysa Ernst, nurse manager in the department of medicine at Johns Hopkins Hospital. "This video is a fake," said Dr. Aaron E. Glatt, fellow and spokesperson for the Infection Diseases Society of America. Furthermore, the video makes false claims about Morgellons disease, which some medical studies have shown is an unproven condition. Glatt described the condition as a neuropsychiatric disorder because patients are suffering symptoms that have no cause. "There is no proof to it whatsoever that it is caused by an infectious disease," Glatt said about Morgellons disease. "It is not a disease by an organism or anything that is moving." Dr. Stephen R. Feldman, professor of dermatology at Wake Forest School of Medicine, said of the video: "Nothing makes any scientific sense about what they are suggesting." The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conducted a four-year study that found that Morgellons disease is similar to delusional infestation, where people believe their body is infested with organisms. Delusional infestation is often treated with therapy. Laboratory analysis of the fibers found from people complaining of Morgellons disease were determined to be from cotton.

— Beatrice Dupuy

Photo of people praying over golden Trump statue is fabricated

CLAIM: Photo shows six people praying over a golden idol of former President Donald Trump.

THE FACTS: While numerous attendees of this year's Conservative Political Action Conference in Orlando, Florida, posed for selfies with a 6-foot-tall golden statue of Trump, a viral photo of faith leaders praying over the statue was fabricated. Social media users on Monday were widely sharing the faked image, presenting it as alleged evidence that some Trump supporters had an extreme, cult-like devotion to the former president. "This is literally the creepiest thing I've ever seen and we should be very, very, VERY concerned," read one Facebook post with the image. "Literally praying before a false idol," another Facebook user wrote. However, a reverse-image search reveals that the image was created from a photo of faith leaders and pastor Paula White praying over President Donald Trump during an "Evangelicals for Trump" campaign event in Miami in January 2020. The fake image replaced Trump in the photo with the statue of his likeness, which is real and appeared at CPAC over the weekend. According to the website of the artist, Tommy Zegan, it is a "humorous caricature" of the former president titled "We the People," or "Trump and His Magic Wand." Zegan did not respond to a request for comment. Although this photo was fake, a video showing a man kneeling before the statue at CPAC was real.

— Ali Swenson

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Myanmar cracked down brutally on protests. It may get worse.

By VICTORIA MILKO and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Myanmar's security forces have killed scores of demonstrators protesting a coup. The new junta has jailed journalists — and anyone else capable of exposing the violence. It has done away with even limited legal protections. The outside world has responded so far with tough words, a smattering of sanctions and little else.

The slide from a nascent democracy to yet another coup, as rapid as it has been brutal, opens up a

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grim possibility: As bad as it looks in Myanmar now, if the country's long history of violent military rule is any guide, things could get worse.

Protesters have continued to fill the streets despite violence that left 38 people dead one day this week — though they have turned out in smaller numbers than the weeks right after the Feb. 1 coup. They have used smartphones to capture the brutality. Recent videos show security forces shooting a person at point-blank range and chasing down and savagely beating demonstrators.

The military, however, has the clear upper hand, with sophisticated weapons, a large network of spies, the ability to cut telecoms, and decades of fighting experience from civil conflicts in the country's borderlands.

"We are at a crisis point," Bill Richardson, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations with long experience working with Myanmar, told The Associated Press, pointing to the arrests of journalists, including AP's Thein Zaw, and the indiscriminate killing of protesters. "The international community needs to respond much more forcefully, or this situation will degenerate into complete anarchy and violence."

So, will it?

Governments around the world, including the United States, have condemned the coup, which reversed years of slow progress toward democracy. Before that opening up began, Myanmar had languished under a strict military rule for five decades that led to international isolation and crippling sanctions. As the generals loosened their grip in the past decade, the international community lifted most sanctions and poured in investment.

Despite the flurry of recent global criticism, however, there's not much hope that pressure from outside will change the course of events inside the country. For one thing, coordinated action at the U.N. — like a global arms embargo that the world body's independent expert on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews, called for — is unlikely. Russia and China, Myanmar's most powerful supporter, are still selling arms to the military — and they each have a permanent seat on the U.N. Security Council and thus could veto any such measure. The Security Council will take up the crisis in Myanmar on Friday.

Myanmar's neighbors, the countries that make up the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, are generally loath to "interfere" in one another's affairs — a policy that means they are unlikely to do anything more than call for talks between the junta and the ousted government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

That leaves sanctions from the United States and other Western countries. Washington imposed sanctions on Myanmar's top military leaders after the Feb. 1 coup. More pressure came after a U.N. envoy said security forces killed 38 people on Wednesday. Britain imposed sanctions on three generals and six members of the junta in response to the coup and the crackdown. The European Union is drawing up measures to respond to the coup.

But even tough sanctions from those countries are unlikely to yield anything, though they may weigh heavily on ordinary people. Myanmar has ridden out decades of such measures before, and the military is already talking about plans for "self-reliance."

U.N. special envoy for Myanmar, Christine Schraner Burgener, told reporters this week that she had warned the military that tough sanctions may be coming — and the response was that the generals knew how to "walk with only a few friends."

"Myanmar's history suggests the military will use ever increasing brutality and violence in an attempt to put down the protest movement," said Ronan Lee, a visiting scholar at the International State Crime Initiative at Queen Mary University of London. "In the past, the military has been prepared to murder thousands to quell civil unrest or to meet its goals."

In the face of such determination, some observers question how long the protest movement can last.

"While it may appear at first glance to be a battle of wills, the military has a substantial resource advantage over the average protester and has demonstrated that it's willing to engage in extreme acts of violence and brutality to try to force compliance," said John Lichtefeld, vice president of The Asia Group, a consulting firm.

It may get much worse, he said. The military "is an organization with tremendous institutional pride, and it's possible that hardliners within the military who have been pushing for a more aggressive response are

beginning to gain influence.”

The military has also gotten away with past abuse. In 2017 the army slaughtered thousands of minority Rohingya Muslims in massacres that U.N. officials have said bear the “hallmarks of genocide” with few consequences so far.

In a sign of how limited the options are to influence the junta, when asked what more Britain and other countries could do, Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab responded: “We will continue to look at how we hold individual members of the regime to account.”

Myanmar’s military is banking on the world going no further than “harsh words, some economic sanctions and travel bans,” Lee, the scholar at Queen Mary University, said. In order to ensure that, it may exercise some restraint in its crackdown — to try to keep violence below a threshold that would compel action — or at least keep it hidden.

This is why, he said, authorities are targeting journalists. It suggests they “understand the value of international exposure to the protesters and are aggressively working to limit it.”

Milko reported from Jakarta, Indonesia. Associated Press writers Jill Lawless in London, Jamey Keaton in Geneva, Frances D’Emilio in Rome and Raf Casert in Brussels contributed to this report.

Israel postpones drive to vaccinate Palestinian workers

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Friday postponed plans to vaccinate Palestinians who work inside the country and its West Bank settlements until further notice.

COGAT, the Israeli military agency coordinating day-to-day affairs with the Palestinian Authority, attributed the postponement to “administrative delays,” adding that a new start date for the campaign would be determined later.

The vaccination program was supposed to begin on Sunday at West Bank crossings into Israel and at Israeli industrial zones.

Such inoculations could have assuaged criticism of Israel for not sharing significant amounts of its vaccine stockpiles with Palestinians living under Israeli control in the West Bank and those in the Gaza Strip — even as Israel succeeded in launching one of the fastest vaccine rollouts in the world.

Israel had also announced plans to share surplus vaccines with far-flung allies in Africa, Europe and Latin America, but the decision was frozen by legal questions. On Thursday, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with leaders of Denmark and Austria said the three nations would join forces in the fight against COVID-19 with an investment in research and roll-out of vaccines.

Some 100,000 Palestinian laborers from the West Bank work in Israel. The PA had acquired enough dose for only 6,000 of its people — meaning the vast majority of the estimated 7 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip will remain unvaccinated.

The West Bank was placed under new restrictive measures last week to curb the surge in infections.

Pope urges Iraq to embrace its Christians on historic visit

By NICOLE WINFIELD and SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

BAGHDAD (AP) — Pope Francis opened the first-ever papal visit to Iraq on Friday with a plea for the country to protect its centuries-old diversity, urging Muslims to embrace their Christian neighbors as a precious resource and asking the embattled Christian community -- “though small like a mustard seed” -- to persevere.

Francis brushed aside the coronavirus pandemic and security concerns to resume his globe-trotting papacy after a yearlong hiatus spent under COVID-19 lockdown in Vatican City. His primary aim over the weekend is to encourage Iraq’s dwindling Christian population, which was violently persecuted by the Islamic State group and still faces discrimination by the Muslim majority, to stay and help rebuild the country devastated by wars and strife.

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"Only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family," Francis told Iraqi authorities in his welcoming address, "will we be able to begin an effective process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world."

The 84-year-old pope donned a facemask during the flight from Rome and throughout all his protocol visits, as did his hosts. But the masks came off when the leaders sat down to talk, and social distancing and other health measures appeared lax at the airport and on the streets of Baghdad, despite the country's worsening COVID-19 outbreak.

The government is eager to show off the relative stability it has achieved after the defeat of the IS "caliphate." Nonetheless, security measures were tight.

Francis, who relishes plunging into crowds and likes to travel in an open-sided popemobile, was transported around Baghdad in an armored black BMWi750, flanked by rows of motorcycle police. It was believed to be the first time Francis had used a bulletproof car — both to protect him and keep crowds from forming.

Iraqis, though, seemed keen to welcome Francis and the global attention his visit brought. Some lined the road to cheer his motorcade. Banners and posters in central Baghdad depicted Francis with the slogan "We are all Brothers."

Some hoping to get close were sorely disappointed by the heavy security cordons.

"It was my great wish to meet the pope and pray for my sick daughter and pray for her to be healed. But this wish was not fulfilled," said Raad William Georges, a 52-year-old father of three who said he was turned away when he tried to see Francis during his visit to Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral in the Karada neighborhood.

"This opportunity will not be repeated," he said ruefully. "I will try tomorrow, I know it will not happen, but I will try."

Francis told reporters aboard the papal plane that he was happy to be resuming his travels again and said it was particularly symbolic that his first trip was to Iraq, the traditional birthplace of Abraham, revered by Muslims, Christians and Jews.

"This is an emblematic journey," he said. "It is also a duty to a land tormented by many years."

Francis was visibly limping throughout the afternoon in a sign his sciatica nerve pain, which has flared and forced him to cancel events recently, was possibly bothering him. He nearly tripped as he climbed up the steps to the cathedral and an aide had to steady him.

At a pomp-filled gathering with President Barham Salih at a palace inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, Francis said Christians and other minorities in Iraq deserve the same rights and protections as the Shiite Muslim majority.

"The religious, cultural and ethnic diversity that has been a hallmark of Iraqi society for millennia is a precious resource on which to draw, not an obstacle to eliminate," he said. "Iraq today is called to show everyone, especially in the Middle East, that diversity, instead of giving rise to conflict, should lead to harmonious cooperation in the life of society."

Salih, a member of Iraq's ethnic Kurdish minority, echoed his call.

"The East cannot be imagined without Christians," Salih said. "The continued migration of Christians from the countries of the east will have dire consequences for the ability of the people from the same region to live together."

The Iraq visit is in keeping with Francis' long-standing effort to improve relations with the Muslim world, which has accelerated in recent years with his friendship with a leading Sunni cleric, Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb. It will reach a new high with his meeting Saturday with Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, a figure revered in Iraq and beyond.

In Iraq, the pontiff bringing his call for tolerance to a country rich in ethnic and religious diversity but deeply traumatized by hatreds. Since the 2003 U.S. invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, it has seen vicious sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunni Muslims, clashes and tensions between Arabs and Kurds, and militant atrocities against minorities like Christians and Yazidis.

The few Christians who remain harbor a lingering mistrust of their Muslim neighbors and face discrimi-

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nation that long predated IS.

Iraq's Christians, whose presence here goes back nearly to the time of Christ, belong to a number of rites and denominations, with the Chaldean Catholic the largest, along with Syriac Catholics, Assyrians and several Orthodox churches. They once constituted a sizeable minority in Iraq, estimated at around 1.4 million. But their numbers began to fall amid the post-2003 turmoil when Sunni militants often targeted Christians.

They received a further blow when IS in 2014 swept through northern Iraq, including traditionally Christian towns across the Nineveh plains. Their extremist version of Islam forced residents to flee to the neighboring Kurdish region or further afield.

Few have returned — estimates suggest there are fewer than 300,000 Christians still in Iraq and many of those remain displaced from their homes. Those who did go back found homes and churches destroyed. Many feel intimidated by Shiite militias controlling some areas.

There are practical struggles, as well. Many Iraqi Christians cannot find work and blame discriminatory practices in the public sector, Iraq's largest employer. Public jobs have been mostly controlled by Shiite political elites.

For the pope, who has often traveled to places where Christians are a persecuted minority, Iraq's beleaguered Christians are the epitome of the "martyred church" that he has admired ever since he was a young Jesuit seeking to be a missionary in Asia.

At Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral, Francis prayed and honored the victims of one of the worst massacres of Christians, the 2010 attack on the cathedral by Islamic militants that left 58 people dead.

Speaking to congregants, he urged Christians to persevere in Iraq to ensure that its Catholic community, "though small like a mustard seed, continues to enrich the life of society as a whole" — using an image found in both the Bible and Quran.

On Sunday, Francis will honor the dead in a Mosul square surrounded by shells of destroyed churches and meet with the small Christian community that returned to the town of Qaraqosh, where he will bless their church that was vandalized and used as a firing range by IS.

Iraq is seeing a new spike in coronavirus infections, with most new cases traced to the highly contagious variant first identified in Britain. Francis, the Vatican delegation and travelling media have been vaccinated; most Iraqis have not, raising questions about the potential for the trip to fuel infections.

The Vatican and Iraqi authorities have downplayed the threat and insisted that social distancing, crowd control and other health care measures will be enforced.

To some degree they were, but that didn't diminish the happiness of ordinary Iraqis — Christians and Muslims alike — that Francis had come to their home.

"We cannot express our joy because this for sure is a historic event which we will keep remembering," said Rafif Issa. "All Iraqis are happy, not just the Christians. We hope it will be a blessed day for us and for all the Iraqi people."

AP journalist Qassim Abdul-Zahra contributed.

Africa welcomes COVAX doses but warns against 'selfishness'

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — Urgent calls for COVID-19 vaccine fairness rang through African countries on Friday as more welcomed or rolled out doses from the global COVAX initiative, with officials acutely aware their continent needs much more.

"Rich countries should not be so selfish," Pontiano Kaleebu, head of the Uganda Virus Research Institute, said as his country received its first doses. "It's a concern, and everyone is talking about it."

The East African nation of 45 million people was receiving under 1 million vaccine doses — 864,000. It's the first batch of a total of 18 million COVAX doses for Uganda, but when all will arrive is not known.

That number is "not going to do much," said Monica Musenero, an epidemiologist and presidential adviser, though she added that "we can advocate for more vaccines, but we should also appreciate what we've got."

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The foundation of Nobel Peace Prize winner and former South African archbishop Desmond Tutu and his wife, Leah, on Friday issued a statement saying that "more must be done, immediately, to ensure lower-income countries have faster access to COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostic tools and treatments."

The foundation said a small number of rich countries hold the majority of vaccine doses.

"This is not a time for selfishness," its statement said, and it noted growing calls for a waiver of intellectual property rights to COVID-19 vaccines to allow for faster, wider production — a proposal opposed by the European Union and countries including the United States, Britain and Canada.

While the COVAX initiative was created to ensure that low- and middle-income countries receive COVID-19 vaccines, it has faced delays and limited supply.

Even as the World Health Organization's Africa chief, Matshidiso Moeti, on Thursday noted that almost 10 million COVAX doses had been delivered to 11 African countries, she could not resist adding, "finally."

She added, "we expect about half of African countries will receive COVAX deliveries in the coming week and that most countries will have vaccination programs under way by end of March."

Mali on Friday received 396,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine. And Nigeria began its vaccination campaign after Africa's most populous country received almost 4 million doses.

In Kenya, vaccinations with 1 million doses began a day after President Uhuru Kenyatta declared that "vaccine nationalism is something that we should all abhor."

The president encouraged citizens of East Africa's economic hub to keep up virus prevention measures, even as many Kenyans are weary of a curfew they say is hurting the economy. "This pandemic has inconvenienced our livelihoods, but while we can recover this, we cannot get back lost lives," Kenyatta said.

Kenyan authorities also pushed back against vaccine skepticism, a growing concern, after the local Catholic Doctors Association called on its 300 members to refuse the shots, calling them "totally unnecessary." The group's stance differs from that of the church.

"I can assure the safety of this vaccine as it has gone through a rigorous process," said Patrick Amoth, the director general at the ministry of health and the first to receive a shot. "As you can see, I have taken it. No one should fear."

The goal in Africa is that countries will be able to vaccinate 20% of their population with the COVAX doses by the end of this year — far from the goal of 60% or more to achieve so-called "herd immunity" when enough people are protected through infection or vaccination to make it difficult for a virus to continue to spread.

"You expect that at this point we should be getting the initial 9 million doses from COVAX" instead of less than 1 million, said Misaki Wayengera, head of a technical committee advising Uganda's response. He worries that delays in vaccine procurement mean several months could pass before some people receive the second required shot.

Uganda aims to vaccinate 20% of its population with doses from COVAX, with 40% vaccinated via government and private-sector funding.

The COVAX delays have pushed other African countries to seek more doses elsewhere, including via bilateral deals that can be unfavorable.

Uganda has announced plans to buy 18 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine from the Serum Institute of India, but the country faces cash shortages.

And it is not clear how much the doses will cost. Some critics have been appalled by lower-income countries paying more per COVID-19 vaccine dose than rich ones.

One WHO official in Africa, Richard Mihigo, on Thursday discouraged African countries from bilateral deals because of the risk of paying a high price. The African Union instead is pursuing bulk deals for the continent, but that also has faced delays.

Tom Odula in Nairobi, Kenya contributed.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at:
<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>
<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

House impeachment manager sues Trump, allies over riot

By COLLEEN LONG and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rep. Eric Swalwell, who served as a House manager in Donald Trump's last impeachment trial, filed a lawsuit Friday against the former president, his son, lawyer and a Republican congressman whose actions he charges led to January's insurrection.

The California Democrat's suit, filed in federal court in Washington, alleges a conspiracy to violate civil rights, along with negligence, inciting a riot and inflicting emotional distress. It follows a similar suit filed by Rep. Bennie Thompson last month in an attempt to hold the former president accountable in some way for his actions Jan. 6, following his Senate acquittal.

Swalwell charges that Trump, his son Donald Jr., along with former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani and Republican Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama, had made "false and incendiary allegations of fraud and theft, and in direct response to the Defendant's express calls for violence at the rally, a violent mob attacked the U.S. Capitol."

The lawsuit spells out in detail how the Trumps, Giuliani and Brooks spread baseless claims of election fraud, both before and after the 2020 presidential election was declared, and charges that they helped to spin up the thousands of rioters before they stormed the Capitol. Five people died as a result of the violence on Jan. 6, including a U.S. Capitol Police officer.

Trump's spokesman Jason Miller called Swalwell a "low-life" with "no credibility."

"Now, after failing miserably with two impeachment hoaxes," Swalwell is attacking "our greatest President with yet another witch hunt," Miller said in a statement. "It's a disgrace that a compromised Member of Congress like Swalwell still sits on the House Intelligence Committee."

Brooks said the lawsuit was frivolous and "a meritless ploy."

"I make no apologies whatsoever for fighting for accurate and honest elections," he said, adding he wore the lawsuit "like a badge of courage."

The lawsuit, through Trump's own words, accuses the former president of inciting the riot, using much of the same playbook used by Swalwell and others during Trump's impeachment trial — that his lies over the election results stirred supporters into the false belief the 2020 election had been stolen, that he egged the angry mob on through his rally speech and that he did nothing when faced with the images of throngs of his supporters smashing windows at the U.S. Capitol and sending lawmakers fleeing.

"Those with knowledge claimed that during this moment of national horror, Trump was 'delighted' and was 'confused about why other people on his team weren't as excited as he was.' Others described Trump as 'borderline enthusiastic' about the unfolding violence," according to the suit.

Unlike Thompson's lawsuit — filed against Trump, Giuliani and some far-right extremist groups whose members are alleged to have participated in the insurrection — Swalwell's did not specify whether he was filing in his personal or official capacity, which would require additional approvals from the House and involve House attorneys.

Both lawsuits cite a federal civil rights law that was enacted to counter the Ku Klux Klan's intimidation of officials. Swalwell's attorney Philip Andonian praised Thompson's lawsuit, filed under a Reconstruction-era law called the Ku Klux Klan Act, and said they were behind it 100%, but saw the need for this one, too.

"We see ourselves as having a different angle to this, holding Trump accountable for the incitement, the disinformation," he said.

Presidents are historically afforded broad immunity from lawsuits for actions they take in their role as commander in chief. But the lawsuit, like the one by Thompson, was brought against Trump in his personal, not official, capacity.

Swalwell also describes in detail being trapped in the House chamber with many other members of Congress as plainclothes Capitol Police officers barricaded the doors and tried to fend off the mob at gunpoint.

"Fearing for their lives, the Plaintiff and others masked their identities as members of Congress, texted loved ones in case the worst happened, and took shelter throughout the Capitol complex," the lawsuit reads.

The lawsuit alleges that Brooks "conspired with the other Defendants to undermine the election results by alleging, without evidence, that the election had been rigged and by pressuring elected officials, courts, and ultimately Congress to reject the results." It notes that he spoke at a rally supporting Trump at the Ellipse, near the White House, shortly before thousands of pro-Trump rioters made their way to the Capitol and overwhelmed police officers to shove their way inside the building.

The suit seeks unspecified damages, and Swalwell also wants a court to order all of the defendants to provide written notice to him a week before they plan to have a rally in Washington that would draw more than 50 people.

"Unable to accept defeat, Donald Trump waged an all out war on a peaceful transition of power," Swalwell said in a statement. "He lied to his followers again and again claiming the election was stolen from them, filed a mountain of frivolous lawsuits — nearly all of which failed, tried to intimidate election officials, and finally called upon his supporters to descend on Washington D.C. to 'stop the steal.'"

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

Trump State Department aide charged with assault at Capitol

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

A former State Department aide in President Donald Trump's administration has been charged with participating in the deadly siege at the Capitol and assaulting officers who were trying to guard the building, court papers show.

It's the first known case to be brought against a Trump appointee in the Jan. 6 insurrection, which led to Trump's historic second impeachment.

Federico Klein, who also worked for Trump's 2016 campaign, was seen wearing a "Make America Great Again" hat amid the throng of people in a tunnel trying to force their way into the Capitol on Jan. 6, the papers say. Klein pushed his way toward the doors, where, authorities say, "he physically and verbally engaged" with officers trying to keep the mob back.

Klein was seen on camera violently shoving a riot shield into an officer and inciting the crowd as it tried to storm past the police line, shouting, "We need fresh people, we need fresh people," according to the charging documents.

As the mob struggled with police in the tunnel, Klein pushed the riot shield, which had been stolen from an officer, in between the Capitol doors, preventing police from closing them, authorities say. Eventually, an officer used chemical spray, forcing Klein to move somewhere else, officials say.

Klein was arrested Thursday in Virginia and faces charges including obstructing Congress and assaulting officers using a dangerous weapon.

He was in custody on Friday and couldn't be reached for comment. It was not immediately clear whether he had an attorney who could comment on his behalf. A Trump spokesman said he had no comment.

At least five people, including a Capitol Police officer, died as a result of the violence, and two other officers killed themselves after. More than 300 people have been charged with federal crimes.

Klein became a staff assistant in the State Department shortly after Trump's inauguration in 2017, according to a financial disclosure report. He held a top secret security clearance that was renewed in 2019, according to the court papers. He resigned from his position on Jan. 19, the day before Joe Biden was sworn in as president, authorities said.

One of Klein's State Department coworkers helped authorities identify him, officials said.

A Department of State diplomatic security special agent interviewed by an FBI agent said that Klein worked in the Office of Brazilian and Southern Cone Affairs, according to the court papers. The Department of State official identified Klein in photos and video shown by the FBI, officials said.

The Latest: Pope honors massacre victims at Baghdad church

BAGHDAD (AP) — The Latest on Pope Francis' historic visit to Iraq to deliver a message of hope to the country's dwindling Christian community following years of unrest and amid a devastating pandemic (all times local):

5:50

Pope Francis is honoring the victims of one of Iraq's most brutal massacres of Christians by Islamic militants by saying their deaths are a reminder that violence is incompatible with authentic religious teaching.

Francis was welcomed joyfully with song and a yellow and white flower necklace as he entered Our Lady of Salvation Cathedral, hours after he arrived in Iraq for the first-ever papal visit.

Francis was praying at the church, where on Oct. 31, 2010 extremists gunned down worshippers in an attack that left 58 people dead. Forty-eight were Catholic, and the Vatican is considering their beatification as "martyrs" in the first step to possible sainthood. Photos of the 48 adorned the altar where Francis spoke.

Meeting with Iraqi priests, seminarians and religious sisters, Francis said: "Their deaths are a powerful reminder that inciting war, hateful attitudes, violence or the shedding of blood are incompatible with authentic religious teaching."

Francis noted Iraqi Christians had suffered during years of war, economic hardships and persecution. But he urged them to persevere "in order to ensure that Iraq's Catholic community, though small like a mustard seed, continues to enrich the life of society as a whole."

An aide helped the 84-year-old pope up the steps to the cathedral as it appeared his sciatica nerve pain was making it difficult and painful to walk. Outside, hundreds of Iraqi security personnel wearing black uniforms and carrying light weapons maintained a tight cordon, preventing people from wandering around nearby.

4:45 p.m.

Pope Francis is urging Iraqis to value their religious minorities and consider them a "precious resource" to protect, not an obstacle to eliminate as he opened the first-ever papal visit to Iraq with a plea for tolerance and fraternity.

Francis told President Barham Salih and other Iraqi authorities gathered at the Baghdad palace inside the heavily fortified Green Zone that no one should be considered a second-class citizen. He said Iraqis of all faiths deserve to have the same rights and protections as the Shiite Muslim majority.

He said: "Only if we learn to look beyond our differences and see each other as members of the same human family will we be able to begin an effective process of rebuilding and leave to future generations a better, more just and more humane world."

Despite the coronavirus pandemic and security concerns, Francis came to Iraq to try to encourage its dwindling number of Christians, who were violently persecuted by the Islamic State group and face continued discrimination by the Shiite Muslim majority. He is urging them to remain and help rebuild the country after years of war.

4:30 p.m.

Iraq's president has welcomed the first-ever papal visit to Iraq as an opportunity to improve Christian-Muslim relations, saying Pope Francis' decision to go ahead with the tour despite the coronavirus pandemic and security concerns had "doubled" its value.

President Barham Salih spoke Friday at a meeting at the presidential palace with Francis that was attended by other top Iraqi officials shortly after the pontiff's arrival.

Salih lamented that the Middle East was facing a "crisis of coexistence" owing to regional tensions and extremism. He stressed the importance of peaceful coexistence and the preservation of Iraq's nearly 2,000-year-old Christian community.

He said "the East cannot be imagined without Christians," and that their continued migration will have "dire consequences." He expressed support for the establishment of an Abraham House for Religious Dialogue, named for the shared patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

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Iraq was home to nearly 1.5 million Christians before the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein and plunged the country into chaos. Church officials say only a few hundred thousand remain, following years of instability and militant attacks.

3:30 p.m.

Pope Francis arrived inside the heavily fortified Green Zone, the seat of Iraq's government, to meet with President Barham Salih and other officials.

Horsemen carrying both Iraqi and Vatican flags escorted his motorcade inside the Green Zone, which houses key government buildings and foreign embassies.

Salih greeted Francis outside the presidential palace. Both men wore masks as a band played the Vatican and Iraqi national anthems.

Francis, who has been vaccinated along with his entourage, shook hands with several Iraqi officials.

Public health experts have expressed concern about the first-ever papal visit to Iraq, fearing it could accelerate the country's already worsening coronavirus outbreak. The Vatican said strict health measures would be taken, but many in the crowds greeting Francis were not wearing masks or keeping their distance from others.

2:45 p.m.

Pope Francis rolled down the window of his car to wave at some of the hundreds of people who gathered to greet him as his motorcade rolled through Iraq's capital.

Crowds waving Iraqi and Vatican flags gathered along Baghdad's airport road — the scene of regular attacks in the years after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion — to greet the pontiff on the first-ever papal visit to the country. Iraqi authorities hope to highlight the improved security situation after declaring victory against the Islamic State group in 2017.

The Pope, who arrived earlier on Friday, was on his way to the presidential palace where he is to meet with President Barham Salih and other officials. Francis hopes to deliver a message of peace and hope to Iraq's Christian community, which has dwindled in recent years of war and unrest.

The Vatican had defended going ahead with the trip despite Iraq's worsening coronavirus outbreak, saying social distancing and other health measures would be enforced. But many in the airport and along the motorcade route were packed together and not wearing masks.

2 p.m.

Pope Francis has arrived in Iraq on a visit to rally the country's dwindling Christian community after decades of war.

The pontiff's landmark visit has been months in the making and is the first papal visit to Iraq, one that eluded his predecessors. He brings a message of peace and coexistence to comfort the country's deep-rooted Christian minority, many of whom fled the country in the successive conflicts that followed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

His trip will begin in Baghdad, where he is due to deliver speeches and celebrate Mass in the capital's churches, and cover the holy city of Najaf, the plains of Ur in Nassiriyah province, as well as Mosul and Irbil in the north.

The Alitalia flight, with both Vatican and Iraqi flags, carrying the pope and his delegation landed just before 2 p.m. (1100GMT). A red carpet was rolled out on the tarmac in Baghdad's international airport.

Hundreds of people gathered along the airport road with hopes of catching a glimpse of the pope's convoy.

Iraq was estimated to have nearly 1.5 million Christians prior to the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled dictator Saddam Hussein. Now, church officials estimate only a few hundred thousand, or even fewer, remain with Iraq's borders.

11:30 a.m.

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Dozens of Christians are gathering at the Church of the Virgin Mary in Baghdad hours before Pope Francis was due to land in Iraq for a first papal visit to the war-weary country.

Men, women and children gathered inside the church early in the morning. Many were not wearing masks and sat close to each other. One man tapped his feet impatiently, as they waited to be shuttled to the airport in buses.

The papal visit has raised alarm among public health experts, who fear large crowds will inevitably gather to see the pope.

Iraq is confronting a worsening coronavirus outbreak driven by a more infectious strain that first appeared in the U.K.

Old vs. new school: the best rap album debate at the Grammys

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Lil Baby, Roddy Ricch, Megan Thee Stallion and DaBaby have blazed the Billboard charts, but Grammy voters gave the young hip-hop stars the cold shoulder in the best rap album category, instead, surprisingly nominating the genre's more matured voices like Nas and Jay Electronica.

Some were baffled by the academy's decision to push through some lesser-known projects in the category instead of the popular chart-topping albums that have dominated streaming services with record numbers. Several hip-hop artists weighed in and called out the Grammys, including Drake, Killer Mike and 50 Cent, who said the awards show is "out of touch."

In addition to Nas' "King's Disease" and Jay Electronica's "A Written Testimony," this year's best rap album nominees include Freddie Gibbs & the Alchemist's "Alfredo," "The Allegory" by Royce da 5'9" and D Smoke's "Black Habits." The rappers are 35-and-up with Nas — who has never won a Grammy — being the oldest at 47.

Each of the nominated albums were reviewed as solid pieces of work, but some rap enthusiasts saw a clear divide between the seasoned rappers and the new generation of twentysomething hip-hop performers — sometimes referred to as "mumble rappers" who focus more on quick word play with heavy bass melodies instead of lyricism.

"First thing that came to my mind was rigged," said Twysted Genius, who produced four songs on Lil Baby's sophomore album "My Turn," including the platinum-selling singles "Sum 2 Prove" and "Emotionally Scarred."

Billboard named "My Turn" the second-most successful album of 2020, besting projects by pop stars like Taylor Swift, Harry Styles and The Weeknd, and easily out-selling the nominees for best rap album. Roddy Ricch's "Please Excuse Me for Being Antisocial" ranked third on Billboard's list and has won honors at the American Music Awards, BET Awards and Apple Music Awards..

Twysted Genius, 28, declined to offer names but the producer said he'd never heard of some of the rap album nominees. He struggled to understand why hit singles like Roddy Ricch's "The Box," DaBaby's "Rockstar" and Pop Smoke's "Dior" were good enough to receive nominations for best rap song or best rap performance, but not their albums.

"It kind of blew me," Twysted Genius said. "I've seen how big Lil Baby has become in the world. I, at least, knew that he would be up for a Grammy for best album. It's just mind-blowing."

The producer's thoughts come a year after former Recording Academy CEO Deborah Dugan claimed that the awards are rigged and filled with conflicts of interests in the nomination process. She was ousted after reporting sexual harassment and pay disparities.

Despite the criticism, Royce da 5'9" believes the Grammys are heading in the right direction under the leadership of Harvey Mason jr., the academy's interim president and CEO. Last year, the producer-songwriter took on the role with aspirations to diversify the academy's staff, membership and outreach to the music community.

"They are doing a good job," said Royce da 5'9", who is nominated for his first Grammy in a decade. "(Harvey is) a good addition to the Grammys. I think just adding more Black people to the board in dif-

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ferent states would really help. I think that's key."

Royce da 5'9" said he believes the best rap album nominee perfectly reflects the genre, though he added that Lil Baby and Roddy Ricch's albums should compete for the Grammys' top prize — album of the year — instead of best rap album.

"I think if they break it down like that, that would be great," the 43-year-old said. "Everybody in the rap album category, I (support) them."

D Smoke — who has been lauded for his Kendrick Lamar-like rap style — believes the rap album nomination opens a "conversation of what our culture needs and wants." The rapper said the mature voices in the category speak to a broader audience on a "deeper level," but he adds that the younger generation of rappers need to be heard as well to push the genre forward.

"Their music is successful for a reason. I hope they are not using this as a measuring stick of how successful their year was," said 35-year-old D Smoke, who rose to fame in 2019 as the winner of Netflix's music reality TV series "Rhythm + Flow."

"I'm sure their bank accounts are telling another story," continued D Smoke, who is also nominated for best new artist along with Megan Thee Stallion and Chika. "I don't knock them, I just know the quality of music and the people nominated are different — I'm not saying better or worse."

Freddie Gibbs thinks there should be no reason to complain. The rapper said he's waited to become Grammy-nominated after years of believing he was overlooked as an artist who made waves in the underground scene.

"We can all complain about not getting recognition, but we all live blessed lives doing something that we love to do," said Gibbs, 38. "It's not too much to really complain about. When you're making music on this level, you're rich. So, whatever."

He added: "I've never been nominated for (anything), but I've never complained about it either. When it's your time — it's your time."

The Grammys will air from Los Angeles on March 14.

Biden signals support to replace war power authority

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday signaled support to replace decades-old authorizations for the use of military force in the Middle East, a little more than a week after he relied on the authorizations to carry out a retaliatory airstrike against Iranian-backed militia in eastern Syria.

The Biden administration announced its position after a bipartisan bill was introduced earlier this week that would repeal the 1991 and 2002 authorizations for the wars in Iraq that presidents from both parties have relied on for legal justification to carry out strikes in the region.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden was committed to working with Congress to "ensure that the authorizations for the use of military force currently on the books are replaced with a narrow and specific framework that will ensure we can protect Americans from terrorist threats while ending the forever wars."

Biden spurred bipartisan backlash last week after he ordered the strikes against facilities used by Kataib Hezbollah. The strikes were in response to a rocket attack earlier in February targeting U.S. troops and civilian personnel in northern Iraq without first seeking congressional approval. The U.S. has blamed the militia for numerous attacks targeting U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq in the past.

Sen. Tim Kaine, a lead sponsor of the bill, said the reliance on the decades old authorizations for use of military force "serve no operational purpose, keep us on permanent war footing, and undermine the sovereignty of Iraq."

"Last week's airstrikes in Syria show that the Executive Branch, regardless of party, will continue to stretch its war powers," said Kaine, a Virginia Democrat.

Administration officials defended the airstrikes as legal and appropriate, saying they took out facilities that housed valuable "capabilities" used by Iranian-backed militia groups to attack American and allied

forces in Iraq.

But several leading members of Congress, including members in Biden's own party, denounced the strikes — the first military action he has authorized. Kaine and others argued offensive military action without congressional approval is not constitutional absent extraordinary circumstances.

The White House signaled support to replace the authorizations even as it warned the U.S. may consider military action following a rocket attack earlier this week that hit an air base in western Iraq where American and coalition troops are housed. A U.S. contractor died after at least 10 rockets slammed into the base early Wednesday.

"If we assess further response is warranted, we will take action again in a manner and time of our choosing," Psaki said.

Officers maced, trampled: Docs expose depth of Jan. 6 chaos

By MARTHA MENDOZA and JULIET LINDERMAN Associated Press

Two firefighters loaned to Washington for the day were the only medics on the Capitol steps Jan. 6, trying to triage injured officers as they watched the angry mob swell and attack police working to protect Congress.

Law enforcement agents were "being pulled into the crowd and trampled, assaulted with scaffolding materials, and/or bear maced by protesters," wrote Arlington County firefighter Taylor Blunt in an after-action memo. Some couldn't walk, and had to be dragged to safety.

Even the attackers sought medical help, and Blunt and his colleague Nathan Waterfall treated those who were passing out or had been hit. But some "feigned illness to remain behind police lines," Blunt wrote.

The memo is one of hundreds of emails, texts, photos and documents obtained by The Associated Press. Taken together, the materials shed new light on the sprawling patchwork of law enforcement agencies that tried to stop the siege and the lack of coordination and inadequate planning that stymied their efforts.

The AP obtained the materials through 35 Freedom of Information Act requests to law enforcement agencies that responded to the Capitol insurrection.

"We were among the first mutual aid teams to arrive and were critical to begin the process of driving protestors off the Capitol," wrote Blunt.

Five people died in the attack, including a police officer. Two other officers killed themselves after. There were hundreds of injuries and more than 300 people, including members of extremist groups Proud Boys and Oathkeepers, have been charged with federal crimes. Federal agents are still investigating and hundreds more suspects are at large. Justice Department officials have said they may charge some with sedition.

The Arlington firefighters ended up at the Capitol because, two days earlier, Washington Metro Police Chief Robert J. Contee had formally asked the Arlington County Police Department, along with police departments from Montgomery and Prince George's counties in Maryland, and Arlington County in Virginia, to lend them some officers trained for protests and riots, according to the documents.

Arlington's acting police chief Andy Penn said they'd send help for the "planned and unplanned first amendment activities," according to emails.

At the time, the Capitol Police department had issued a security assessment warning that militia members, white supremacists and other extremists were heading to Washington to target Congress in what they saw as a "last stand" to support President Donald Trump.

Federal agencies not responding were also preparing for potential violence. On Jan. 4, U.S. Customs and Border Protection said staff should try to telework for the week.

Two days later, it was 3:39 p.m. when Penn emailed county officials that he had "just been notified" that Arlington officers were responding to the Capitol attack and had been absorbed into the overall response led by Capitol Police.

That was almost 90 minutes after the mob first busted into the Capitol and more than an hour after the medics began treating injured police on the steps.

Members of Congress, who were locked down or rushed to safety that day as the attackers approached

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the House and Senate chambers, are holding hearings this week to get to the bottom of what went wrong with the law enforcement response that allowed the crowd to enter and ransack the Capitol building.

One question they are looking to answer is why the Capitol Police didn't have more help on hand early in the day, before the rally near the White House devolved into insurrection at the Capitol.

The emails obtained by AP — hastily written and including misspellings and incomplete sentences — show that nearby police agencies were alerted two days earlier that there might be trouble and were prepared to help.

The night before the breach, after hours of rallies and speeches across the city, Federal Protective Service officers, who protect federal property, had noticed protesters trying to camp out on federal property and were "being vigilant for any suspicious activity," according to an email from the agency.

They were expecting large crowds, and by the next morning they were monitoring them closely.

At 9:45 a.m. a protective service liaison to the Capitol Police wrote, "Good morning Sir, what I have is the Ellipse is permitted for 30k but they expecting for there to be much more. Freedom Plaza original permit was 5k and it was raised to 30k, the permit outside Sylvan Theater is permitted for 15K."

The agents were particularly interested in the right wing extremist group, Proud Boys. They noted how many were in Washington, that they were staying at a downtown hotel, and what they planned.

In a briefing at noon on that day, just as Trump was encouraging supporters to "fight like hell," a Federal Protective Service email said about 300 Proud Boys were at the U.S. Capitol.

"No incidents at this time," the email said. But then it warned, "The Proud Boys are threatening to shut down the water system in the downtown area, which includes government facilities."

The email noted there was a man in a tree with what appeared to be a rifle near the Ellipse, and about 25,000 people were around the White House, including some who were hiding bags in bushes outside the building.

"Together we stand!" the officer signed off.

About 20 minutes later, a protective service officer whose name was redacted sent an email that read, "POTUS is encouraging the protesters to march to capitol grounds and continue protesting there." POTUS stands for president of the United States.

In a series of emails that followed, protective service officers messages offered a blow-by-blow account of the march to the Capitol from the rally where Trump spoke.

"Protesters moving towards the capitol down Pennsylvania, Constitution and Madison in numbers estimated 10-15,000," read an email sent at 12:28 p.m.

The officers tracked them across the city and at 12:57 p.m. a message read, "Large group just breached the USCP barricade on the West Front," referring to the Capitol Police barriers on west side of the Capitol Building.

About a half hour later, they reported several police officers were injured, and then at 2:14 a message screamed "CAPITOL HAS BEEN BREACHED. PROTESTERS ARE NOW INSIDE THE CAPITOL." Two minutes later they reported the House and Senate chambers were being locked down.

"Shots fired 2nd floor house side inside the capitol," read a message at 2:45, probably the moment when a Capitol Police officer fatally shot Ashli Babbitt, a Trump supporter who tried to hurl herself through a broken interior window into the Speaker's Lobby just outside the House chamber where lawmakers were taking cover.

Intelligence agents used Facebook to monitor dozens of protests planned for Jan. 6 and beyond, according to emails. These rallies had names such as the "Yugest Trump Parade of All (45 Exclamation Points)!", "Fight for President Trump and Your Rights," and "Wild Protest for Donald Trump (The Republican Mandate)." Some events were permitted, others were not.

Officers in the Virginia suburb of Vienna were already on edge two days before the Capitol breach after a video of a small, half-hour protest at the home of Republican Sen. Josh Hawley — a Trump supporter — attracted more than 100,000 pageviews.

"They claim they are coming back tonight," Vienna Deputy Chief Daniel Janickey said in Jan. 5 emails

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to Fairfax County officials.

"WE will have some officers out there tonight monitoring in case (the) group shows up," Janickey wrote. "Hawley and his staff have hired armed private security for (the) next 48 hours."

Those protesters didn't return. But within 24 hours, Fairfax County, Virginia, officials realized their Washington counterparts had much more trouble on their hands.

At 3:10 p.m. on Jan. 6, Fairfax County's deputy county executive, Dave Rohrer, emailed more than 25 county officials: "Subject: Awareness - Police Mutual Aid Request U.S. Capitol Police."

That was about two hours after the first windows had been broken.

The U.S. Capitol had been breached, he said.

"It is obvious to me based on my experience and knowledge that an emergency exists," said Rohrer. He said he had authorized the Fairfax County Police Department to send Civil Disturbance Unit officers and commanders "to assist gaining control for safety reasons."

He added that they were monitoring the deployment closely. The redacted email refers to an early June episode when police from several jurisdictions used tear gas to violently break up a peaceful and legal protest in Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House.

On Jan. 6, Rohrer said he reminded commanders on the scene "that they are to cease operations if at any point they determine they are being used in an inappropriate, unethical, illegal manner, or are not under a competent authority... Maintaining life safety, regaining and establishing a safe perimeter, etc., should be the initial focus."

Just 12 minutes later, Rohrer had an update: They were suspending any fire, rescue or emergency service transportation to hospitals in the District of Columbia and "upgrading response and command structure."

For hours, Fairfax County's police monitored Metro stations and acted as back up to Washington police, according to the emails. They were also checking with hotels where some in the mob were staying. Rohrer noted that many had been staying in Alexandria and Arlington..

The hotels "reported some problems with crowds and disorderly conduct the past few nights," he said.

That evening, at 8:31 p.m., a Federal Protective Service memo alerted "there is a report of an armed militia group headed to dc from west Virginia. Query ongoing."

As midnight approached, Rohrer emailed again. Although the Capitol was quiet, "Intel will be monitored throughout the night and, unfortunately, PD and US Capitol Police are investigating several threats targeting residences of Capitol VIPs or family members received late tonight."

By Jan. 7, Fairfax County Police Department Major Shawn Bennett was bristling at former Capitol Police Chief Terry Gainer's critique of the police response.

"Gainer throws a lot of shame but he doesn't offer any answers to what 'specifically' he would have done differently to keep the initial group from breaking down the barriers," emailed Bennett.

Also on Jan. 7, Fairfax County Executive Bryan Hill was thanking his staff.

"Our Police Department's Civil Disturbance Unit answered the call yesterday, and as much as I hated to activate you, it was an activation to preserve our republic," he wrote. "I am hopeful we will never again see what we witnessed yesterday, but I am most hopeful that yesterday's events will galvanize our county and our nation as we do our best to vaccinate, maintain calm and create a sense of unity."

Associated Press writers Colleen Long in Washington and Garance Burke in San Francisco contributed to this story.

Contact AP's Global Investigations team at investigative@ap.org.

This story has been corrected to show Terry Gainer is a former Capitol Police chief, not the current Capitol Police chief.

China sets growth target 'over 6%,' tightening HK control

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — China's No. 2 leader set a healthy economic growth target Friday and vowed to make the nation self-reliant in technology amid tension with the U.S. and Europe over trade and human rights. Another official announced plans to tighten control over Hong Kong by reducing the public's role in government.

The ruling Communist Party aims for growth of "over 6%" as the world's second-largest economy rebounds from the coronavirus, Premier Li Keqiang said in a speech to the National People's Congress, China's ceremonial legislature. About 3,000 delegates gathered for its annual meeting, the year's highest-profile political event, under intense security and anti-virus controls. It has been shortened from two weeks to one because of the pandemic.

The party is shifting back to its longer-term goal of becoming a global competitor in telecoms, electric cars and other profitable technology. That is inflaming trade tension with Washington and Europe, which complain Beijing's tactics violate its market-opening commitments and hurt foreign competitors.

Li promised progress in reining in climate-changing carbon emissions, a step toward keeping President Xi Jinping's pledge last year to become carbon-neutral by 2060. But he avoided aggressive targets that might weigh on economic growth.

The NPC meeting focuses on domestic issues but is overshadowed by geopolitics as Xi's government pursues more assertive trade and strategic policies and faces criticism over its treatment of Hong Kong and ethnic minorities. The ruling party has doubled down on crushing dissent as Xi tries to cement his image as a history-making leader reclaiming China's rightful place as a global power.

An NPC deputy chairman, Wang Chen, said a Hong Kong Election Committee dominated by businesspeople and other pro-Beijing figures will be given a bigger role in choosing the territory's legislature. Wang said the Election Committee would choose a "relatively large" share of the now 70-member Legislative Council.

That came after a spokesman for the legislature on Thursday said Beijing wants "patriots ruling Hong Kong," fueling fears opposition voices will be shut out of the political process.

Li, the premier, said Beijing wants to "safeguard national security" in Hong Kong.

Also Friday, the government announced a 6.8% rise in military spending to 1.4 trillion yuan (\$217 billion) amid territorial disputes with India and other neighbors and ambitions to match the United States and Russia in missile, stealth fighter and other weapons technology.

That is less than the double-digit increases of earlier years but a marked rise in real terms when inflation is close to zero. Foreign analysts say total military spending is up to 40% more than the reported figure, the world's second-highest after the United States.

China became the only major economy to grow last year, eking out a multi-decade-low 2.3% expansion after shutting down industries to fight the virus. Growth accelerated to 6.5% over a year earlier in the final quarter of 2020 while the United States, Europe and Japan struggled with renewed virus outbreaks.

The 6% target is higher than expectations for the United States and other major economies but less than the 7%-8% forecasters expected Li to announce.

That suggests Beijing is "shifting focus from quantity to quality of economic growth," said Chaoping Zhu of J.P. Morgan Asset Management in a report.

Beijing might allocate resources to environmental protection and other initiatives "to boost China's long-term growth potential," Zhu said.

Li vowed to "work faster" to develop tech capabilities seen by Communist leaders as a path to prosperity, strategic autonomy and global influence. Those plans are threatened by conflicts with Washington over technology and security that prompted then-U.S. President Donald Trump to slap sanctions on companies including telecom equipment giant Huawei, China's first global tech brand.

The ruling party's latest five-year development blueprint says efforts to make China a self-reliant "technology power" are this year's top economic priority.

The party sees "technological self-reliance as a strategic support for national development," Li said.

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Li promised to pursue "green development" following Xi's pledge last year to ensure China's carbon emissions peak by 2030 and to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. That will require sharp increases in clean energy in an economy that gets 60% of its power from coal and is the world's biggest source of climate-changing industrial pollution.

He promised to reduce carbon emissions per unit of economic output by 18% over the next five years. That is in line with the previous five-year period's goal, but environmentalists say Beijing needs to do more. "It defers some of the most important questions to the future," said Li Shuo of Greenpeace.

Li repeated official promises to promote "peaceful growth of relations" with Taiwan but announced no initiatives toward the self-ruled island that split with the mainland in 1949 after a civil war.

Beijing claims Taiwan as its territory and has threatened to invade if it tries to make its de facto independence official. Li said the mainland will "resolutely deter" any activity "seeking Taiwan independence."

This year's legislative meeting is being held mostly by video links to keep Chinese leaders, delegates and reporters separate as an anti-virus measure.

The ruling party earlier announced it achieved its goal of doubling economic output from 2010 levels by last year, which required annual growth of 7%. Xi has talked about doubling output again by 2035, which would imply annual growth of about 5%, still among the highest for any major economy.

As Xi has sought to cement his image, China has doubled down on repression of dissent in ways that could stifle innovation.

The ruling party's desire for the prosperity produced by free-market competition also clashes with its insistence on playing a dominant role in the economy and strategic goals of reducing dependence on other countries.

Beijing will promote "domestic circulation," Li said, a reference to official pressure on industries to use more Chinese-supplied components and technology and rely less on foreign inputs, even if that increases costs.

That emphasis on self-reliance and the conflict with Washington has fueled fears the world might split into separate U.S., Chinese and other industrial spheres with incompatible technologies, less competition and higher costs.

The goal of "decoupling them from foreign technology" is "more likely to harm productivity than help it," Mark Williams of Capital Economics said in a report this week.

AP writers Huizhong Wu in Taipei, Taiwan, and Zen Soo in Hong Kong contributed to this report.

This story corrects the current size of the Hong Kong legislature to 70 members, not 35.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, March 6, the 65th day of 2021. There are 300 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 6, 1857, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, ruled 7-2 that Scott, a slave, was not an American citizen and therefore could not sue for his freedom in federal court.

On this date:

In 1475, Italian artist and poet Michelangelo was born in Caprese (kah-PRAY'-say) in the Republic of Florence.

In 1836, the Alamo in San Antonio, Texas, fell as Mexican forces led by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna stormed the fortress after a 13-day siege; the battle claimed the lives of all the Texan defenders, nearly 200 strong, including William Travis, James Bowie and Davy Crockett.

In 1853, Verdi's opera "La Traviata" premiered in Venice, Italy.

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In 1944, U.S. heavy bombers staged the first full-scale American raid on Berlin during World War II.

In 1962, what became known as the Ash Wednesday Storm began pounding the mid-Atlantic coast; over a three-day period, the storm resulted in 40 deaths and caused more than \$200 million in property damage.

In 1964, heavyweight boxing champion Cassius Clay officially changed his name to Muhammad Ali.

In 1970, a bomb being built inside a Greenwich Village townhouse by the radical Weathermen accidentally went off, destroying the house and killing three group members.

In 1973, Nobel Prize-winning author Pearl S. Buck, 80, died in Danby, Vermont.

In 1981, Walter Cronkite signed off for the last time as principal anchorman of "The CBS Evening News."

In 1987, the first "Lethal Weapon" movie, starring Mel Gibson and Danny Glover, was released by Warner Bros.

In 2002, Independent Counsel Robert Ray issued his final report in which he wrote that former President Bill Clinton could have been indicted and probably would have been convicted in the scandal involving former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

In 2015, during a town hall at South Carolina's Benedict College, President Barack Obama said racial discrimination by police in Ferguson, Missouri, was "oppressive and abusive" as he called for criminal justice reform as part of the modern struggle for civil rights.

Ten years ago: The space shuttle and space station crews hugged goodbye after more than a week together, but saved their most heartfelt farewell for Discovery, which was on its final voyage after nearly three decades.

Five years ago: Former first lady Nancy Reagan died in Los Angeles at age 94. Former President Jimmy Carter announced he no longer needed treatment for cancer, less than seven months after revealing he'd been diagnosed with melanoma that spread to his brain. Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders tangled aggressively in a Democratic presidential debate in Flint, Michigan, over trade, Wall Street influence and more.

One year ago: The number of people infected by the coronavirus worldwide reached 100,000, with more than 3,400 dead. President Donald Trump signed a \$8.3 billion measure to help tackle the coronavirus outbreak; it included money for vaccines, tests and potential treatments. Vice President Mike Pence said 21 people on a cruise ship being held off San Francisco had tested positive for the coronavirus. The president announced a major staff overhaul, replacing acting chief of staff Mick Mulvaney with Republican Rep. Mark Meadows. The family of jazz pianist McCoy Tyner announced that Tyner, the last surviving member of the John Coltrane Quartet, had died at the age of 81. Former hockey star Henri Richard, who won a record 11 Stanley Cups with the Montreal Canadiens, died at 84.

Today's Birthdays: Former FBI and CIA director William Webster is 97. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan is 95. Dancer-actor Carmen de Lavallade is 90. Former Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova is 84. Former Sen. Christopher "Kit" Bond, R-Mo., is 82. Actor-writer Joanna Miles is 81. Actor Ben Murphy is 79. Opera singer Dame Kiri Te Kanawa is 77. Rock musician Hugh Grundy (The Zombies) is 76. Rock singer-musician David Gilmour (Pink Floyd) is 75. Actor Anna Maria Horsford is 74. Actor-director Rob Reiner is 74. Singer Kiki Dee is 74. TV consumer reporter John Stossel is 74. Composer-lyricist Stephen Schwartz is 73. Rock singer-musician Phil Alvin (The Blasters) is 68. Sports correspondent Armen Keteyian is 68. Actor Tom Arnold is 62. Actor D.L. Hughley is 58. Country songwriter Skip Ewing is 57. Actor Shuler Hensley is 54. Actor Connie Britton is 54. Actor Moira Kelly is 53. Actor Amy Pietz is 52. Rock musician Chris Broderick (Megadeth) is 51. Basketball Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal is 49. Country singer Trent Willmon is 48. Rapper Beanie Sigel is 47. Rapper Bubba Sparxxx is 44. Actor Shaun Evans is 41. Rock musician Chris Tomson (Vampire Weekend) is 37. MLB pitcher Jake Arrieta is 35. Actor Eli Marienthal is 35. Actor Jimmy Galeota is 35. Rapper/producer Tyler, the Creator is 30. Actor Dillon Freasier is 25. Actor Savannah Stehlin is 25. Actor Millicent Simmonds (Film: "Wonderstruck") is 18.