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Groton's Angel Tree is now available at Lori's Pharmacy and Next Level Nutrition



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated November 18, 2020; 3:39 PM

JK	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Staff	Total
0	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4	7

A positive case is considered active for a minimum of ten days after onset of symptoms. It is important to note that not all reported cases have been in school or school activities during their infectious periods (48 hours prior to onset of symptoms).



Karyn Babcock has been busy sprucing up the skate that hangs outside the skating house. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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American Standard

Walk-In Tubs

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50th Anniversary

Bill and Jana Duncan will be celebrating their 50th Wedding Anniversary on November 28th.

We won't be able to host a gathering due to the pandemic, but we would love for you to send Mom and Dad a card wishing them a Happy 50th!!

**The Duncans
PO Box 564, Groton, SD 57445**

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Awesome Oranges!

Grove
Navels

Petite Red
Navels

Tangerines

Petite Navel

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\$19.99*

Special limited
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SAVE \$15!
Reg. Price ~~\$34.99~~

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Only \$19.99* (reg. \$34.99), plus \$5.99 shipping & handling. Satisfaction completely guaranteed. This gift ships in December at the peak of freshness. Order by Dec. 18, 2020 for GUARANTEED Christmas delivery. AZ, CA, TX & LA order by Dec. 15, 2020.

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*Plus \$5.99 handling per pack to the 48 contiguous states. Limited time offer, good while supplies last. Not valid with any other offer. Limit 5 boxes per customer.



The ladder and the safety railing was attached to the roof of the water tower on Wednesday. (Photo by Paul Kosel)

Service Notice: Robert Pray, Sr.

Mass of Christian Burial for Robert Pray, Sr., 96, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Saturday, November 21st at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church. Father Tom Hartman will officiate. Burial with military honors will follow in Union Cemetery, Groton under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Visitation will be held at the funeral home on Friday from 5-7 p.m. with a wake service at 7:00 p.m.

Bob passed away November 17, 2020 at Avera St. Lukes Hospital, Aberdeen.

The funeral service will be livestreamed at GDILIVE.COM.

Palisades State Park Reduces Bridge Weight Limits

PIERRE, S.D. – After a routine structural inspection of the iconic 1908 bridge located at Palisades State Park near Garretson, the gross vehicle weight capacity of the bridge has been reduced to 3-tons. This new rating will exclude traditional passenger vehicle traffic over the bridge.

“The Department of Game, Fish, and Parks (GFP) will put vehicle size restrictions in place, effective immediately,” said district park supervisor, Luke Dreckman. “This is very unfortunate news, but the decision was made with public safety in mind.”

Barriers will be placed at the bridge entrance with an opening of 66 inches to limit the size of vehicles crossing the bridge.

“This will limit use to UTVs, motorcycles, or other similar sized motor vehicles,” says Dreckman.

The bridge will remain open to pedestrian traffic, providing access to the popular King and Queen quartzite rock outcroppings on the west side of Split Rock Creek.

Park staff are working to provide temporary parking while incorporating long-term parking in the park expansion plans to replace parking lost due to the bridge closure.

GFP anticipates groundbreaking on a multi-year, phased park expansion south of the existing park in 2021. The park expansion will include additional opportunities for visitors including camping, canoe/kayak launches, trails, additional access to Split Rock Creek, and infrastructure to enhance outdoor recreational opportunities. GFP is planning visitor access to some of these improvements in 2023.

Questions can be directed to Palisades State Park by calling 605.594.3824 or by emailing parkinfo@state.sd.us

Northern State will hold winter commencement on Nov. 21

ABERDEEN, S.D. – Northern State University will hold winter commencement at 10 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 21.

The ceremony, which takes place in the Barnett Center, is open to all 2020 NSU graduates.

After assessing the current increase in cases in Brown County with area health officials and government agencies, it was determined that only graduating students, along with faculty and select staff, will be allowed inside the Barnett Center for the ceremony. Attendees will be required to wear masks, and participants will be appropriately spaced throughout the facility.

For parents, friends and loved ones, the event will be live streamed through the NSU Facebook page and locally through cable channel 12.

Locals graduating are:

Paxton Steen, Bristol (B.A. History) (Candidate for Cum Laude)

Dallas Johnson, Frederick (B.A. English)

Jasmine Schaller, Groton (B.S. Human Performance and Fitness) (Candidate for Magna Cum Laude)

Alyssa Sippel, Groton (B.S. Accounting)

Jessica Podoll, Westport (B.S. Biology)

Legalization votes bring worries of increased youth marijuana use, but evidence remains murky

Nick Lowrey

South Dakota News Watch



Maureen Murray

"It is concerning because legalization makes people think that using marijuana is safe and doesn't have consequences, and teens don't need to hear that."

**-- Maureen Murray,
Youth and Family Services in Rapid City**

One major concern of South Dakotans who opposed legalization of medical and recreational marijuana was that it could lead to an epidemic of youth use of the drug.

Drug-abuse prevention advocates and law enforcement officials said greater availability of marijuana would almost certainly lead to an increase of use among children and teens whose brains are still developing.

Despite their concerns, however, research conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health has not found an increase in the regular use of marijuana among youths in Oregon, Washington or Colorado, the states where marijuana legalization has been most extensively studied.

Colorado, for example, has a lower overall youth marijuana use rate than the U.S. as a whole. And in all three states, as in the rest of the U.S., there has been a long-term decline in the regular use of marijuana among youths.

Those statistics provide little comfort, however, for those in South Dakota who are on the front lines of the battle to prevent drug abuse by youth.

Marijuana use is associated with poorer performance in school, increased risk for mental health disorders and other negative behavior outcomes for youth, said Maureen Murray, director of mental health and prevention services at Youth and Family Services in Rapid City.

"It is concerning because legalization makes people think that using marijuana is safe and doesn't have consequences, and teens don't need to hear that," Murray

said. "We have very significant concerns with teens."

South Dakota voters approved statewide ballots measures on Nov. 3 that have set the stage for legalization of both medicinal and recreational marijuana in July. Marijuana would be legal only for those 21 and over. South Dakota was one of four new states to legalize recreational marijuana on Nov. 3, bringing the total to 15. Medical marijuana will soon be legal in 36 states.

Regular marijuana use is defined in surveys as respondents having used the drug at least once during the 30 days before they took the survey. Research has shown that regular and heavy use of marijuana among teens carries the most risk for long-term negative effects.

National surveys such as the biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey have shown small declines in the number of youths regularly using both marijuana and alcohol over the past decade. South Dakota has generally followed the national trend, with surveys showing a decline in regular youth marijuana use from 17.8% of youths surveyed in 2011 compared to only 16.5% in 2019.

Colorado, where recreational marijuana has been legal since 2014, also has seen declines in youth marijuana use. From 2011 to 2019, the youth use rate dropped from 22% in 2011 to 20.1% in 2019. Preven-

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tion experts say national and state education programs and prevention efforts have played a big role in declines in youth marijuana use.

Concerns over marijuana legalization among the South Dakota drug-abuse prevention community range from worries over use by motorists to the potential for women to harm children by using marijuana while pregnant or breastfeeding, said Darcy Jensen, executive director of Prairie View Prevention Services. Jensen is a licensed addiction counselor and a leader of the Coalition for a Drug Free South Dakota.

Members of the coalition met Nov. 12 to begin planning a response to marijuana legalization, Jensen said. Though reform was badly needed in how marijuana and other drug use has been treated by the criminal justice system, full legalization of marijuana was not the best way to fix those problems and may lead to new issues, Jensen said.

"I don't know that this was a place that I would want South Dakota to be in, but we are, so we need to find ways to counter it, and continue to provide positive prevention education," Jensen said.

Legalizing marijuana causes new social and health problems, Jensen said, citing reports from Colorado showing that the number of traffic fatalities in which a driver tested positive for marijuana increased from 18% in 2013 to 32% in 2017.

Meanwhile, the rate of marijuana-related hospitalizations has risen sharply from an average of 1,440 per 100,000 hospitalizations annually from 2010 to 2013 to 3,517 last year. But perhaps most concerning, Jensen said, was that the number of suicide victims found to have marijuana in their bloodstreams increased.

A closer look at Colorado data reveals a nuanced, inconclusive picture of marijuana legalization. In 2018 the state Department of Public Safety published a comprehensive report on impacts of marijuana legalization. The report shows that while Colorado has seen an increase in its number of traffic fatalities, eight states with similar populations and traffic patterns that had not legalized marijuana also saw similar increases in traffic deaths. Pinning the rise in Colorado traffic deaths solely on marijuana legalization was not possible, the report said.

Furthermore, Colorado's rising number of marijuana-related hospitalizations might have been influenced by changes in how hospitals track diagnoses. The healthcare industry in 2015 updated the diagnosis codes used for billing, creating many new coding categories. More codes meant doctors had more options to indicate whether they believe a patient had been using marijuana prior to being hospitalized, the 2018 Colorado public safety report said.

Suicide rates in Colorado have increased less only slightly, from 19.7% in 2012 to 20.5% in 2016. The rate of Colorado suicide victims testing positive for marijuana has nearly doubled from 11.8% in 2012 to 22.3% in 2016. Nationally, about 22.4% of suicide victims tested positive for marijuana in 2016, data that includes states where marijuana is not legal, according

Regular youth marijuana use rates have declined in South Dakota, Colorado and the U.S.

	2011	2019
South Dakota	17.8%	16.5%
Colorado	22.0%	20.1%
United States	25.9%	22.5%

to a 2018 CDC report.

Still, experts studying youth marijuana use and the effects of marijuana on brain development say that South Dakota's drug-abuse prevention advocates are right to be concerned about legalization. While there does not appear to have been sharp increases in the number of children and teens using marijuana in states that have legalized, legalization remains a relatively new concept and longitudinal studies are few.

Data show increase in adult pot use

Little evidence exists to show that legalizing marijuana for medical purposes causes an increase in youth use of the drug. There also is little evidence, so far, that legalizing marijuana for recreational use leads to an increase in the overall number of children smoking or otherwise ingesting the drug. Instead, research shows adult use typically rises with legalization.

"Once medical cannabis laws or medical marijuana laws are enacted, we usually see increases in use in adults ages 26 and older. But we don't see any increases in use among adolescents, which is good," said Dr. Silvia Martins, director of the Substance Use Epidemiology Unit at Columbia University. "Regarding recreational legalization of cannabis, most of the research has shown that increases in use is mainly among adults."

A September 2019 report from the National Institutes of Health found that Colorado has seen no increase in the number of adolescents using marijuana since legalization for adults 21 and over in 2014. The biennial Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that in 2019, Colorado's estimated rate of youth marijuana use of 20.1% was lower than the national rate of 21.7%.

An October 2019 report from the CDC found that marijuana use among students in 10th and 12th grades in Washington state did not significantly change from the year 2000 to 2016. For students in 8th grade, the regular marijuana use rate fell by half, from 12% in 2000 to 6% in 2016. In Washington, legal sales of recreational marijuana began in 2014.

Still, researchers such as Martins caution that there has not been enough research into how legalizing recreational use of marijuana affects youth drug use to draw major conclusions.

At most, researchers have only had a few years of data to study, Martins said. Most of the data on population-wide youth marijuana use come from anonymous surveys of students administered in schools such as the Youth Risk Behaviors Survey. States conduct the survey in schools during odd-numbered years, and its results are reported to the CDC. Public health officials use the survey to monitor such things as drug and alcohol abuse among adolescents.

In Colorado, there have only been two Youth Risk Behavior Surveys conducted since legal sales of recreational marijuana began, one in 2017 and one in 2019.

Another potential factor in youth marijuana use is how children growing up watching their parents and other adults use marijuana will view the drug. Parents can have a strong influence on their children's choices, said Magdalena Cerda, director of the Center for Opioid Epidemiology and Policy at New York University's Grossman School of Medicine.

"Previous studies have found that if your parents use drugs, then the likelihood of you using drugs is go-



Opponents of legal marijuana in South Dakota remain concerned that youth use of the drug will increase with legalization in July, and say that any level of use by youths is worrisome. Photo: Stock image

ing to be higher," Cerda said. "Whether that is because you think it is more acceptable, or it is because drugs are more available to you, or because of something else entirely, is relatively unclear. But I would say that is a concern."

Another 10 years could pass before the normalizing effect of legalizing marijuana shows up in surveys of high school students, she said.

Researchers have identified some troubling trends among youths who regularly use marijuana. A few studies have found increases in Cannabis Use Disorder among youths who regularly use marijuana in states that have legalized recreational sales of the drug, Cerda said. Cannabis Use Disorder is generally diagnosed when someone can't quit using despite trying, starts having trouble at work or school or gives up social activities due to use of marijuana.

"That is obviously a concern because dependence on cannabis actually has an effect on your life, on your interactions with others and on your work," Cerda said. "Essentially, a cannabis addiction, particularly for adolescents, can have long-term effects."



While some research shows that youth marijuana use does not climb with legalization, experts say increased adult use is likely and can lead to increased use among the children of adult users. Photo: Stock image

Concerns remain over long-range impacts

Marijuana use has been associated with an increase in a person's risk for developing a mental health disorder, said J. Cobb Scott, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania Perelman School of Medicine. There also is evidence that using marijuana can lead to psychotic episodes in people who already have schizophrenia. Psychotic episodes can lead to involuntary hospitalization, homelessness or suicide, Scott said.

One significant risk of marijuana use is in youths and young adults who potentially are at risk of schizophrenia or depression, said Scott, who has spent years researching how marijuana use affects brain function and mental health.

But just because someone who has mental illness has a history of marijuana use doesn't mean the drug caused the illness, Scott said. Researchers have attempted to prove marijuana use causes mental illness but have had mixed results.

A 2019 study of how marijuana use contributed to the prevalence of psychosis in adults in Europe, published in the medical journal *The Lancet*, found that people using high potency marijuana every day were five times more likely to develop psychosis than people who didn't use the drug. But a 2016 study of data collected by the National Epidemiological Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions found no link between marijuana use and mental health disorders.

"There's evidence both ways right now," Scott said. "And what we don't have is a lot of epidemiological evidence. We have seen increased use of cannabis over the last 15 years or so, but we don't have the hugely increased rates of psychosis that you might expect if that relationship were really strongly causal."

Part of the difficulty in pinning down whether or not marijuana can cause psychosis is that most of the research into how marijuana affects people has been observational. Researchers have essentially had to wait for people to start using the drug on their own before marijuana's effect on them can be studied.

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J. Cobb Scott

"We know that the brain continues to develop through the teenage years and into the mid-20s, and we know that any psychoactive substance like cannabis can potentially affect brain development."

**-- J. Cobb Scott,
University of Pennsylvania**

Because researchers are not controlling who uses the drug or how much they're using, and are often not recording their subjects' medical histories or IQ levels before they start using marijuana, it can be hard to know for sure the significance of the drug's impacts.

Drawing conclusions from observational research requires large sample sizes being studied over several years, Scott said.

Some of the best evidence of marijuana's effect on brain development and mental health comes from a study conducted in New Zealand. In the study, researchers followed more than 1,000 people from the age of eight until they turned 38.

The New Zealand researchers found that subjects who developed an addiction to marijuana and began using it heavily before turning 18 and remained addicted to the drug for many years lost an average of six Intelligence Quotient points. People who started using marijuana as adults did not lose any IQ points, the study found.

An ongoing study being conducted by the U.S. National Institutes of Health, called the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development study, should give scientists a much better understanding of how marijuana affects young brains. The study will follow more 10,000 children aged 9 and 10 for a decade. Researchers will collect information on the children using brain scans, genetic and psychological tests, academic records and surveys. The study began in 2015.

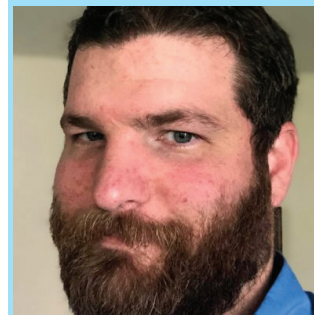
One area where there is strong evidence of marijuana's effects on people is cognitive function, or how well a person's brain works. Many studies have shown that frequent

cannabis use can impact cognitive functioning in specific areas, including memory and behavior, Scott said. Marijuana's cognitive effects, though, tend to wear off fairly quickly after someone quits using the drug.

"A couple of larger studies have shown that heavy use starting before the age of 18, and going on pretty consistently for a number of years, may cause long term changes in cognitive functioning. But that is a very small group of people," Scott said.

Still, South Dakotans should be concerned about marijuana use among teenagers, Scott said. There are too many unknowns about the drug's effect on brain development. Studies of rats, for example, have shown that marijuana can affect the development of important parts of the brain such as the hippocampus which plays a significant role in learning and memory.

"We know that the brain continues to develop through the teenage years and into the mid-20s," Scott said. "And we know that any psychoactive substance like cannabis can potentially affect brain development."



ABOUT NICK LOWREY

Nick Lowrey, based in Pierre, S.D., is an investigative staff reporter for South Dakota News Watch. A South Dakotan for more than 20 years, he is a former editor of the Pierre Capital Journal.

#269 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm getting tired of setting records, yet we keep setting them. Record new cases today: 178,900, a 1.6% increase in total cases from yesterday. We are now at 11,603,800 cases. Looks very much as though we could hit 12 million on Saturday, possibly Friday if things continue to go south. Either way, that's going to set another record. I had a look at the New York Times county-by-county heat map today, and I see a note on the map. It says, "On Nov. 18, the color scale on the hot spots map was expanded to reflect the new record rates of infection." In other words, they didn't have enough colors for the high end of the map, so they had to add some. The darkest color is now very close to black. Not sure what they're going to do next time they have to expand; I don't know of a color darker than black.

We also set another record for hospitalizations—eighth day in a row for that. We're up to 76,958, which is a 48% increase from two weeks ago. As hospitals and their staffs become more stretched, that's going to rise; no way around it. Trouble on every side.

Deaths spiked today too. Not yet a record since we have those sky-high spring numbers from back when we didn't know what we were doing in treating patients. I think we could get there though; the trajectory is not a good one. We're now over a quarter-million deaths with 250,319. There were 1967 deaths today, a 0.8% increase and the highest daily number we've seen since May 7, back in the bad old days. I think the bad old days are back.

You are aware by now, even if you're joining us here for the first time today, that public health officials have been urging us to bag the big family Thanksgiving dinner this year, to stay home only with members of our own households, in an effort not to contribute to the growth in cases of Covid-19 in this country. Well, I'm just going to set this fact here and tiptoe away because there simply isn't anything I can say about it that any of these people are going to hear: According to a recent survey by Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center, roughly 40 percent of us plan to attend a gathering with 10 or more people anyhow. Sigh.

A team at Columbia University has been modeling the pandemic and now estimates 3.6 million Americans are currently infected and shedding virus; that's more than 1% of us. You can use that to calculate your odds of running across one of those people as you move through your day. This represents a 34% increase over last week, which was 36% higher than the week before. Our trajectory, as you are already well aware, is an awful one. Epidemiologist Jeffrey Shaman, a member of this team, said, "It's bad; it's really, really bad. We're running into Thanksgiving now and that's only going to make it worse. We're going to go through a lot of people being infected between now and the end of the year, unfortunately."

Modelers at the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington have estimated that about 3.2 million people have been infected since Election Day, which is a whole lot more than the official count because it accounts for those who are not tested. This model projects continued increases every day for the next six weeks, estimating that nearly a quarter million people will become newly infected each day. Epidemiologist Ali Mikdad on the IHME team has been urging government action and action from the general public as well. He said, "When do you want to hit the brakes? That's the question. When you have a fire, you send the firetruck. You don't wait and say, 'Okay, let me wait a little bit, maybe that fire isn't going to spread that much.' . . . We already moved into exponential growth. Just hit the brakes as soon as you can."

This isn't like last spring. Instead of the Northeast and a few big cities, we have this thing out of control across the country with 49 states showing rising hospitalizations. We're better at treating, so the likelihood of dying is declining. And this isn't close to peaking; we're probably weeks away from that.

We know we're missing lots of cases; with test positivity rates like those we've been seeing, that's a certainty, and the number is quite large. We're missing people who have no symptoms yet—or who will never develop them at all. It also includes people with symptoms who choose not to be tested so they don't have to stay home from work or miss out on social events. Problem is these are people who are shedding virus. You're highly likely to run into them at the grocery store, at work, at school, at restaurants

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and bars and sporting events and concerts if you're foolish enough to be frequenting those last. With the resistance I see from both officials and citizens to taking action, I'm going to say you're not just likely, but certain to run into them—again and again and again—for weeks to come. Rising cases and deaths are not inevitable, but I'm betting we're not going to step off that path anytime soon. Take every precaution you can to keep yourself safe; it's not looking like others will be invested in that effort.

We have updated information from Pfizer and its partner BioNTech on their joint vaccine trial; they say they now have the required safety data to seek emergency use authorization (EUA) from the FDA and will do so within days; this is the authorization which will permit them to distribute the vaccine outside trials, that is, to the general population. Further study will continue and an additional application be made in the future for full licensure of the vaccine; our interest today is getting safe and effective vaccine into people as soon as possible, and it appears that day is coming closer.

Be aware no data have been released, so what we have is only the companies' report of their results; I will add, however, it would be extraordinarily imprudent of them to manipulate the numbers or seek to mislead with such high profile trials. I find it difficult to believe the numbers will be appreciably different when they are released, although, of course anything's possible, so we'll see. With that said, they are reporting they have accumulated 170 infections, eight of which occurred in vaccinated individuals; that computes to just over 95% effectiveness. There were ten severe cases, only one of which was in a vaccinated participant, which is an important marker as well; we have talked about the problem that would be presented by a vaccine which prevented mild infections for a high efficacy rate, but didn't do much to prevent the severe ones. This is a good indication we do not have a situation like that. They are also reporting over 94% effectiveness in adults over 65, but no breakdown of ages among those infected was provided, so it's difficult to sort out how that was determined. There was a comment that there were enough older adults among the placebo group who became infected to be confident "this vaccine appears to work in the higher-risk population."

No safety details were released, but they repeated their earlier assertion that no serious side effects have been reported. According to the report, the most common side effect seen, which appeared in about four percent of the participants, was fatigue after the second dose. Data collection will continue for two years; this very long follow-up is typical for vaccine trials because vaccines are administered to healthy people. The companies anticipate having around 20 million doses available for use in the US by year's end and over a billion doses worldwide in 2021.

So what about travel? I know, I know, I've been telling you to stay home. And I mean that: It's safer for you and it's safer for others and travel contributes generally to community spread across the country. But I also know some of you will insist on traveling anyhow, so let's consider our options.

First, for travel anywhere within a day's drive of home, drive. You can control the environment inside your car and control who gets into it with you. That is the safest unless you're planning to drive around to the neighbors' houses and pick up everyone's kids. That would be a bad plan, however short the trip. Don't do that. For meals on the road, use drive-up or at least take-out. This is not the time to go all gourmand on the available options. Do not eat indoors in a restaurant. If you are traveling in a location where outdoor dining is feasible this time of year, you can consider that, although it is somewhat higher risk than take-out that you eat in a park or in your car. You can limit your restroom breaks to a quick in and out, wearing a mask, of course. Take your disinfectant wipes with you for frequently-touched surfaces, and have plenty of hand sanitizer with you during the trip as well.

For longer distances, you're going to either have one or more nights on the road or fly. For information about overnights, see below. For air travel, the reviews are mixed. A recent report indicated air travel is remarkably safe; but that study was funded by the airline industry, so cannot be considered unbiased. Also, it relied on modeling, not on actual data from experiments or observational studies. Models are as good as the assumptions built into them, and while I'm no opponent of modeling, modeling paid for by someone with a vested interest in the outcome makes me nervous. Other studies with more disinterested funding sources have not been definitive, and none of them conclude either that you're signing your own

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death warrant or that flying is just a walk in the park.

I don't think airplanes are death traps; but flying does expose you to a whole lot of people in the course of a trip, people who you don't know where they've been. On the plus side, the ventilation systems in airplanes are extremely efficient with excellent filtration, which dilutes and removes particulates in the air rather quickly. But flying is picking up, so flights—and airports—are getting more crowded. More and more airlines have stopped blocking seats as demand has increased—and I get that; it's hard to pay the bills when you're flying half-empty airplanes around. The problem, of course, is that contact with more people is contact with more people. And the more people with whom you're in contact, the greater your risk, particularly at a time when in almost any part of the country, a fair proportion of those people are going to be carrying this virus around with them. Airport ventilation systems are not as good as those on the planes, and there's no way to avoid spending time in airports when you fly. There are security lines and poorly ventilated restrooms and crowded gate areas. And sitting within six feet of others on a plane, often for hours, is a higher-risk proposition than staying home. No ventilation system is a guarantee, especially against those sitting within a row or two of you in any direction. Remember that proximity and duration of exposure are two important factors in transmission.

I do, of course, recommend wearing a mask all of the time you are indoors (or close to others outdoors) during travel. If your day is long and you must eat and drink, make it quick to reduce your time spent without a mask. It's difficult to judge, but I think I'd opt to do my eating and drinking in the airport where I could position myself farther away from others, even if I had to take my food to an empty gate area and eat there. I would try very hard not to consume anything while on the plane itself; that's just too close to others for comfort. I also recommend carrying disinfectant wipes and going over every surface you might touch or lay your possessions on—arm rests, seat belt clips, tray tables, touch screens. And I would make liberal use of hand sanitizer throughout the flight as well. If possible, I would avoid airplane restrooms; they're so tiny that any virus in the air is quite likely to find you.

All or nearly all airlines are requiring everyone to wear masks, but not everyone complies. You can get banned from most airlines if you refuse to comply, but once a plane's in the air, that threat doesn't protect people on the flight with the outlaw while he's refusing. This is, unfortunately, not a rare problem; over 1000 people have already been banned in the US for refusing to wear a mask. This means you could find yourself on a flight and in proximity to a jerk who is not masked, and again, once you're airborne, you're stuck with him for the duration. Also, no mask is perfect; while universal mask-wearing substantially reduces transmission, no one thinks it is 100% effective.

Then, you're going to need a ride from the airport to wherever you're staying; that's another set of issues to factor in. I'm going to say the safest means of travel from the airport is to rent a car. You can fairly easily wipe down surfaces inside the car and open windows for ventilation in case there would be any lingering virus inside the rental; and once that's done, it becomes sort of a safe bubble where you can let down your guard. If that's not an option and you must use a ride sharing service, a traditional cab, or have a friend pick you up, you'll want to mask and ask your driver to mask as well. Hand sanitizer and wipes will be beneficial as well. Open windows at least a little to provide ventilation. I'd be fairly nervous in a shuttle bus or on public transit at this time. If you must use it, exercise as much caution as you are able with respect to proximity to others and hand hygiene. And, of course, wear a mask.

You will also need to consider where you're going to stay when you get wherever you're going (and also on the road if you're driving a long distance). There are no perfect options here. Staying at someone's home means admitting yourself to their world and exposing yourself to everyone with whom they've been in contact for the last two weeks. It's not enough to say to your friend or relative, "You're being safe, right?" Because it turns out everyone's definitions for "safe" are very different. I've even heard people throw the word, quarantine, around associated with various actual practices, some of them not very quarantine-like; for example, it is not quarantining yourself if you leave the bar early, only if you avoid the bar altogether. You have to get pretty granular with someone to understand the degree of risk you're taking on, and you're going to want to do that more carefully the higher your personal risk for severe infection is. Staying

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in a hotel carries some risk too. Most of that risk is in the common areas—lobby, hallways, dining areas, etc. Those are areas to avoid as much as possible and mask up when you're in them. The room itself is something of a crap shoot. You can call and inquire about reserving a room which has been empty for at least a day; that should be fairly easy to arrange until bookings pick up again. You will, of course, be relying on the place to be straight-up with you about that. If you are in a location where it's feasible given the weather, I'd suggest moving into your room, opening a window where possible and the room door, and letting fresh air move through to dilute any particles which might be wafting about. If the room's climate control permits it, I would set the system to outside air. I would also wipe down all frequently-touched surfaces—door knobs, light switches, TV remote, desktops, etc.—with disinfectant wipes. And if you're staying multiple days, put out a note for housekeeping to skip over your room; the fewer people you have breathing in your air space, the better.

Once again, you must consider your personal risk factors when deciding whether and how to travel. You should also consider community transmission in the area you are leaving and in your destination. Remember that, even if your personal risk is low and you never become ill, you can transmit infection to those who cannot afford to get sick. The more you indulge your own wishes for travel, the greater the chance you will harm the larger community. We have to start thinking of the wider ripples of our actions if we're ever going to bring this virus under control; so for every virus-denying, mask-refusing, science-ignoring person out there, we need more of those who believe the science to counterbalance the harm those folks are doing. It has to start somewhere.

No one knows where he came from. Apparently homeless, he just showed up on the playground of the mostly shut down Yardley Primary School in a London suburb last March, hanging out in a little shed and occasionally spotted on a rooftop. Actually, Yardley's principal heard him before he spotted him. The call of a peacock is pretty distinctive—and easily heard at some distance.

He's been hanging around the neighborhood ever since. The locals document sightings on Facebook, taking selfies with him (well in the background). They've dubbed him Kevin, and Kevin, the pandemic peacock, has been inspiring joy and comfort in hard times, a symbol of freedom at a time when people don't feel free and connection when people have felt isolated. The community has really come together over Kevin, worrying about whether he'd get scared and leave when the kids came back to school (spoiler: he did not), and how he'll survive the oncoming winter (according to peacock experts, he'll be fine, and the school is looking into providing shelter).

One resident declared, "Kevin belongs to everyone and no one." Wherever he escaped, they apparently haven't missed him; at least, they haven't cared enough to come and claim him. With his fame, it's hard to believe they haven't heard about the pandemic peacock. Meanwhile, photos have been shared showing Kevin atop a garage, Kevin hanging out on a lawn, Kevin refusing an offered banana (I have no idea at all what peacocks eat), Kevin spinning around in circles. Kevin has visited school, strolling into the building from time to time, once interrupting a spelling test by banging his beak on the door, demanding entrance, I guess. There was great angst when Kevin lost his long tail feathers this summer; but online research reassured the community that this happens at the end of each mating season, so no worries. This discovery led to expressions of concern that maybe Kevin needs a girlfriend, but no plans are underway to remedy any lack in his social life, at least not yet.

A peacock expert has identified Kevin as a 3-year-old Indian Blue and tells us peacocks are very sociable. That explains why, as one janitor said, Kevin looks sad when the children aren't around. One resident, grieving the loss of her uncle to Covid-19, spotted Kevin on her roof as she was contemplating her relationship with this man who had been like a father to her. She felt as if Kevin was a symbol to her, so she Googled the significance of a peacock and discovered seeing one "is to recognize your past, future and present."

Perhaps in recognition of that, the school, has decided to name its sports team the Yardley Peacocks and held a contest to design a new logo. The principal says, I like that in 30 years' time, people may ask why we have a peacock on our shirts. The story can live on about a pandemic peacock that brightened our days." I feel as though Kevin, the pandemic peacock, being the sociable sort, approves. I certainly do.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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Area COVID-19 Cases

	Nov. 18	Nov. 19
Minnesota	236,949	242,043
Nebraska	103,805	106,617
Montana	49,398	50,582
Colorado	172,044	176,694
Wyoming	21,047	21,750
North Dakota	65,967	67,230
South Dakota	67,284	68,671
United States	11,360,125	11,530,345
US Deaths	248,707	250,548

Minnesota	+5,931	+5,094
Nebraska	+2,204	+2,812
Montana	+1,371	+1,184
Colorado	+4,331	+4,650
Wyoming	+1,162	+703
North Dakota	+1,082	1,263
South Dakota	+1,006	+1,387
United States	+154,640	+170,220
US Deaths	+1,487	+1,841

	Nov. 11	Nov. 12	Nov. 13	Nov. 14	Nov. 15	Nov. 16	Nov. 17
Minnesota	189,681	194,570	201,795	207,339	213,582	223,581	231,018
Nebraska	87,733	89,942	92,553	94,922	96,834	98,161	101,601
Montana	41,151	42,070	43,031	44,244	45,886	47,158	48,027
Colorado	138,427	142,042	147,599	154,038	159,234	163,417	167,713
Wyoming	16,442	16,518	17,442	18,243	18,726	19,298	19,885
North Dakota	56,342	57,373	59,173	60,602	62,872	63,796	64,885
South Dakota	57,334	58,696	60,716	62,327	64,182	65,381	66,278
United States	10,258,090	10,402,273	10,557,451	10,746,996	10,905,597	11,038,312	11,205,485
US Deaths	239,695	241,808	242,436	244,366	245,614	246,224	247,220

Minnesota	+4,893	+4,889	+7,225	+5,554	+6,243	+9,999	+7,437
Nebraska	+2,182	+2,209	+2,611	+2,369	+1,912	+1,327	+3,440
Montana	+1,098	+919	+961	+1,213	+1,642	+1,272	+869
Colorado	+3,890	+3,615	+5,557	+6,439	+5,196	+4,183	+4,296
Wyoming	+1,131	+76	+924	+801	+483	+572	+587
North Dakota	+894	+1,031	+1,801	+1,429	+2,270	+924	1,089
South Dakota	+1,024	+1,362	+2,019	+1,611	+1,855	+1,199	+897
United States	+147,538	+144,183	+155,178	+189,545	+158,601	+132,715	+167,173
US Deaths	+1,444	+2,113	+628	+1,930	+1,248	+610	+996

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November 18th COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

No more easy days - today has some really ugly numbers. The ICU beds being used for COVID-19 in South Dakota increased from 31 percent yesterday to 48 percent today. The available ICU beds dropped from 36 percent to 18 percent. A new category was created today (listed on South Dakota's numbers below) includes Staffed Adult and Pediatric beds which is at 66 percent capacity of both COVID-19 and Non-Covid-19 patients.

South Dakota recorded 30 deaths today: 17 in the 80+ age group, 11 in their 70s and 2 in their 60s. There were 14 females and 16 males.

Deaths by county: Bon Homme-1, Brookings-1, Butte-1, Codington-1, Custer-1, Davison-2, Gregory-2, Hughes-1, Kingsbury-1, Lawrence-4, Lincoln-2, Lyman-1, Minnehaha-4, Oglala Lakota-4, Pennington-1, Turner-1 and Union 1.

Glacial Lakes hospital beds being occupied by COVID-19 patients as well as Minnehaha and Pennington counties: Walworth: 3 (-1) Occupied Beds; Potter: 2 (-0) Occupied Beds; Hughes: 14 (+0) Occupied Beds, 3 (+1) ICU Beds, 0 (-0) Ventilation; Hand: 7 (+3) Occupied Beds; Faulk: 4 (+0) Occupied Beds; Edmunds: 2 (+1) Occupied Bed; Brown: 38 (+4) Occupied Beds, 5 (+2) ICU, 0 (-1) Ventilation; Spink: 3 (-0) Occu-

piated Beds; Day: 0 (-2) Occupied Beds; Marshall: 0 (-0) Occupied Beds; Grant: 4 (+0) Occupied Beds; Codington: 19 (-4) Occupied Beds, 5 (+1) ICU, 2 (+1) Ventilation; None (some counties have no hospitals): Clark, Hyde, Stanley, Sully, Campbell, McPherson, Roberts; Minnehaha: 277 (+1) Occupied Beds, 58 (-1) ICU, 40 (+3) Ventilation; Pennington: 77 (-7) Occupied Beds, 12 (-0) ICU, 9 (+1) Ventilation

Hospitalized: +95 (3,769 total). 593 currently hospitalized +11)

Deaths: +30 (674 total)

Recovered: +741 (48,757 total)

Active Cases: +616 (19,240)

Percent Recovered: 71.0%

Total COVID-19 Occupied Beds: 593 (+11), Black Hills Region 115 (-3), Glacial Lakes Region 96 (+1) Sioux Empire Region 300 (+3), South Central Plains 82 (+10).

ICU Units: Total 97 (+2), BH 13 (-0), GL 13 (+4), SE 59 (-1), SCP 12 (-1).

Ventilation: Total 51 (+4), BH 9 (+1), GL 2 (-0), SE 40 (+3), SCP 0 (-0).

Staffed Hospital Bed Capacity: 22% Covid, 45% Non-Covid, 33% Available

ICU Bed Capacity: 48% Covid, 34% Non-Covid, 18% Available

Staffed Adult + Pediatric ICU Bed Capacity: 66% Occupied, 34% Available

Ventilator Capacity: 12% Covid, 16% Non-Covid, 72% Available

Beadle (22) +49 positive, +11 recovered (613 active cases)

Brookings (14) +34 positive, +15 recovered (529 active cases)

Brown (10): +47 positive, +40 recovered (713 active cases)

Clark (1): +6 positive, +5 recovered (56 active cases)

Brown County:

Total Positive: +47 (3027) Positivity Rate: 6.8%

Total Tests: +361 (23,794)

Total Individuals Tested: +146 (12,551)

Recovered: +40 (2,304)

Active Cases: +7 (713)

Ever Hospitalized: +6 (174)

Deaths: +0 (10)

Percent Recovered: 76.1%

Hospital Reports:

Avera St. Luke's: Covid-19 Occupied 26 (+2); ICU 1 (-1), Ventilation 0 (0).

Sanford Aberdeen: Covid-19 Occupied 12 (+2); ICU 4 (+3), Ventilation 0 (-1)

Sanford Webster: Covid-19 Occupied 0 (-2).

Marshall County Healthcare: Covid-19 Occupied: 0 (-0).

South Dakota:

Positive: +1387 (68,671 total) Positivity Rate: 20.6%

Total Tests: 6717 (530,768 total)

Total Individuals Tested: 2614 (298,359)

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Clay (8): +17 positive, +10 recovered (269 active cases)

Codington (31): +29 positive, +25 recovered (546 active cases)

Davison (17): +62 positive, +36 recovered (882 active cases)

Day (5): +6 positive, +2 recovered (98 active cases)

Edmunds (1): +4 positive, +2 recovered (54 active cases)

Faulk (6): +3 positive, +0 recovered (39 active cases)

Grant (5): +7 positive, +6 recovered (134 active cases)

Hanson (1): +4 positive, +7 recovered (70 active cases)

Hughes (9): +30 positive, +16 recovered (429 active cases)

Lawrence (13): +35 positive, +22 recovered (515 active cases)

Lincoln (42): +88 positive, +57 recovered (1386 active cases)

Marshall (3): +4 positive, +5 recovered (41 active cases)

McCook (9): +13 positive, +9 recovered (198 active cases)

McPherson (1): +2 positive, +1 recovery (42 active case)

Minnehaha (143): +299 positive, +188 recovered (4729 active cases)

Potter: +5 positive, +1 recovered (69 active cases)

Roberts (13): +19 positive, +12 recovered (172 active cases)

Spink (8): +7 positive, +5 recovered (140 active cases)

Walworth (10): +7 positive, +2 recovered (103 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Nov. 18:

- 15.9% rolling 14-day positivity
- 1,275 new positives
- 7,749 susceptible test encounters
- 297 currently hospitalized (-7)
- 9,977 active cases (-45)
- 785 total deaths (+16)

Yesterday

Today

Global Cases
55,695,116
11,360,125 US
8,912,907 India
5,911,758 Brazil
2,087,183 France
1,975,629 Russia
1,510,023 Spain
1,414,359 United Kingdom
1,329,005 Argentina
1,238,072 Italy
1,211,128 Colombia
1,011,153 Mexico

Global Cases
56,358,603
11,530,345 US
8,958,483 India
5,945,849 Brazil
2,115,717 France
1,998,966 Russia
1,525,341 Spain
1,434,004 United Kingdom
1,339,337 Argentina
1,272,352 Italy
1,218,003 Colombia
1,015,071 Mexico

Global Deaths
1,339,820
248,707 deaths US
166,699 deaths Brazil
130,993 deaths India
99,026 deaths Mexico
52,839 deaths United Kingdom
46,464 deaths Italy

Global Deaths
1,351,381
250,548 deaths US
167,455 deaths Brazil
131,578 deaths India
99,528 deaths Mexico
53,368 deaths United Kingdom
47,217 deaths Italy

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	312	197	757	2	Substantial	52.13%
Beadle	2024	1389	4421	22	Substantial	32.61%
Bennett	281	203	1014	5	Substantial	10.92%
Bon Homme	1243	1065	1691	8	Substantial	41.51%
Brookings	2136	1593	7513	14	Substantial	23.64%
Brown	3027	2304	9524	10	Substantial	26.90%
Brule	487	336	1489	5	Substantial	41.57%
Buffalo	341	300	803	5	Substantial	29.69%
Butte	633	446	2346	9	Substantial	31.06%
Campbell	96	79	178	1	Moderate	31.82%
Charles Mix	672	455	3206	1	Substantial	22.72%
Clark	199	142	732	1	Substantial	11.56%
Clay	1159	882	3737	8	Substantial	29.44%
Codington	2318	1741	6977	31	Substantial	31.54%
Corson	326	264	814	3	Substantial	55.26%
Custer	457	353	1928	5	Substantial	25.52%
Davison	2045	1146	4981	17	Substantial	37.69%
Day	285	182	1302	5	Substantial	47.20%
Deuel	265	204	854	2	Substantial	34.88%
Dewey	713	321	3407	2	Substantial	30.02%
Douglas	264	185	729	5	Substantial	23.02%
Edmunds	213	158	795	1	Substantial	19.31%
Fall River	330	235	1962	7	Substantial	21.03%
Faulk	264	219	544	6	Substantial	31.25%
Grant	495	356	1645	5	Substantial	32.61%
Gregory	383	262	921	15	Substantial	32.00%
Haakon	129	95	437	3	Moderate	7.77%
Hamlin	372	230	1314	0	Substantial	18.53%
Hand	254	159	626	1	Substantial	41.30%
Hanson	198	127	509	1	Substantial	41.56%
Harding	64	58	122	0	Minimal	30.77%
Hughes	1408	970	4633	9	Substantial	32.26%
Hutchinson	461	271	1729	3	Substantial	24.50%

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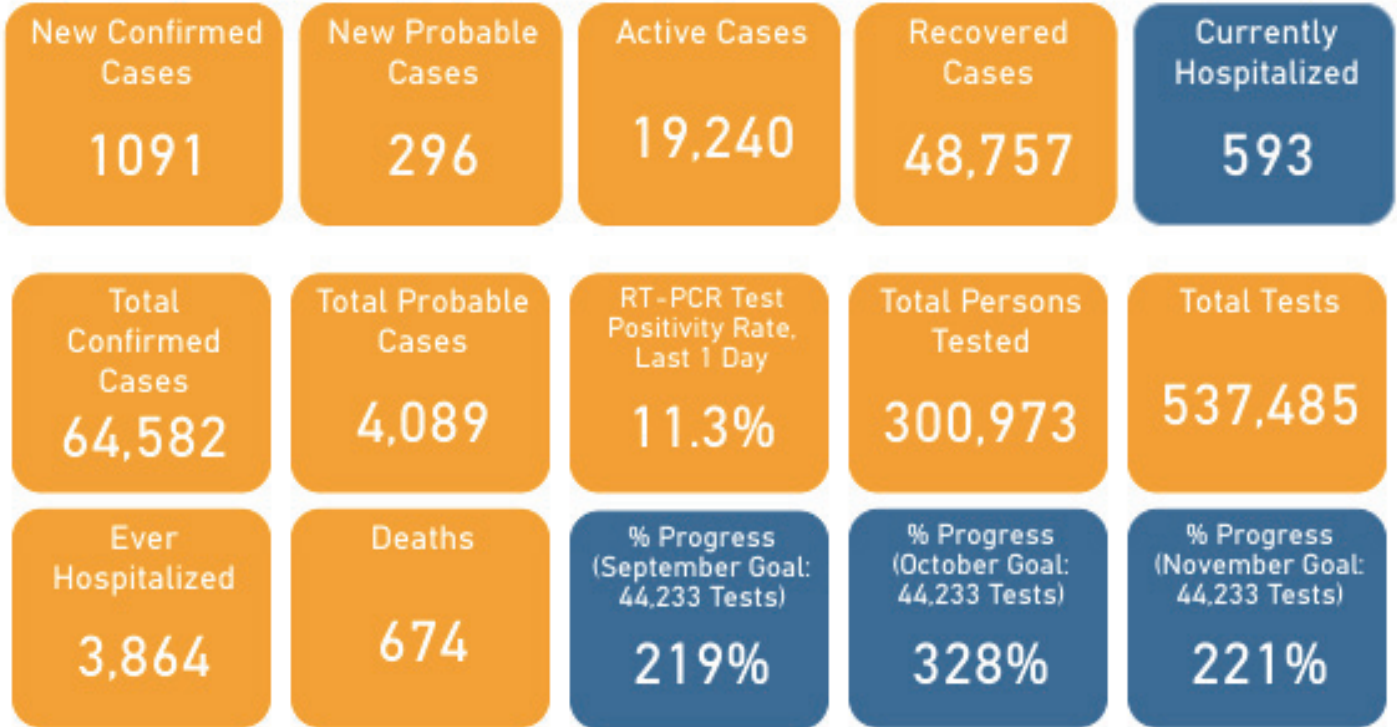
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Hyde	107	57	323	0	Substantial	51.11%
Jackson	183	132	793	5	Substantial	30.30%
Jerauld	222	158	417	13	Substantial	29.55%
Jones	50	38	145	0	Moderate	40.00%
Kingsbury	372	225	1164	7	Substantial	22.60%
Lake	734	495	2097	9	Substantial	43.88%
Lawrence	1725	1197	6259	13	Substantial	24.00%
Lincoln	4689	3261	14646	42	Substantial	36.03%
Lyman	389	309	1489	8	Substantial	24.82%
Marshall	127	83	835	3	Substantial	38.04%
McCook	525	318	1188	9	Substantial	36.01%
McPherson	112	69	435	1	Substantial	17.83%
Meade	1504	1121	5670	11	Substantial	22.83%
Mellette	141	105	583	1	Substantial	50.00%
Miner	176	137	444	3	Substantial	35.14%
Minnehaha	17751	12879	57973	143	Substantial	30.61%
Moody	358	240	1427	6	Substantial	40.00%
Oglala Lakota	1453	1043	5806	17	Substantial	29.01%
Pennington	7385	5176	27858	61	Substantial	27.42%
Perkins	127	80	517	0	Substantial	27.91%
Potter	221	153	637	0	Substantial	16.39%
Roberts	596	411	3467	13	Substantial	23.10%
Sanborn	214	113	503	1	Substantial	42.86%
Spink	475	327	1708	8	Substantial	16.22%
Stanley	188	113	657	0	Substantial	28.33%
Sully	77	51	192	1	Substantial	43.48%
Todd	741	577	3520	10	Substantial	38.46%
Tripp	423	309	1194	2	Substantial	44.81%
Turner	727	509	2020	35	Substantial	25.00%
Union	1091	816	4513	19	Substantial	21.21%
Walworth	393	280	1406	10	Substantial	31.33%
Yankton	1388	958	6757	8	Substantial	30.93%
Ziebach	153	90	596	3	Substantial	24.00%
Unassigned	0	0	1423	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range	# of Cases	# of Deaths
0-9 years	2248	0
10-19 years	7357	0
20-29 years	13365	2
30-39 years	11613	9
40-49 years	9824	15
50-59 years	9704	42
60-69 years	7611	87
70-79 years	3918	140
80+ years	3031	379

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	35828	328
Male	32843	346

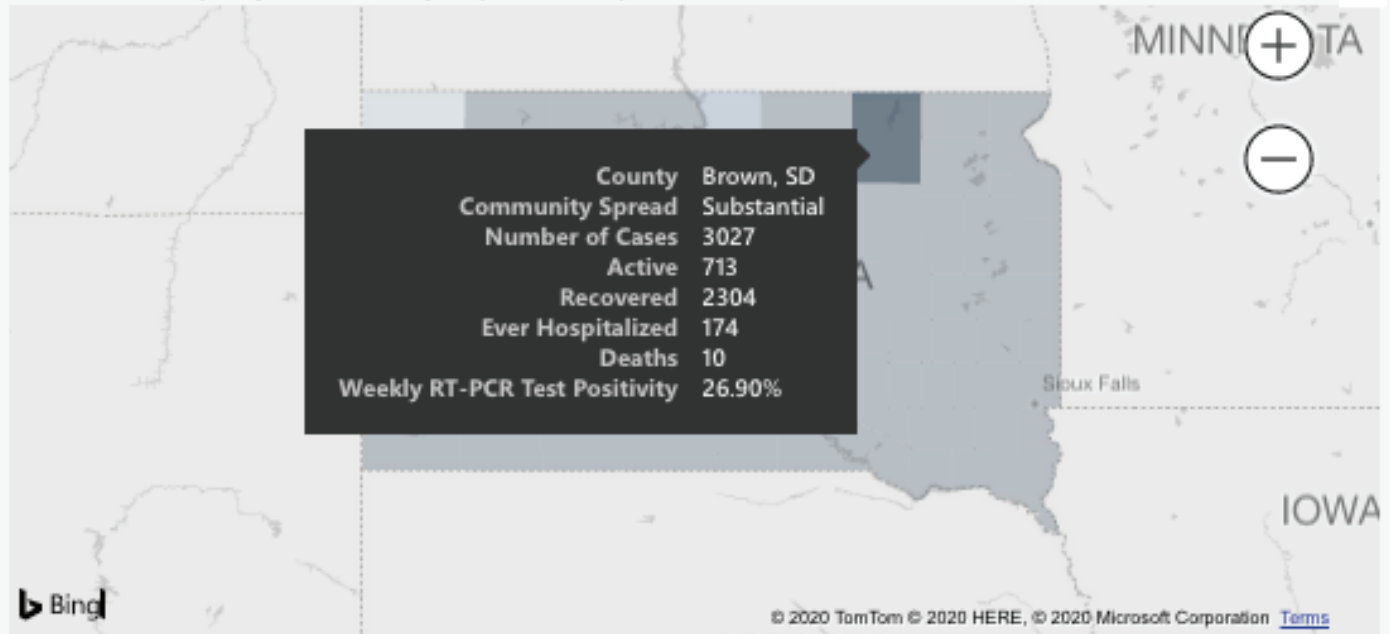
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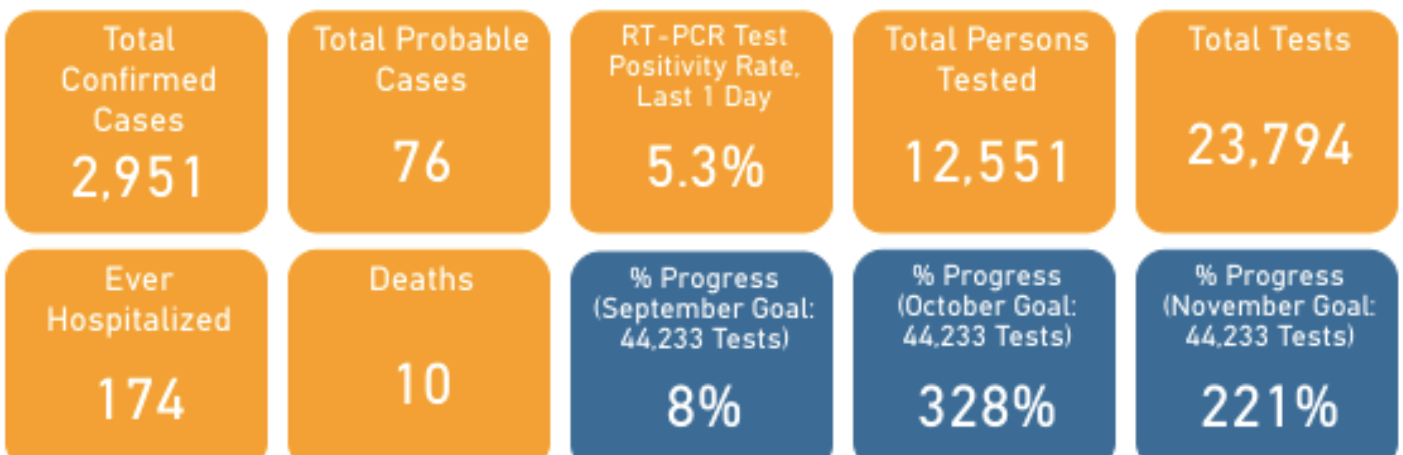
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



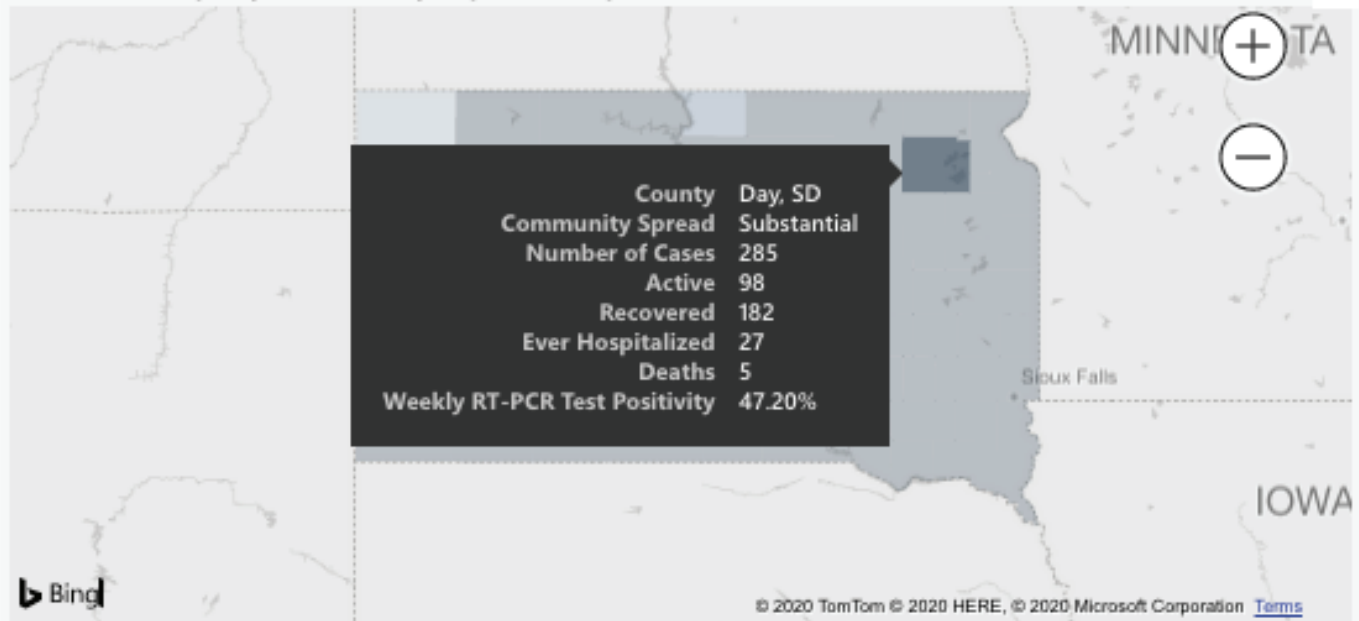
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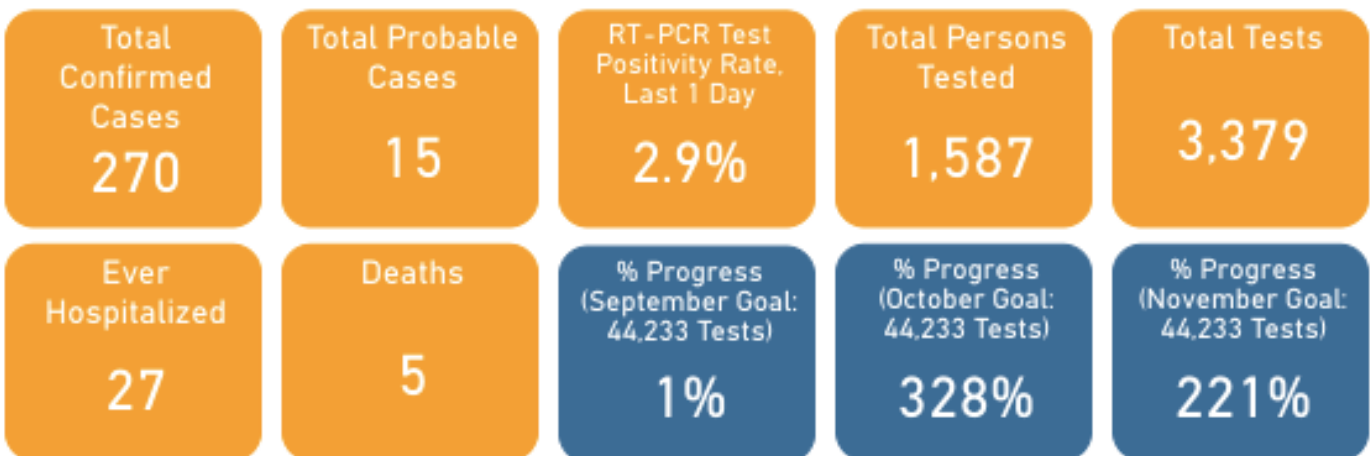
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



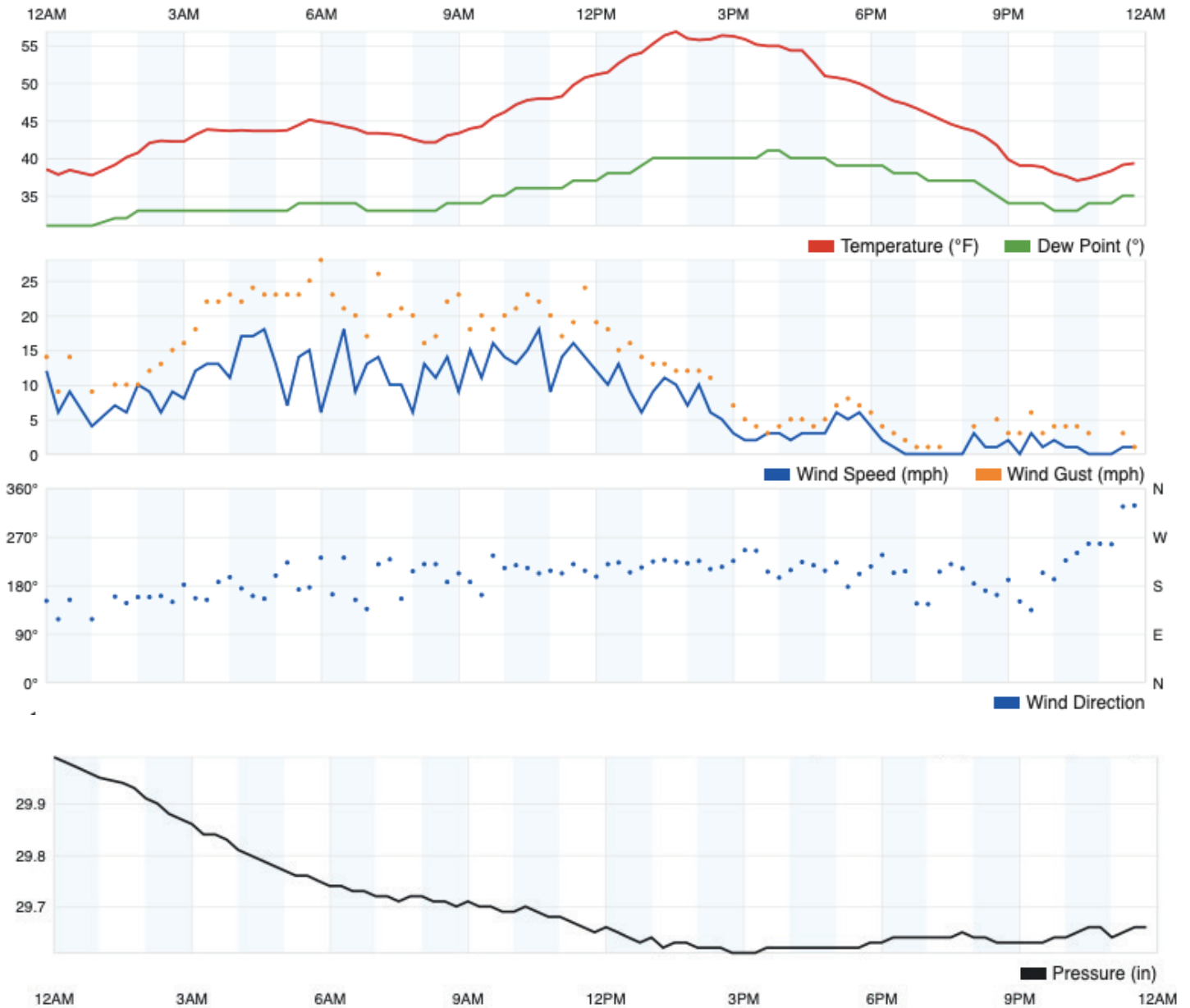
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 53 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 27 °F

Friday



Sunny

High: 41 °F

Friday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 22 °F

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 48 °F

Mostly Dry and Mild End to the Week

Highs: 50 to 65(central South Dakota) today falling to 35 to 50 on Friday.

Lows: Mid 20s to lower 30s tonight.

Outlook: Above average temperatures persist through the weekend with highs in the 40s. Slight chances for precipitation this afternoon and evening (north), then more widespread chances on Saturday.

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Updated: 11/19/2020 5:31 AM Central

An active but mostly dry pattern will persist through the weekend. Temperatures will cool after today but remain above normal. A couple of hit or miss chances for light precipitation exist over the next few days.

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Today in Weather History

November 19, 1981: A storm system moved from southeast Nebraska through Iowa on the 18th and spread rain and sleet as well as a few thunderstorms into southern Minnesota. Rain and sleet began changing over to snow during the afternoon on the 18th and continued through the 19th. The most substantial snowfall was in the Minneapolis area. The 10.4 inches of snow reported from the National Weather Service office in the Twin Cities was the heaviest snowfall recorded at the office since March 22nd, to the 23rd, 1965 when 13.6 inches fell. The storm knocked out power and phones to many in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Damage was also done to the Humber H. Humphrey Metrodome, where the weight of the heavy snow caused the newly inflated, fabric dome collapsed and ripped.

November 19, 1996: Widespread freezing rain spread a layer of ice across a large area before changing over to snow during November 19-20. Snowfall amounts were 1 to 3 inches in central South Dakota, 3 to 7 inches across north central South Dakota, 5 to 6 inches in west central Minnesota, and 4 to 12 inches across northeast South Dakota. Travel was difficult, and several schools were closed or delayed. Mail delivery was also slowed or postponed for a day or two. Several, mainly minor accidents, resulting in several minor injuries, occurred as a result of the ice and snow covered roads. Two Milbank buses slid into ditches. Strong north winds led to near-blizzard conditions across northeast South Dakota on the 20th. Some snowfall totals included; 12.0 inches in Clear Lake and near Milbank; 10.1 inches near Mellette; 9.0 inches in Browns Valley; 8.3 inches near Big Stone City; 8.0 inches in Faulkton; and 7.0 inches in Britton and Conde.

1921: The Columbia Gorge ice storm finally came to an end. In Oregon, 54 inches of snow, sleet, and glaze blocked the Columbia River Highway at The Dalles. Apart from traffic on the river itself, all transportation between Walla Walla WA and Portland, OR came to a halt. Nine trains were stopped as railroads were blocked for several days.

1930: A rare, estimated F4 tornado struck the town of Bethany, Oklahoma. Between 9:30 am and 9:58 am CST, it moved north-northeast from 3 miles west of the Oklahoma City limits, and hit the eastern part of Bethany. About 110 homes and 700 other buildings, or about a fourth of the town, were damaged or destroyed. Near the end of the damage path, 3.5 miles northeast of Wiley Post Airfield, the tornado hit the Camel Creek School. Buildings blew apart just as the students were falling to the floor and looking for shelter, and five students and a teacher were killed. A total of 23 people were killed and another 150 injured, with 77 being seriously injured. Damage estimates were listed at \$500,000.

1957 - Nineteen inches of snow covered the ground at Cresco, IA, a record November snow depth for the state. (The Weather Channel)

1981 - An unusually early snowstorm struck the Twin Cities of Minnesota, with as much as a foot of snow reported. The weight of the heavy snow caused the newly inflated fabric dome of the Hubert Humphrey Metrodome in downtown Minneapolis to collapse and rip. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A sharp cold front pushed across the Great Lakes Region and the Mississippi Valley. Northwest winds gusting to 50 mph in Iowa caused some property damage around Ottumwa, and wind chill readings reached 16 degrees below zero at Hibbing MN. Showers and thunderstorms over Florida produced 5.80 inches of rain in six hours at Cocoa Beach. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Strong thunderstorms developed during the mid morning hours and produced severe weather across eastern Texas and the Lower Mississippi Valley into the wee hours of the night. Thunderstorms spawned twenty-one tornadoes, including thirteen in Mississippi. One tornado killed two persons and injured eleven others at Nettleton MS, and another tornado injured eight persons at Tuscaloosa AL. Thunderstorms produced baseball size hail in east Texas and northern Louisiana, and Summit MS was deluged with six inches of rain in four hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Gale force winds continued to produce squalls in the Lower Great Lakes Region early in the day. Snowfall totals in western New York State reached 24 inches in southern Lewis County, with 21 inches reported at Highmarket. Unseasonably warm weather prevailed across the Northern and Central Plains Region. Eight cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Denver CO with a reading of 79 degrees. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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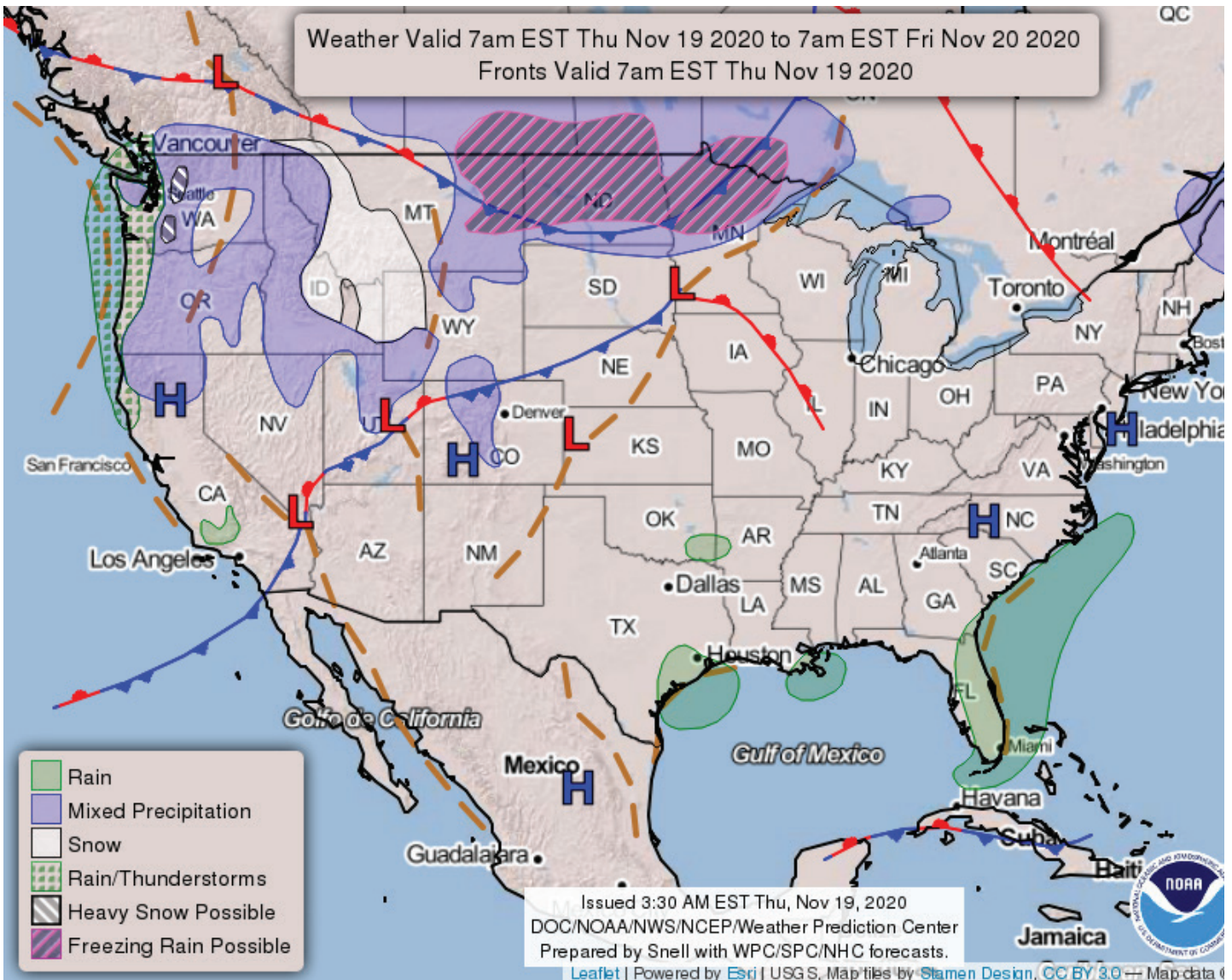
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 57 °F at 1:40 PM
Low Temp: 36 °F at 10:38 PM
Wind: 28 mph at 5:53 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 75° in 1908
Record Low: -11° in 1914
Average High: 37°F
Average Low: 17°F
Average Precip in Nov.: 0.48
Precip to date in Nov.: 0.06
Average Precip to date: 20.95
Precip Year to Date: 16.40
Sunset Tonight: 4:59 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40 a.m.



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OUR GOD IS A GOOD GOD!

Mary Jo spent part of her spring vacation with her Grandmother. When she returned home, her mother asked, "Were you a good girl?"

"Mom, I was so good that I could hardly stand it," she replied. "It's a wonder I had any fun I was so good."

The word "good" is difficult to measure. There is no "good-er" or "good-est." Why? Because the word good is only applicable to God. And we must never forget that it is not possible for God to improve on anything He does or do anything any "good-er."

On one occasion when Jesus was starting on a trip, a man came running up to Him and asked, "Good Teacher, what must I do to get into heaven?"

"Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "Only God is truly good!"

His reply did not disclaim that He, too, was good. On the contrary! He claimed and proclaimed His goodness when He confessed that He was God!

Unfortunately, the young man regarded Jesus as a human teacher only. For him to attach the word "good" to a mere human being was a bad thing because of his religious beliefs. So, it was necessary for him to understand that only God is good and that no one other than God is, in fact, good. Jesus is good because He is God.

Whenever we think of ourselves, we must always remember who we are, how we think, and that we are human. When we think of God, however, we must shout with the Psalmist, "Give thanks to God for He is good!"

Prayer: Thank you, Father, that You are good and in Your goodness, we see Your love, mercy, grace, and salvation. Thank You for being what we are not. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good! His faithful love endures forever. Psalm 107:1

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2020 Groton SD Community Events

- **CANCELLED** Groton Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt - City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- **CANCELLED** Dueling Piano's Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion
- **CANCELLED** Fireman's Fun Night (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- **POSTPONED** Front Porch 605 Rural Route Road Trip
- **CANCELLED** Father/Daughter dance.
- **CANCELLED** Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales, (1st Saturday in May)
- **CANCELLED** Girls High School Golf Meet at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 05/25/2020 Groton American Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services
- 07/04/2020 Firecracker Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/12/2020 Summer Fest/Car Show
- 07/16/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Pro Am Golf Tourney
- 07/24/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Ferney Open Golf Tourney
- 07/25/2020 City-Wide Rummage Sales
- **CANCELLED** State American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
- 08/07/2020 Wine on Nine Event at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 09/12-13/2020 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In at the Groton Airport north of Groton
- 09/12/2020 Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales (1st Sat. after Labor Day)
- 09/13/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Couples Sunflower Classic
- 10/09/2020 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
- 10/10/2020 Pumpkin Fest (Saturday before Columbus Day)
- 10/30/2020 Downtown Trick or Treat
- 10/30/2020 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat
- **CANCELLED** Groton Legion Annual Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
- 11/26/2020 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center
- 12/05/2020 Olive Grove Golf Course Tour of Homes & Holiday Party
- 12/05/2020 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services
- 01/--/2021 83rd Annual Carnival of Silver Skates

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

06-15-18-23-25

(six, fifteen, eighteen, twenty-three, twenty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

17-35-39-42-43, Star Ball: 5, ASB: 2

(seventeen, thirty-five, thirty-nine, forty-two, forty-three; Star Ball: five; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.25 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$188 million

Powerball

04-05-17-43-52, Powerball: 5, Power Play: 2

(four, five, seventeen, forty-three, fifty-two; Powerball: five; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$179 million

The Latest: S Korea begins stronger limits in some areas

By The Associated Press undefined

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has reported more than 300 new coronavirus cases for a second consecutive day as authorities begin enforcing toughened social distancing rules in some areas to fight a resurgence of small-scale clusters of infections.

The 343 new cases announced Thursday raised the country's case total to 29,654 for the pandemic, with 498 deaths from COVID-19.

On Thursday, elevated physical distancing rules took effective in the greater Seoul area, the southern city of Gwangju and some parts of Gangwon province. In those areas, no more than 100 people may attend rallies, concerts and other events, while sporting events and religious services are limited to 30-50% capacity. Dancing at night clubs and drinking at karaoke rooms are prohibited.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- Pfizer seeks regulatory review of vaccine candidate within days
- Europe has half of world's 4M new virus cases tallied last week
- FDA allows first prescription rapid coronavirus test that gives results at home
- Surge of coronavirus cases U.S. sends people back to stores to stockpile again, leaving shelves bare and forcing retailers to put limits on purchases.
- Health experts say masks are useful tool for arresting spread of the coronavirus. Studies show they help in multiple ways and work best when everyone wears one.
- Athletes at the postponed Tokyo Olympics won't have the luxury of hanging around once they've wrapped up their event. No late-night parties or nights on the town.

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — The small Pacific nation of Samoa is reporting its first positive test for

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the coronavirus, although officials say a second test on the same patient came back negative.

Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele Malielegaoi went on television and radio Thursday urging the nation's 200,000 people to stay calm but remain vigilant with their virus precautions.

Samoa was among a dwindling handful of nations to have not reported a single case of the virus.

According to the Samoa Observer, officials say the patient is a sailor who has been in quarantine since flying in from New Zealand on Friday. The sailor tested positive four days after arriving, but a second test Thursday was negative.

The Cabinet was to meet to discuss the situation.

DENVER — Public schools in Denver will go to fully remote learning for all grades for the rest of the semester as the coronavirus surges.

Officials said Wednesday that remote learning will begin for more than 90,000 students in Colorado's largest school district on Monday and run through the end of winter break. The district's decision also applies to special education students.

In September, the district reported about 13 new coronavirus cases weekly, mostly involving teachers and staff, when it first opened early childhood education classes. It says new cases now have surpassed 300 per week, causing teacher and staff shortages and forcing individual schools to close.

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Five Florida mayors are expressing concern about the rising number of coronavirus cases in the state, and are urging Gov. Ron DeSantis to change his approach to the pandemic.

Following a months-long decline from a huge summer spike in coronavirus infections, Florida has seen a mid-autumn climb in COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. Still, the governor has resisted a return to statewide restrictions in place earlier in the year.

The mayors of Miami Beach, Hialeah, Miami Shores Village, Sunrise and St. Petersburg called Wednesday for consistency in statewide regulations, implementation of a mask mandate and restoration of state testing sites to full capacity.

TOPEKA, Kan. — Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly has issued a new mask mandate in hopes of lessening the spread of the coronavirus after the state again reported another record seven-day increase in new cases.

State law allows Kansas' 105 counties to opt out of the order. Most did when Kelly issued a similar order in July. But the state's rolling seven-day average for new coronavirus cases was more than nine times higher Wednesday than it was when her first order took effect.

Kelly's order takes effect Nov. 25, the day before Thanksgiving, and only in counties that don't yet have their own mask mandates. That is a majority of the state's counties.

The governor says she is giving counties a week to work out their own mask rules.

WASHINGTON — Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar is trying to tamp down concerns the stalled transition of power to President-Elect Joe Biden will scramble the government's efforts to distribute the COVID-19 vaccine to Americans.

At a vaccine news briefing Wednesday, Azar says "in the event" of a transition, the vast majority of the HHS and Pentagon officials working on vaccine distribution are all career government employees and "there is really just total continuity that would occur."

The Biden campaign has raised concerns that President Donald Trump's refusal to concede defeat will only add to the suffering as the coronavirus spreads in many parts of the country.

Azar says HHS cannot begin the transition process until allowed by an obscure agency called the General Services Administration, headed by a Trump appointee.

RICHMOND, Va. — Gov. Ralph Northam on Wednesday urged Virginians to stay home for the Thanksgiving holiday, saying it would be "an act of love" to help keep people safe amid steadily rising coronavirus cases.

If people must get together, Northam said, they should keep gatherings small and celebrate outside.

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The Democratic governor's comments come a few days after he announced substantial new statewide restrictions on gatherings and certain businesses in an effort to slow rising COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations.

The state's cap on gatherings will be reduced from 250 people to 25, the mask requirement will be applied to younger children, the number of spectators allowed at athletic events will be reduced, and alcohol sales will be prohibited at dining and drinking establishments after 10 p.m.

In Virginia, case counts have been increasing with particular intensity in the state's southwest, where cases were sparse early in the pandemic.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — In western Tennessee, The Jackson Sun newspaper reported that a key hospital in Madison County was no longer accepting patient transfers due to a rise in coronavirus patients.

Calling it a "sobering day," West Tennessee Healthcare CEO James Ross said the hospital, which serves as the health care hub for the region, typically accepts 50 to 60 ambulance transfers outside of the county a day.

As of Wednesday, the hospital had reported 573 patients, approaching its maximum 642-bed capacity. More than 100 patients are being treated for COVID-19.

Tennessee has seen just over 4,000 COVID-19 related deaths to date, according to researchers from Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. That death count is the 19th highest in the country overall and the 27th highest per capita at 59.0 deaths per 100,000 people.

NEW YORK — New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio says the city will close schools to try to stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The mayor and the Schools Chancellor Richard Carranza say the nation's largest public school system will temporarily halt in-person learning Thursday.

The city has said schools would close if the coronavirus positivity rate reached 3% citywide over a seven-day period. As the rate neared that point last week, de Blasio advised parents to prepare for a possible shutdown within days.

The city's more than 1 million public school students will be taught entirely online. As of the end of October, only about 25% of students had gone to class in school this fall, far fewer than officials had expected.

Even as the school system stayed open, nearly 1,500 classrooms went through temporary closures after students or staffers tested positive. Officials began instituting local shutdowns in neighborhoods where coronavirus cases were rapidly rising.

More than 2,300 students or staff at public schools had tested positive since the start of the school year.

BATON ROUGE, La. — Louisiana has surpassed 200,000 confirmed coronavirus cases.

The Louisiana Department of Health added another 8,900 cases on Wednesday, pushing the confirmed total to nearly 201,000.

Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards cautions the current trajectory of cases raises the risk that hospitals could become overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients.

There have been more than 5,900 confirmed deaths from the virus.

AMMAN, Jordan — Jordan has reported 7,933 new cases of the coronavirus, the highest daily amount since the start of the pandemic.

The numbers were pushed higher by an outbreak at a garment factory in southern Jordan, where 1,623 foreign workers tested positive for the virus.

Health Minister Nathir Obeidat says a "procedure was taken to isolate the factory."

Jordan has reported a total of 163,926 confirmed cases. Obeidat says 60 more people have died, raising the confirmed death toll to 1,969.

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MINNEAPOLIS — Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz plans to announce new coronavirus restrictions on Wednesday. The plan will shut down indoor dining at bars and restaurants, close gyms and fitness centers, and put organized youth sports on hold for four weeks. Bars and restaurants will still be allowed to offer takeout, according to a person with knowledge of the governor's plan. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the person was not authorized to speak ahead of the governor's Wednesday night announcement.

In a call with reporters Tuesday, Walz said the state is trying to ease the strain on hospitals. He said restrictions would be targeted and based on data.

There were 1,423 new cases per 100,000 people in Minnesota over the past two weeks, putting Minnesota seventh in the country for cases per capita. One in every 119 people in Minnesota tested positive in the past week, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

There were 5,102 cases reported in Minnesota on Wednesday, along with 67 deaths. The state totals stand at more than 242,000 cases and 3,010 confirmed deaths.

— By Doug Glass

NEW YORK — Vaccine maker Pfizer says it's already in regular communication with the president-elect Joe Biden's transition team as part of ongoing efforts to keep all interested parties updated on its coronavirus vaccine and its distribution.

"There is no room for politics in this process," said Pfizer spokeswoman Sharon Castillo.

Last Sunday, Biden chief of staff Ron Klain said the transition team planned to meet with Pfizer and other vaccine makers, as President Donald Trump continues to stall the formal transition process to a new administration.

Castillo said Pfizer maintains ongoing communication with the Trump administration, state governors, and leading lawmakers of both parties in Congress. The Biden team is part of that effort.

"We're in the middle of a transition and we're communicating with both sides," she said.

There's no word yet on a formal meeting between Biden and the pharmaceutical chiefs.

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SIOUX FALLS, S.D. — The largest group representing South Dakota doctors is supporting a statewide mask mandate as several cities have moved to require masks in public.

The South Dakota State Medical Association has been urging people to voluntarily wear masks but updated its stance to "strongly support" a statewide mandate.

South Dakota is second in the nation in new cases per capita over the last two weeks.

There were 2,089 new cases per 100,000 people, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. That's roughly one out of 48 people in South Dakota testing positive in the last two weeks.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has opposed statewide mask mandates, arguing they have not been proven to halt the spread of infections. She plans to give an update on the state's coronavirus status later Wednesday.

South Dakota's Noem defends forgoing masks as virus surges

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday defended those who choose not to wear masks in public, even as her state deals with one of the worst coronavirus outbreaks in the nation.

Those who don't wear masks are making a "personal decision" and deserve respect, the Republican governor said during a news conference. She refused to encourage people to wear masks or socially distance, instead saying the best thing people can do to stop the spread of the virus is wash their hands.

It was the governor's first news conference to address the pandemic in over three months. Although she acknowledged the state's growing health crisis, she defended her approach to tackling the pandemic and showed no sign of issuing a mask mandate or other restrictions.

The ardently conservative state's largest group representing doctors has said it "strongly supports" a mask mandate, and several South Dakota cities now require masks to be worn in stores and public buildings.

"Some have said that my refusal to mandate masks is a reason why our cases are rising here in South Dakota, and that is not true," Noem said.

Noem said she wears a mask when "appropriate," though she frequently posts photos of herself on social media without one, despite her proximity to others. She said she doesn't believe her powers as governor allow her to issue a mask mandate.

"We talk often about the government's role in a situation like this in dealing with a pandemic," Noem said, "At this point, frankly, I'm getting more concerned about how neighbors are treating neighbors."

She pointed to other states in the region with mask mandates, such as Wisconsin and Montana, that have a higher rate of daily new cases per capita. South Dakota ranks in the top seven states for the metric. And in the last two weeks, the numbers of confirmed new cases and deaths per capita in the state have been the second-highest in the country, according to Johns Hopkins researchers.

The number of COVID-19 deaths has skyrocketed in recent weeks. Health officials have reported 259 deaths in November — about a third of the state's total death toll over the course of the pandemic.

The only state with worse death and new case rates, North Dakota, on Friday issued a statewide mask mandate and limited the size of gatherings in businesses.

Later Wednesday, state epidemiologist Josh Clayton sent an email to healthcare providers underlining that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends wearing masks and that "experimental and epidemiological data support community masking to reduce the spread" of the coronavirus.

Noem's approach has received a sharp reproach from public health experts. Dr. Ali Mokdad, a professor of the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington, has become increasingly alarmed with the governor's hands-off strategy, calling it "nonsense" that has led to an outbreak on par with countries that have far fewer health resources.

"Somalia did nothing. Yemen did nothing," he said. "It's so sad to compare yourself to countries like that."

Information published by the Department of Health brought new clarity to the dwindling number of hospital beds in South Dakota. There were about 37 adult ICU beds and 921 general care beds available across the state, according to data released by health officials that distinguished between adult ICU beds and neonatal or pediatric ICU beds.

The largest health care systems say they are operating at or above capacity, struggling with the influx of coronavirus patients combined with people needing other medical care.

Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon said the pandemic has worsened staffing shortages at hospitals, but offered the development of a vaccine as a "bright spot on the horizon." She hoped vaccine distribution, which will prioritize health care workers, could begin as early as December.

But Mokdad, the infectious disease expert, said it was heartbreaking watching the state's failure to prevent deaths and "surrender so close to a vaccine being deployed."

Some GOP governors shift on mask mandates as hospitals fill

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — After Republicans expanded their control of Iowa's Legislature this month, Gov. Kim Reynolds said the outcome was a validation of her small-government approach to managing the coronavirus pandemic.

But as Iowa hospitals rapidly filled up in the days after the election, the GOP governor reluctantly embraced a policy she had once considered government overreach and vowed never to enact: a statewide mask mandate, however limited.

"If our health care system exceeds capacity, it's not just COVID-19 we'll be fighting. Every Iowan who needs medical care will be put at risk," Reynolds said in a prime-time address Monday, warning that ambulances, first responders and routine preventive care would soon be unavailable without action. "If Iowans don't buy into this, we lose."

Reynolds is joining Republican governors in Utah and North Dakota in changing course on the pandemic response since the Nov. 3 election and issuing mask mandates and other restrictions as coronavirus cases skyrocket across the country. GOP governors in Ohio and West Virginia have also recently strengthened existing mask mandates, while Mississippi's governor expanded the state's partial mandate to cover more counties.

By belatedly mandating masks, the governors are tacitly acknowledging the failure of their earlier hands-off approach to public health. Health officials have long called for widespread mask wearing to prevent the spread of the disease. Governors who resisted for ideological or political reasons now find themselves in the throes of a crisis and forced to follow science or risk making a dangerous situation worse through their inaction.

The changes are backed by growing evidence that cloth masks protect not only those around an infected person but also those wearing them. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says masks help prevent asymptomatic people from spreading virus-laden droplets when they cough, sneeze and talk and help wearers to avoid inhaling them.

The governors, their advisers and other observers say they are simply responding to the rapidly worsening public health crises in their states.

"Our situation has changed, and we must change with it," a somber North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum said after he signed a surprise executive order late Friday requiring people throughout the state to wear face coverings inside businesses and other indoor public settings.

Burgum had previously urged people to wear masks while promoting a "light touch" by government. But by last weekend, there were few intensive care unit beds available in the state, and the governor said doctors and nurses urgently need help.

In Iowa, Reynolds had for months resisted growing pressure to enact a mask mandate, rebuffing recommendations from White House experts and medical groups. She said that it would be a "feel-good measure" that would be unenforceable and that she trusted Iowans to wear masks and take other precautions voluntarily.

Reynolds announced no new restrictions during October as cases increased in Iowa faster than nearly every other state. She spent part of the month campaigning for President Donald Trump and other Republicans at events where hundreds or thousands of maskless supporters gathered in defiance of public health guidance.

In the two weeks after the election, COVID-19 hospitalizations in Iowa doubled to more than 1,500 by Monday. Hospitals began filling up, canceling elective procedures in order to free up beds and transferring patients. Health care workers were exhausted, and many were in quarantine or isolation after exposure or infection.

The governor feared that the state's health care system would soon be overrun and that the crisis would get worse if maskless relatives got together for large indoor Thanksgiving celebrations across the state.

"I think we've hit a point where positive cases are just too much. She had to do something," said David

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Kochel, a Republican political consultant who advises Reynolds.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert, who is leaving office in January, said the timing of his post-election move wasn't political. Instead, he said it was an essential step to avoid disaster with a surge already threatening to overwhelm hospitals ahead of the holiday season.

Still, 13 other states with GOP governors still have no statewide mask mandates, and many of them have affirmed their opposition in recent days even as cases, hospitalizations and deaths rise in their states.

"I don't think mask mandates are appropriate," Nebraska Gov. Pete Ricketts said at a news conference Tuesday. "I think they breed resistance."

South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Wednesday asked people to respect those who don't wear masks and stood by her decision not to issue a mandate.

"We talk often about the government's role in a situation like this in dealing with a pandemic," Noem said. "At this point, frankly, I'm getting more concerned about how neighbors are treating neighbors."

President-elect Joe Biden on Monday praised "conservative Republican governors who have stepped up and issued mandates for wearing masks," singling out Utah and North Dakota. He said the moves were patriotic and could save lives.

Critics of Reynolds called her mandate too little, too late, noting that it exempts schools and churches and applies only to indoor interactions longer than 15 minutes. Iowa reported 40 deaths from COVID-19 on Wednesday, a record for the state.

"She has taken a half step in the right direction," said Democratic state Sen. Joe Bolcom of Iowa City. "But we're still at code red here in Iowa and will be even with the governor's newfound interest in masks."

Reynolds may have undermined her new policy at a news conference Tuesday when she acknowledged doubts about whether masks work, claiming that there's "science on both sides" on their efficacy and that cases have risen in states with mandates.

Some of the governors' fellow conservatives, meanwhile, called her mandate an overreach.

"Mask mandates will likely have the opposite effect of what was intended," Rep. Steven Holt, chair of the Iowa House Judiciary committee, wrote on his Facebook page.

Associated Press writers Grant Schulte in Lincoln, Neb.; Stephen Groves in Sioux Falls, S.D.; James MacPherson in Bismarck, N.D.; and Tom Beaumont in Des Moines, Iowa, contributed to this report.

Sanford Health, Dakota State partner on cyberhealth

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sanford Health in Sioux Falls and Dakota State University are forming a new partnership they say is focused on cyberhealth.

The two entities announced the CyberHealth Strategic Alliance Wednesday and said it was aimed at creating more workforce and economic development options for South Dakota.

That includes collaborative research and creating a health care technology and cybersecurity operations center to serve as a model for health care nationwide.

The alliance would also support startup and technology innovation companies to improve health care delivery, the Argus Leader reported.

"The goal is to create a supportive environment for responsive, agile relationships and collaborations built on the significant abilities and aspirations of the people of Sanford Health and Dakota State University," DSU President José-Marie Griffiths stated.

The alliance would also explore a data science program focused on sports medicine and athletics for injury prevention and athletic performance.

US says settlement products can be labeled 'Made in Israel'

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The U.S. State Department has announced that products from Israeli settlements can be labeled "Made in Israel," breaking with longstanding policy.

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The move was announced shortly after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited a settlement in the occupied West Bank, a first by a top U.S. diplomat.

President Donald Trump's Mideast plan, which overwhelmingly favored Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians, would allow Israel to annex up to a third of the West Bank, including all its settlements.

The State Department said the change in the labeling policy is "consistent with our reality-based foreign policy approach."

The Palestinians and most of the international community view the settlements as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace. The European Union requires member states to label products originating in the settlements.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story follows below.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo paid the first-ever visit by a top U.S. diplomat to an Israeli settlement in the occupied West Bank on Thursday after announcing a new initiative to combat the international Palestinian-led boycott movement.

The visit to the settlement, and the announcement that the U.S. would brand the boycott movement as anti-Semitic and cut off all funding for groups that participate in it, together offered a parting gift to Israel from an administration that has broken with decades of U.S. policy to endorse Israel's claims to territory seized in war.

A State Department official, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the visit to the Psagot winery in a settlement near Jerusalem to reporters traveling with Pompeo, who were not allowed to accompany him.

Pompeo had earlier said he would pay a visit to the Golan Heights. Israel seized the West Bank and the Golan Heights in the 1967 war and later annexed the Golan in a move not recognized internationally.

Israel has built dozens of settlements in the West Bank, which the Palestinians want for their future state. Most of the international community views the settlements as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace.

Pompeo announced that the U.S. will regard the Palestinian-led boycott movement as "anti-Semitic" and cut off government support for any organizations taking part in it, a step that could deny funding to Palestinian and international human rights groups.

"We will regard the global, anti-Israel BDS campaign as anti-Semitic," Pompeo said, referring to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement.

"We will immediately take steps to identify organizations that engage in hateful BDS conduct and withdraw U.S. government support for such groups," he said, adding that all nations should "recognize the BDS movement for the cancer that it is."

BDS organizers cast their movement as a non-violent way of protesting Israel's policies toward the Palestinians modeled on the campaign that helped end apartheid in South Africa. The movement has had some limited success over the years but no impact on the Israeli economy.

Israel views BDS as an assault on its very existence, and has seized on statements by some supporters to accuse it of anti-Semitism, allegations denied by organizers.

In a statement, the BDS movement reiterated its rejection of "all forms of racism, including anti-Jewish racism," and accused the U.S. and Israel of trying to silence advocacy for Palestinian rights.

"The BDS movement for Palestinian freedom, justice and equality, stands with all those struggling for a more dignified, just and beautiful world," it said. "With our many partners, we shall resist these McCarthyite attempts to intimidate and bully Palestinian, Israeli and international human rights defenders into accepting Israeli apartheid and settler-colonialism as fate."

Pompeo did not provide additional details about the initiative, and it was unclear what organizations would be at risk of losing funding. Israelis have accused international groups like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International of supporting BDS, allegations they deny.

Human Rights Watch, whose researcher was deported from Israel last year for past statements allegedly in support of BDS, does not call for boycotting Israel but urges companies to avoid doing business in West Bank settlements, saying it makes them complicit in human rights abuses. Amnesty does not take a position on the boycott movement.

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"The Trump administration is undermining the common fight against the scourge of antisemitism by equating it with peaceful advocacy of boycotts," Eric Goldstein, acting Middle East and North Africa director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement.

Israel passed a 2017 law that bars entry to foreigners who have called for economic boycotts of Israel or its settlements. The U.S. House of Representatives passed a resolution opposing the boycott movement last year, and several U.S. states have enacted anti-BDS laws.

Virtually all Palestinian organizations support the boycott movement, but under President Donald Trump the U.S. has already cut off nearly all forms of aid to the Palestinians. President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to restore the aid as part of efforts to revive the peace process.

Pompeo spoke at a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who said the Israel-U.S. alliance had reached "unprecedented heights" under the Trump administration.

Netanyahu thanked the administration for moving its embassy to contested Jerusalem, abandoning the U.S. position that Israeli settlements are contrary to international law, recognizing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights and taking a hard line against Iran.

Israel captured east Jerusalem and the West Bank in the 1967 war. The Palestinians want both territories to be part of their future state and view the settlements as a violation of international law and an obstacle to peace — a position endorsed by most of the international community.

Trump's Mideast plan, which overwhelmingly favored Israel and was rejected by the Palestinians, would allow Israel to annex up to a third of the West Bank, including all of its settlements there, which are home to nearly 500,000 Israelis.

"For a long time, the State Department took the wrong view of settlements," Pompeo said, but it now recognizes that "settlements can be done in a way that (is) lawful, appropriate and proper."

Neither Netanyahu nor Pompeo said anything about the U.S. election. Pompeo, like Trump, has yet to acknowledge President-elect Joe Biden's victory. Netanyahu congratulated Biden and referred to him as the president-elect in an official statement earlier this week.

African continent hits 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Africa has surpassed 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases as the continent's top public health official warned Thursday that "we are inevitably edging toward a second wave" of infections.

The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the 54-nation continent had crossed the milestone. Africa has seen more than 48,000 deaths from COVID-19. Its infections and deaths make up less than 4% of the global total.

The African continent of 1.3 billion people is being warned against "prevention fatigue" as countries loosen pandemic restrictions to ease their economies' suffering and more people travel.

"We cannot relent. If we relent, then all the sacrifices we put into efforts over the past 10 months will be wiped away," Africa CDC director John Nkengasong told reporters. He expressed concern that "many countries are not enforcing public health measures, including masking, which is extremely important."

While the world takes hope from promising COVID-19 vaccines, African health officials also worry the continent will suffer as richer countries buy up supplies.

"Let's celebrate the good news" first, Nkengasong said. But he warned that the Pfizer vaccine requires storage at minus 70 degrees Celsius, and such a requirement "already creates an imbalance in the fair distribution or access to those vaccines" as richer countries will be better equipped to move quickly.

A storage network at minus 70 Celsius was put in place for West Africa's devastating Ebola outbreak a few years ago, but that was localized, Nkengasong said. "If we were to deploy across the whole continent, it would be extremely challenging to scale it," he said. "Let's be hopeful in coming weeks other vaccines will show more ease of distribution in resource-limited settings like Africa."

The Moderna vaccine requires storage at minus 20 degrees Celsius, which Nkengasong called promising.

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But the price of any COVID-19 vaccine is another factor in their fair distribution, he said. "So if a vaccine is \$40 it becomes almost exclusive to parts of the world" that can afford it.

But he offered an optimistic early look at attitudes across Africa toward any COVID-19 vaccine. Early data from a vaccine perception survey in 11 countries show 81% of respondents would accept a vaccine, he said. "So that's very, very encouraging news."

In a separate briefing, World Health Organization Africa chief Matshidiso Moeti acknowledged "very hot competition at the global level to reserve doses" but expressed her hope that "as time goes on, other countries are willing to, if you like, concede that you don't need to try to cover all the population at once."

Salim Abdool Karim, chairman of South Africa's COVID-19 advisory committee, said there was no sign that the vaccines now showing promise won't be just as effective in Africa as in their clinical trials elsewhere in the world.

Several African countries have confirmed virus cases in the six figures. South Africa leads with more than 750,000, while Morocco has more than 300,000, Egypt more than 110,000 and Ethiopia more than 100,000.

Kenya is the latest concern as it now sees a fresh surge in cases. At least four doctors died on Saturday alone, leading a powerful health union in the country to threaten a nationwide strike starting next month.

"Absolutely no doubt you'll see COVID spread into more rural areas" of Kenya and other countries, Nken-gasong said, as more people move around.

The African continent has conducted 20 million coronavirus tests since the pandemic began, but shortages mean the true number of infections is unknown.

Moeti worried that in some of Africa's low-income countries, much of the limited testing capacity has been used on people who want to travel abroad instead of controlling the virus at home.

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

Trump targets vote certification in late bid to block Biden

By ZEKE MILLER, CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Getting nowhere in the courts, President Donald Trump's scattershot effort to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory is shifting toward obscure election boards that certify the vote as Trump and his allies seek to upend the electoral process, sow chaos and perpetuate unsubstantiated doubts about the count.

The battle is centered in the battleground states that sealed Biden's win.

In Michigan, two Republican election officials in the state's largest county initially refused to certify results despite no evidence of fraud, then backtracked and voted to certify and then on Wednesday flipped again and said they "remain opposed to certification." Some Republicans have called on the GOP statewide canvassers to do the same. In Arizona, officials are balking at signing off on vote tallies in a rural county.

The moves don't reflect a coordinated effort across the battleground states that broke for Biden, local election officials said. Instead, they seem to be inspired by Trump's incendiary rhetoric about baseless fraud and driven by Republican acquiescence to broadsides against the nation's electoral system as state and federal courts push aside legal challenges filed by Trump and his allies.

Still, what happened in Wayne County, Michigan, on Tuesday and Wednesday was a jarring reminder of the disruptions that can still be caused as the nation works through the process of affirming the outcome of the Nov. 3 election.

There is no precedent for the Trump team's widespread effort to delay or undermine certification, according to University of Kentucky law professor Joshua Douglas.

"It would be the end of democracy as we know it," Douglas said. "This is just not a thing that can happen."

Certifying results is a routine yet important step after local election officials have tallied votes, reviewed procedures, checked to ensure votes were counted correctly and investigated discrepancies. Typically, this certification is done by a local board of elections and then, later, the results are certified at the state level.

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But as Trump has refused to concede to Biden and continues to spread false claims of victory, this mundane process is taking on new significance.

Among key battleground states, counties in Michigan, Nevada and Wisconsin have all made it through the initial step of certifying results. Except for Wayne County, this process has largely been smooth. Arizona, Pennsylvania and Georgia still haven't concluded their local certifications.

Then all eyes turn to statewide certification.

In Wayne County, the two Republican canvassers at first balked at certifying the vote, winning praise from Trump, and then reversed course after widespread condemnation. A person familiar with the matter said Trump reached out to the canvassers, Monica Palmer and William Hartmann, on Tuesday evening after the revised vote to express gratitude for their support. Then, on Wednesday, Palmer and Hartmann signed affidavits saying they believe the county vote "should not be certified."

Time is running short for Trump. Across the nation, recounts and court challenges must wrap up and election results must be certified by Dec. 8. That's the constitutional deadline ahead of the Electoral College meeting the following week.

Matt Morgan, the Trump campaign's general counsel, said last week the campaign was trying to halt certification in battleground states until it could get a better handle on vote tallies and whether it would have the right to automatic recounts. Right now, Trump is requesting a recount in Wisconsin in two counties, and Georgia is doing an hand audit after Biden led by a slim margin of 0.3 percentage points, but there is no mandatory recount law in the state. The law provides that option to a trailing candidate if the margin is less than 0.5 percentage points.

Some in the Republican president's orbit have held out hope that by delaying certification, GOP-controlled state legislatures will get a chance to select different electors, either overturning Biden's victory or sending it to the House, where Trump would almost surely win.

But most advisers to the president consider that a fever dream. Trump's team has been incapable of organizing even basic legal activities since the election, let alone the widescale political and legal apparatus needed to persuade state legislators to try to undermine the will of their states' voters.

Lawsuits have been filed by Trump allies in Michigan and Nevada seeking to stop certification. Trump personal attorney Rudy Giuliani argued to stop vote certification in Pennsylvania on Tuesday, the first time he'd been in a courtroom in decades. And the same day, the Arizona Republican Party asked a judge to bar Maricopa County, the state's most populous, from certifying until the court issues a decision about the party's lawsuit seeking a new hand count of a sampling of ballots.

The party is also putting pressure on county officials across the state to delay certification, even though there hasn't been any evidence of legitimate questions about the vote tally showing that Biden won Arizona.

"The party is pushing for not only the county supervisors but everyone responsible for certifying and canvassing the election to make sure that all questions are answered so that voters will have confidence in the results of the election," said Zach Henry, spokesman for the Arizona Republican Party.

While most counties in Arizona are pressing ahead with certification, officials in Mohave County decided to delay until Nov. 23, citing what they said was uncertainty about the fate of election challenges across the country.

"There are lawsuits all over the place on everything, and that's part of the reason why I'm in no big hurry to canvass the election," Mohave County Supervisor Ron Gould said Monday.

Officials in all of Georgia's 159 counties were supposed to have certified their results by last Friday. But a few have yet to certify as the state works through a hand tally of some 5 million votes.

"They are overwhelmed, and they are trying to get to everything," said Gabriel Sterling, a top official with the Georgia Secretary of State's Office. "Some of these are smaller, less resourced counties, and there are only so many people who can do so many things."

In addition, a few counties must recertify their results after previously uncounted votes were discovered during the audit.

Once counties have certified, the focus turns to officials at the state level who are charged with signing

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off on the election. This varies by state. For instance, a bipartisan panel in Michigan certifies elections, but in Georgia it's the responsibility of the elected secretary of state, who has already faced calls by fellow Republicans to resign.

In Nevada, Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske's role in certification is largely ministerial, but she still got a batch of emails urging her not to certify "potentially fraudulent election results," a spokeswoman said Wednesday. The Justice Department had been looking into one potential case of fraud in the state over voter rolls, but an AP analysis found the case doesn't appear to hold much water.

In Pennsylvania's Luzerne County, a Republican board member, Joyce Dombroski-Gebhardt, said she will not certify the county's election without an audit of at least 10% of the votes to ensure that some voters did not vote twice.

Trump won the county, where the election board is made up of three Democrats and two Republicans. A Democrat on the board, Peter Oullette, said he had no doubt that the rest of the board will sign the certification on Monday.

Philadelphia also had plans to certify results on Monday.

And some delays could still happen given the crushing workload election officials faced this year during the pandemic, according to Suzanne Almeida with Common Cause Pennsylvania, a good government group that helps with voter education and monitors election work in the state.

"A delay in certification doesn't necessarily mean there are shenanigans; sometimes it just takes longer to go through all the mechanics to get to certification," Almeida said.

Cassidy reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Bob Christie and Jacques Billeaud in Phoenix; Marc Levy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Scott Bauer in Madison, Wisconsin; Kate Brumback in Atlanta; and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

Iran candidate tells AP: US attack risks 'full-fledged war'

By NASSER KARIMI and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — An adviser to Iran's supreme leader who is a possible 2021 presidential candidate is warning that any American attack on the Islamic Republic could set off a "full-fledged war" in the Mideast in the waning days of the Trump administration.

Speaking to The Associated Press, Hossein Dehghan struck a hard-line tone familiar to those in Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard, a force he long served in before becoming a defense minister under President Hassan Rouhani.

A soldier has yet to serve as Iran's top civilian leader since its 1979 Islamic Revolution, in part over the initial suspicion that its conventional military forces remained loyal to the toppled shah. But hard-liners in recent years openly have suggested Iran move toward a military dictatorship given its economic problems and threats from abroad, particularly after President Donald Trump pulled America out of Tehran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

"We don't welcome a crisis. We don't welcome war. We are not after starting a war," Dehghan said Wednesday. "But we are not after negotiations for the sake of negotiations either."

Dehghan, 63, described himself as a "nationalist" with "no conventional political tendency" during an interview in his wood-paneled office in downtown Tehran. He's one of many likely to register to run in the June 18 election as Rouhani is term-limited from running again. Others likely include a young technocrat with ties to Iranian intelligence and former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Dehghan's military service came under presidencies representative of the groups that largely compose Iran's tightly controlled political arena — reformists who seek to slowly change Iran's theocracy from within, hard-liners who want to strengthen the theocracy and the relative moderates between. Those calling for radical change are barred from running for office by Iran's powerful constitutional watchdog known as the Guardian Council, which serves under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

While discussing the world Iran finds itself in, Dehghan's points mirrored many of Khamenei's. The former

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head of the Guard's air force who achieved the rank of brigadier general said any negotiations with the West could not include Iran's ballistic missiles, which he described as a "deterrent" to Tehran's adversaries.

Propaganda involving Iran's missile program has surged in recent weeks. The front page of the English-language Tehran Times on Wednesday showed a map of Iran's missile ranges with red stars marking American bases across the region under the words "Back off!" printed in big, bold letters. A headline above warned Iran would respond to "any melancholy adventure by Trump."

"The Islamic Republic of Iran will not negotiate its defensive power ... with anybody under any circumstances," Dehghan said. "Missiles are a symbol of the massive potential that is in our experts, young people and industrial centers."

Dehghan warned against any American military escalation in Trump's final weeks in office.

"A limited, tactical conflict can turn into a full-fledged war," he said. "Definitely, the United States, the region and the world cannot stand such a comprehensive crisis."

President-elect Joe Biden has said he's willing to return to the nuclear deal, which saw sanctions on Iran lifted in exchange for Tehran limiting its uranium enrichment, if Iran first complies with its limits. Since Trump's withdrawal, Iran has gone beyond all the deal's restrictions while still allowing United Nations nuclear inspectors to work in the country. Dehghan said those U.N. checks should continue so long as an inspector is not a "spy."

In the time since, an advanced centrifuge assembly plant at Iran's Natanz nuclear site exploded and caught fire in July. Dehghan said that reconstruction at Natanz was ongoing after satellite photos showed new construction at the site. He described the incident as "industrial sabotage."

"Those who were in charge of installing some devices possibly made some changes there that led to the explosion," Dehghan said, without elaborating.

A Dehghan presidency likely would be looked upon with suspicion in Washington and Paris. As a young commander in the Guard, Dehghan oversaw its operations in Lebanon and Syria between 1982 and 1984, according to an official biography given to Iran's parliament in 2013. Israel, Iran's archenemy in the Mideast, had just invaded Lebanon amid that country's civil war.

In 1983, a suicide bomber in a truck loaded with military-grade explosives attacked a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 241 American troops and 58 French soldiers. While Iran long has denied being involved, a U.S. District Court judge found Tehran responsible in 2003. That ruling said Iran's ambassador to Syria at the time called "a member of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and instructed him to instigate the Marine barracks bombing."

Dehghan vehemently denied he was involved in the bombing, though he was the Guard's top commander there at the time.

"The U.S. tries to link anything happening in the world to someone in Iran," he said. "Do they really have evidence? Why do they link it to me?"

While stressing he wanted to avoid conflict, Dehghan warned Israel's expanding presence in the Mideast could turn into a "strategic mistake." Israel just reached normalization deals with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

"It is opening an extensive front," he said. "Just imagine every Israeli in any military base can be a target for groups who are opposed to Israel."

Dehghan also said Iran continues to seek the expulsion of all American forces from the region as revenge for the U.S. drone strike in Baghdad that killed Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of its expeditionary Quds Force in January. That strike saw Iran launch a retaliatory ballistic missile strike on U.S. troops in Iraq that injured dozens and nearly sparked a war.

Iran's retaliatory strikes were a mere "initial slap," Dehghan said. And there would be no easy return to negotiations with the U.S. in part due to that, he added.

"We do not seek a situation in which (the other party) buys time to weaken our nation," he said.

Gambrell reported from Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Associated Press writer Isabel DeBre in Dubai

contributed to this report.

Japan's daily virus cases surge past previous record high

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's new coronavirus infections hit a record high Thursday, and the prime minister urged maximum caution but stopped short of calling for restrictions on travel or business.

The Health Ministry reported 2,179 new cases, the first time Japan has had more than 2,000 daily cases since the pandemic began. The previous high for new cases was 1,723 on Nov. 14.

Compared to many other countries, Japan has done well with its efforts to combat the virus, reporting 122,966 infections, with 1,922 deaths, since the pandemic began. But it has seen an uptick in cases recently, with record highs both nationally and in Tokyo, the country's largest city.

Tokyo's metropolitan government on Thursday reported 534 new cases, a record high, and raised its alert level to "red," the highest on a scale of four. Tokyo's previous record was 493 set Wednesday. Before that Tokyo's numbers peaked in August during an earlier surge.

The nationwide spikes, especially in the populated capital region and Hokkaido in the north, are alarming experts ahead of an upcoming three-day weekend and the winter holiday season of traveling and parties. They have called on officials to step up preventive measures.

Experts on Tokyo's coronavirus panel called Thursday for officials to secure more beds for patients and hotel rooms for those with less serious symptoms before infections further accelerate.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga said Thursday that he has instructed Cabinet ministers to do their utmost to prevent infections from escalating and he urged the thorough use of masks. But he said his government's tourism and dining incentives will continue.

The "GoTo eat" dining campaign aimed at supporting the restaurant and tourism industry should be limited to groups of up to four people, Suga said. He also asked people to wear masks when dining, removing them only when they put food in their mouths and immediately put them back on while talking quietly.

"I ask the people to quietly dine with masks," Suga said. "I will start thoroughly doing that myself."

Experts say Japan's wide use of face masks and other common preventative measures, as well as cultural traditions that lack handshakes and kissing, might have helped keep the country's caseload low.

Infections have gradually climbed back as the government tries to balance disease prevention and the economy without curbing business activity.

A top government panel expert, Shigeru Omi, told a parliamentary session Wednesday that infection clusters are now occurring in a variety of situations, making preventive measures more challenging and requiring the scaling down of economic and social activity.

"It's time to buckle up again," Omi said.

Japan Medical Association President Toshio Nakagawa urged Tokyo residents to stay home over the weekend.

Economy Revitalization Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura told reporters late Wednesday that groups in the service industry are revising their safety guidelines to step up preventive measures at restaurants and bars where risks are deemed high.

Government officials are reluctant to scale back businesses at a time when the economy is still struggling. The resurgence could also complicate things as Tokyo prepares to host the Olympics next summer after a postponement due to the pandemic.

Japan declared a state of emergency in April and May, making nonbinding stay-at-home and business closure requests. The number of cases leveled off thanks to the measure, even though many people still commuted, picnicked in parks and dined at restaurants that stayed open despite the requests.

Follow Mari Yamaguchi on Twitter at <https://www.twitter.com/mariyamaguchi>

Will social distancing weaken my immune system?

By The Associated Press undefined

Will social distancing weaken my immune system?

In short, no.

Some worry a lack of contact with others will weaken their immune system by reducing its active contact with germs.

But even when we're staying 6 feet from others or spending most of our time at home, our bodies are continuously responding to plenty of bacteria and other germs that inhabit indoor and outdoor environments.

"We're constantly exposed to microbes," said Akiko Iwasaki, an immune system researcher at Yale University. "Our immune system is always being triggered."

The effects of childhood vaccines and other built-up immunity are also long-lasting, Iwasaki said, and won't disappear overnight because we're keeping our distance from others during the pandemic.

Experts say anyone looking to boost their immune health during the pandemic should practice habits such as stress management, healthy eating, regular exercise and getting enough sleep.

"These are the things that actually affect the immune system," Iwasaki said.

A seasonal flu shot will also help protect you from one more potential illness.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org.

Read previous Viral Questions:

How does the coronavirus affect the heart?

Does the flu vaccine affect my chances of getting COVID-19?

Am I immune to the coronavirus if I've already had it?

Wolves select Edwards with No. 1 pick in delayed NBA draft

By BRIAN MAHONEY AP Basketball Writer

Anthony Edwards paid tribute to his mother and grandmother. Onyeka Okongwu recalled his brother. Obi Toppin thought about coming home.

Tears flowed freely for those and many more players Wednesday night when their long-awaited, months-delayed NBA dreams were finally realized.

Edwards was taken by the Minnesota Timberwolves with the No. 1 pick in an NBA draft delayed multiple times because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Commissioner Adam Silver announced the pick from ESPN headquarters in Bristol, Connecticut. The draft was originally scheduled for June 25 before multiple delays caused by the virus pushed it back and out of its usual home at Barclays Center in Brooklyn. Boxes of hats were shipped to the top prospects to put on the one they needed after their name was called.

Edwards watched while seated next to portraits of his late mother and grandmother. They both died of cancer and he was emotional after his name was announced.

"As far as just being excited and just being happy and ready to go and ready to work and ready to get there as soon as possible, those emotions were overwhelming with just my mother and grandmother being there," Edwards said. "I mean, it was just a dream come true and just a blessing."

And though there wasn't the usual family table in the green room and trip on stage to meet the commissioner, some players still were outfitted in fashionable attire — perhaps none more than No. 12 pick Tyrese Haliburton of Sacramento, whose blue, floral suit had the words "Black Lives Matter" on the inside.

They celebrated with family, friends, coaches — and in Cole Anthony's case, even celebrity fans. Movie director Spike Lee jumped up and down with his family when Orlando took Anthony, whose father, Greg played for the Knicks, at No. 15.

Some moments triggered deeper emotions. Okongwu, taken No. 6 by Atlanta, recalled his older brother, Nnamdi, who died after a skateboarding accident in 2014.

Toppin, the national player of the year last season at Dayton, struggled to speak after New York took

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him at No. 8, bringing the Brooklyn-born forward to his hometown.

"I'm from New York, that's why it's important," Toppin said. "Me repping my city, it's amazing."

Edwards became the 11th straight one-and-done player to be the No. 1 pick, coming in a year where there was no clear obvious choice. He averaged 19.1 points for the Bulldogs, tops among all freshman.

The Golden State Warriors, stung by the news that Klay Thompson sustained another leg injury earlier Wednesday, took Memphis center James Wiseman with the second pick. They stumbled to the bottom of the league while Thompson missed the entire season with a torn ACL in his left knee.

The severity of his injury had not been revealed as the draft began but it didn't persuade the Warriors to take another guard. Instead they went with the 7-foot-1 center who arrived as the No. 1 recruit out of high school and averaged 19.7 points and 10.7 rebounds in three games before he was suspended for eligibility reasons and eventually left the program to prepare for the draft.

LaMelo Ball then went to the Charlotte Hornets, the next stop on a lengthy basketball journey that sent the guard from high school in California to stops as a professional in Lithuania and Australia. He joined brother Lonzo, taken No. 2 by the Lakers and now in New Orleans, to give the Balls two brothers taken in the top three picks.

After all his travels, Ball is eager to make a home playing for Michael Jordan's team in Charlotte.

"I feel like I can go out there and play basketball," Ball said. "I feel like I was born to do this."

The newcomers will have precious little time to prepare for their debuts and need to knock off months of rust or more — Wiseman hasn't played an organized game in a year — without the benefit of summer league. Training camps open in early December and the 72-game 2020-21 season is set to begin on Dec. 22.

"This draft process has been the longest for me, so I've just been working on my game," Wiseman said. "I've actually been playing pickup games with pros already, so I've been getting a lot of experience. But really just focusing on myself. I'm truly ready to play with these great guys."

Teams had to evaluate prospects without benefit of the usual draft combine in Chicago or the ability to invite them to their facilities for workouts and meetings. And with the coronavirus shutting down the sports world in March, there was no NCAA Tournament for the players to make a final impression before entering the draft.

That helped contribute to perhaps more questions than usual surrounding the draft, with little feel for how the top few picks would play out.

The Chicago Bulls took Patrick Williams of Florida State, the ACC sixth man of the year as a freshman, at No. 4. Cleveland followed with Auburn's Isaac Okoro, another freshman, to round out the top five.

The latter half of the top 10 featured a couple highly regarded international players in France's Killian Hayes, taken by Detroit at No. 7, and Deni Avdija, the highest player to come from Israel when Washington picked him at No. 9.

The setting wasn't the only thing unusual about the draft. Duke didn't have a player picked in the first round after having 39 since the league went to a two-round draft in 1989.

And the San Antonio Spurs picked in the lottery for the first time since 1997, when they drafted Tim Duncan No. 1. The Spurs picked Devin Vassell at No. 11, giving Florida State two first-round selections for just the second time in school history.

More AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Virus threat 'a new terror' in Syria's scarred Idlib region

By GHAITH ALSAYED and SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

IDLIB, Syria (AP) — Nurses hover over a patient to insert a breathing tube as his condition suddenly deteriorates. ICU beds fill up almost overnight. As one patient dies of the coronavirus and is wheeled out, another is whisked in to take his place. An exhausted doctor leans against a wheelchair for a breather.

The pace is dizzying at the largest isolation hospital in Syria's northwestern city of Idlib. There are no bombs falling outside and the wounded don't crowd bloodstained corridors amid a shaky cease-fire in the

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country's decade old civil war. Still, the intensive care unit staff is overwhelmed with beds full of elderly patients gasping for air.

COVID-19 infections in the last opposition-controlled territory in Syria have been increasing rapidly. Spared until July, the region is now recording 300-500 infections a day, and the number is rising fast.

The area, battered by repeated military offensives from the government of President Bashar Assad, is home to nearly 4 million people, most of them displaced and living in tent camps or unfinished buildings.

Infection rates jumped nearly twentyfold between September and October, the U.N. said. Since then, it has climbed 300%, with nearly 11,900 cases recorded by Nov. 16, up from 8,100 a week earlier.

The number of infections is probably much higher. Cities have been hit hardest, but workers fear the virus will take hold in overcrowded camps.

"There are many patients, most in very bad condition. We have no time to give them all they need," said Aref Shabib, one of over 95 nurses and technicians in the 70-bed isolation hospital, one of two in the city of Idlib, now a virus hot spot.

The pandemic, which has severely tested even developed countries, is the biggest challenge yet for Syria's health sector, already depleted by years of conflict. Authorities are pacing themselves, deploying equipment and supplies where needed in war-scarred areas.

Ambulance driver Rami Khalaf ferried a patient and a nurse for three hours from the city of Idlib to a southern town for a breathing machine. By the time they arrived, they found there was no oxygen available, so they headed to a third location, another three-hour drive.

With the nurse tending to the unconscious patient with one hand and operating a walkie-talkie in a search for life-saving equipment with the other, they drove more than 200 kilometers (125 miles).

Khalaf sat sweating behind the wheel for seven hours in his hazmat suit and mask, driving on unpaved and bombed-out roads. "We are living a new difficult experience," he said.

At least Khalaf didn't have to dodge bombs. Medical teams and hospitals often were targeted by government forces that accuse them of treating "terrorists" — its label for opposition fighters.

But carrying virus patients is a new challenge. Khalaf transported nearly 50 patients in 10 days, up from practically none in October. He keeps away from his children for two to three days to avoid infecting them.

"It is a new terror that is going around among us," he said.

Announcements of virus deaths on social media or mosque loudspeakers compete with posters honoring those killed in battle, with 95 fatalities linked to COVID-19.

As winter rains began, bringing with it renewed rumblings of war, fear is growing that exhausted medical teams may not be able to cope.

Nearly 17% of infections were among health workers, who were first to get the virus. At least three doctors and an administrator died. Medical workers who survived the battlefield find themselves fighting an invisible enemy that pushes their resilience to new limits.

Unlike the war wounded, an entire 24-hour shift can be devoted to just one COVID-19 patient, said Shabib, the ICU specialist.

"We could work for six or eight hours nonstop without even sitting down. It is very hard work," he said.

At the Ziraah or Agriculture Hospital, most of the 42 patients were elderly. At least 16 were getting some form of breathing assistance, said Dr. Salah Eddin al-Saleh, in charge of the ICU at the hospital operated by the Syrian American Medical Society.

Al-Saleh said he had to turn some patients away.

"We are working at full capacity and all our (ICU) beds are taken. The minute one bed is empty, a patient is admitted," he said.

In northwestern Syria, which has been outside government control for most of the last decade, dispersing aid is as complicated as the politics of the conflict.

According to the U.N. task force coordinating efforts, there are at least 142 ICU beds and 155 breathing machines in use in the area. The plan is to eventually have 219 ICU beds and 162 machines. Nearly 500 doctors and nurses are working in COVID-19 centers.

Seven of eight hospitals in northwestern Syria that are equipped to treat the virus are already over-

whelmed.

"The increase in COVID infections, cases of hospitalization and nearing full occupancy of ICUs, brings us closer to a state of emergency," said Salem Abdan, head of Idlib's health directorate.

Infections also are rising at the overcrowded camps housing many of the nearly 1 million people who have been displaced since the last government offensive in March.

Dr. Nasser AlMuhawish, who compiles virus data from his base in Turkey, said only about 8% of infections in the camps have been recorded, and teams are increasing their screenings.

For Syrians who have survived so much adversity, the virus seems to be the least of their worries. Social distancing is nearly impossible, with a single tent or temporary shelter housing between nine to two dozen people, some who have been repeatedly displaced.

"People in Idlib have suffered the worst impacts of the conflict over 10 years," said Misty Buswell, Middle East advocacy director for the International Rescue Committee. "A lot of people are saying ... being displaced is much harder than anything coming from COVID. At this point, I think we have to qualify that and say, 'Up until now.'"

With an economic crisis gripping Syria, the local currency tumbling and resources in war zones shrinking, even the price of soap and water is soaring.

Residents who have supported each other during cycles of violence describe a new sense of fear.

"I don't leave my house except to buy bread and food," said Yasser Aboud, a father of three who has had seven relatives test positive. "I'm diabetic and worry I may get infected."

A neighbor died of COVID-19, but Aboud was afraid to pay his respects.

With fighting threatening to resume and bring a new wave of displacement, Buswell fears a "perfect storm" could be gathering, especially if infections rise like in Europe and the U.S.

Virus misinformation also is spreading, such as eating garlic and onions as a preventative. Some see masks as a sign of infection, adding to the stigma of covering up.

Children play a game in which one picks up a mask found on the street and chases others screaming: "COVID! COVID!"

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El Deeb reported from Beirut.

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Not just COVID: Nursing home neglect deaths surge in shadows

By MATT SEDENSKY and BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

When COVID-19 tore through Donald Wallace's nursing home, he was one of the lucky few to avoid infection.

He died a horrible death anyway.

Hale and happy before the pandemic, the 75-year-old retired Alabama truck driver became so malnourished and dehydrated that he dropped to 98 pounds and looked to his son like he'd been in a concentration camp. Septic shock suggested an untreated urinary infection, E. coli in his body from his own feces hinted at poor hygiene, and aspiration pneumonia indicated Wallace, who needed help with meals, had likely choked on his food.

"He couldn't even hold his head up straight because he had gotten so weak," said his son, Kevin Ameron. "They stopped taking care of him. They abandoned him."

As more than 90,000 of the nation's long-term care residents have died in a pandemic that has pushed staffs to the limit, advocates for the elderly say a tandem wave of death separate from the virus has quietly claimed tens of thousands more, often because overburdened workers haven't been able to give them the care they need.

Nursing home watchdogs are being flooded with reports of residents kept in soiled diapers so long their

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skin peeled off, left with bedsores that cut to the bone, and allowed to wither away in starvation or thirst.

Beyond that, interviews with dozens of people across the country reveal swelling numbers of less clear-cut deaths that doctors believe have been fueled not by neglect but by a mental state plunged into despair by prolonged isolation—listed on some death certificates as “failure to thrive.”

A nursing home expert who analyzed data from the country’s 15,000 facilities for The Associated Press estimates that for every two COVID-19 victims in long-term care, there is another who died prematurely of other causes. Those “excess deaths” beyond the normal rate of fatalities in nursing homes could total more than 40,000 since March.

These extra deaths are roughly 15% more than you’d expect at nursing homes already facing tens of thousands of deaths each month in a normal year.

“The healthcare system operates kind of on the edge, just on the margin, so that if there’s a crisis, we can’t cope,” said Stephen Kaye, a professor at the Institute on Health and Aging at the University of California, San Francisco, who conducted the analysis. “There are not enough people to look after the nursing home residents.”

Comparing mortality rates at homes struck by COVID-19 with ones that were spared, Kaye also found that the more the virus spread through a home, the greater the number of deaths recorded for other reasons. In homes where at least 3 in 10 residents had the virus, for example, the rate of death for reasons besides the virus was double what would be expected without a pandemic.

That suggests the care of those who didn’t contract the virus may have been impacted as healthcare workers were consumed attending to residents ill from COVID-19 or were left short-handed as the pandemic infected employees themselves.

Chronic understaffing at nursing homes has been one of the hallmarks of the pandemic, with a few homes even forced to evacuate because so many workers either tested positive or called in sick. In 20 states where virus cases are now surging, federal data shows nearly 1 in 4 nursing homes report staff shortages.

On New York’s Long Island, Dawn Best saw that firsthand. Before COVID-19 arrived at Gurwin Jewish Nursing Home, she was pleased with the care her 83-year-old mother Carolyn Best received. She enjoyed activities, from tai-chi classes to visits from a pony, and was doted on by staff.

But when the lockdown started and the virus began to spread in the home, Best sensed the staff couldn’t handle what they had been dealt. The second time her mother, a retired switchboard operator, appeared on screen for a scheduled FaceTime call, she looked awful, her eyes closed as she moaned, flailed her arms above her head and just kept repeating “no.” Best insisted a doctor check her out.

A few hours later, the doctor called, seemingly frantic, saying she only had a moment to talk.

“The COVID is everywhere,” Best remembered her saying. “It’s in every unit. The doctors have it, the nurses have it and your mother may have it.”

In the end, 59 residents at Gurwin would be killed by the virus, but Best’s mother never contracted it. She died instead of dehydration, her daughter said, because the staff was so consumed with caring for COVID-19 patients that no one made sure she was drinking.

“My mom went from being unbelievably cared for to dead in three weeks,” said Best, who provided medical documents noting her mother’s dehydration. “They were in over their head more than anyone could imagine.”

Representatives for Gurwin said they could not comment on Best’s case. The home’s administrator, Joanne Parisi, said “COVID-19 has affected us all” but that “our staff at Gurwin has been doing heroic work.”

West Hill Health and Rehab in Birmingham, Alabama, where Wallace lived prior to his Aug. 29 death, said he was “cared for with the utmost compassion, dedication and respect.” Wallace’s son provided medical documents outlining the conditions he described.

The nursing home trade group American Health Care Association disputed that there has been a widespread inability of staff to care for residents and dismissed estimates of tens-of-thousands of non-COVID-19 deaths as “speculation.”

Dr. David Gifford, the group’s chief medical officer, said the pandemic created “challenges” in staffing,

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particularly in states like New York and New Jersey hit hard by COVID-19, but added that, if anything, staffing levels have improved because of a drop in new admissions that has lightened the patient load.

"There have been some really sad and disturbing stories that have come out," Gifford said, "but we've not seen that widespread."

When facilities sealed off across the country in March, advocates and inspectors were routinely kept out too, all while concerning reports trickled in, not only of serious injuries from falls or major medical declines, but of seemingly banal problems that posed serious health issues for the vulnerable.

Mairead Painter, Connecticut's long-term care ombudsman, said with dentists shut out, ill-fitting dentures went unfixed, a factor in mounting accounts of malnutrition, and with podiatrists gone, toenails went untrimmed, posing the possibility of painful conditions in diabetes patients.

Even more widespread, as loved ones lost access to homes, was critical help with residents' feeding, bathing, dressing and other tasks. The burden fell on aides already working tough shifts for little pay.

"I don't think anyone really understood how much time friends and family, volunteers and other people spent in the nursing home and supplemented that hands-on care," Painter said.

Strict rules barring in-person visitation persist in many homes, but as families and advocates have inched back inside, they've frequently been stunned by what they found.

When June Linnertz returned to her father's room at Cherrywood Pointe in Plymouth, Minnesota, in June for the first time in three months, she was struck by a blast of heat and a wall thermometer that hit 85 degrees. His sheets were soaked in sweat, his hair was plastered to his head and he was covered in bruises Linnertz would learn came from at least a half-dozen falls. His nails had been uncut so long, they curled over his fingertips and his eyes crusted over so badly he couldn't get them open.

The father, 78-year-old James Gill, screamed, thinking he had gone blind, and Linnertz grabbed an aide in a panic. She snipped off his diaper, revealing genitals that were deep red and skin sloughing off.

Two days later, Gill was dead from Lewy Body Dementia, according to a copy of his death certificate provided to the AP. Linnertz always expected her father to die of the condition, which causes a progressive loss of memory and movement, but never thought he would end his days in so much needless pain.

"What the pandemic did was uncover what was really going on in these facilities. It was bad before, but it got exponentially worse because you had the squeeze of the pandemic," Linnertz said. "If we weren't in a pandemic, I would have been in there ... This wouldn't have happened."

The assisted living facility's parent company, Ebenezer, said: "We strongly deny the allegations made about the care of this resident," adding that it follows "strict regulatory staffing levels" required by law.

Cheryl Hennen, Minnesota's long-term care ombudsman, said dozens of complaints have poured in of bedsores, dehydration and weight loss, and other examples of neglect at various facilities, such as a man who choked to death while he went unsupervised during mealtime. She fears many more stories of abuse and neglect will emerge as her staff and families are able to return to homes.

"If we can't get in there, how do we know what's really happening?" she said. "We don't know what we can't see."

The nagging guilt of unnecessary death is one Barbara Leak-Watkins understands. It was just in February that her 87-year-old father, Alex Leak, went for a check-up and got lab work that made Leak-Watkins think the Army veteran, contractor and farmer would be with her for a long time to come.

"You're going to outlive all of us," Leak-Watkins remembered the doctor saying.

As nursing home outbreaks of COVID-19 proliferated, Leak-Watkins prayed that he be spared. The prayer was answered, but Leak was nonetheless found unresponsive on the floor at Brookdale Northwest in Greensboro, North Carolina, his eyes rolled back and his tongue sticking out.

After he arrived at the hospital, a doctor there called Leak-Watkins with word: Her father had gone so long without water his potassium levels rocketed and his kidneys started failing. He'd be dead two weeks later of lactic acidosis, according to his death certificate, a fatal buildup of acid in the body when the kidneys stop working. For a man whose military service so drilled the need for hydration into him that he always had a bottle of water at hand, his daughter had never considered he could go thirsty.

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"The facility is short-staffed ... underpaid and overworked," Leak-Watkins said. If they "can't provide you with liquids and fluids to hydrate yourself, there's something wrong."

The daughter is considering filing a lawsuit but a North Carolina law granting long-term care facilities broad immunity from suits claiming negligence in injuries or death during the pandemic could stymie her efforts. Similar laws and executive orders have been enacted in more than two dozen states.

The owner of the father's facility, Brookdale Senior Living, said it couldn't comment on individual cases but that "the health, happiness and wellbeing of each of our residents will always be our priority."

Around the country, the heartache repeats, not only among families who have already buried a member, but also those who feel they are watching a slow-moving disaster.

In Hendersonville, Tennessee, Tara Thompson was able to see her mother for the first time in more than six months when she was hospitalized in October. The 79-year-old had dropped about 20 pounds, her eyes sunken and her legs looking more like forearms. Doctors at the hospital said she was malnourished and wasting muscle. There were bedsores on her backside and a gash on her forehead from a fall at the home. Her vocabulary had shrunk to nearly nothing and she'd taken to pulling the blankets over her head.

The facility Thompson's mother lived in had been engulfed in virus outbreaks, with more than half its residents testing positive and dozens of employees infected, too. She never caught it, but shaken by the lack of care, Thompson transferred her mother to a new home.

"It has nothing to do with the virus. She's declined because she's had absolutely no contact with anybody who cares about her," she said. "The only thing they have to live for are their families and, at the end of their life, you're taking away the only thing that matters to them."

"Failure to thrive" was among the causes listed for Maxine Schwartz, a 92-year-old former cake decorator whose family had been encouraged prior to the lockdown by how well she'd adjusted to her nursing home, Absolut Care of Aurora Park, in upstate New York. Her daughter, Dorothy Ann Carlone, would coax her to eat in the dining room each day and they'd sing songs and have brownies back in her room. Several times a week, Schwartz walked the length of the hallway for exercise.

When the lockdown began March 13, Carlone feared what would happen without her there. She pleaded to staff: "If you don't let me in to feed her, she won't eat, she will starve."

On March 25, when a staffer at the home sent a photo of Schwartz, Carlone was shocked how thin she was. Carlone was told her mother hadn't been eating, even passing up her favorite brownies.

Two days later, Carlone got an urgent call and when she arrived at the home, her mother's skin was mottled, she was gasping for breath and her face was so drawn she was nearly unrecognizable. An hour later, she died.

Dawn Harsch, a spokeswoman for the company that owns Absolut Care, noted a state investigation found no wrongdoing and that "the natural progression of a patient like Mrs. Schwartz experiencing advanced dementia is a refusal to eat."

Carlone is unconvinced.

"She was doing so good before they locked us out," Carlone said. "What did she think when I wasn't showing up? That I didn't love her anymore? That I abandoned her? That I was dead?"

Before the lockdown, Carlone's mother would wait by an elevator for her to arrive each day. She thinks of her mother waiting there when her visits stopped and knows the pain of the isolation must have played a role in her death.

"I think she gave up," she said.

Sedensky and Condon reported from New York. AP data journalist Larry Fenn contributed to this report.

Highway-side eatery in UAE feeds hungry one meal at a time

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

SHARJAH, United Arab Emirates (AP) — At a highway-side restaurant in the industrial outskirts of Dubai, workers methodically assemble packaged takeout meals of biryani rice, dal and brightly colored chicken

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curry for people in poverty and desperate to eat.

It's not a soup kitchen or charity drive, but an ordinary hole-in-the-wall Indian restaurant alongside a busy motorway in Sharjah, one of the seven desert sheikhdoms in the United Arab Emirates.

When other kitchens close for the night, Biryani Spot springs into action. The cooks collect leftover food and repurpose it into free, hot meals for underpaid or out-of-work migrants, largely from Southeast Asia. Those in need filter through the cramped restaurant at 10 p.m. to receive dinner — no questions asked.

"The current situation is you have a lot of jobless people, a lot of people who are struggling here because of their low salary," restaurant co-founder Mohammed Shujath Ali said. "We don't want to waste our food, ... we want to give it to people in need."

As small businesses across the UAE shut down this spring due to the coronavirus pandemic, Ali and his wife were getting ready to open up theirs. A former mechanical engineer, Ali long dreamed of running his own restaurant, a place where the migrant workers who power the plastic and fabric factories of Sharjah's dusty Industrial Area 13 could savor familiar Indian, Pakistani and Bengali food at an exceptionally inexpensive price.

Instead of thwarting his plans, the pandemic-induced economic collapse created an opportunity. Tens of thousands of people working in the shadows of Dubai's economy lost their jobs overnight, as hotels, restaurants and families fired their low-wage service workers in response to the lockdown.

Unable to draw on state support in a country that links their residency status to their jobs, many turned to charity to survive.

Over its two months of existence, Biryani Spot has mobilized to meet the area's growing need for food aid. The place serves griddled paratha bread and a range of spiced meat and rice dishes for less than five dirhams (around \$1.50) during the day, and for nothing late at night.

Those cheap or free meals go a long way in the UAE, a nation of some 9 million people with only about 1 million Emiratis. Southeast Asian laborers, taxi drivers, cleaners, cooks and office workers power businesses across the emirates, home to skyscraper-studded Dubai and oil-rich Abu Dhabi. While many have returned home during the pandemic, others remained, hoping to find work to support loved ones back home.

Taj al-Islam, a 50-year-old Bangladeshi carwash worker, long has struggled to make ends meet, earning about \$270 a month, barely enough to feed his five children back home. He said the free takeout helps him stretch his budget a little longer.

Mohammed Shakeel, a 38-year-old from Pakistan, arrived at night's end to take the remaining meals back to his mosque about 25 kilometers (about 15 miles) away in Dubai. After 19 years as a service manager at a luxury car dealership, he was fired in March when the virus struck. Now he fruitlessly knocks on company doors in search of work, feeling tired and lightheaded without food.

"In any other country I'd be supported if I lost a job like this, but here there's no help," Shakeel said as he piled up the food parcels.

So far, Biryani Spot's biggest challenge is getting the word out. The sprawling neighborhood doesn't have much foot traffic. Hidden from the street, the restaurant's small yellow sign is easily missed among rows of ramshackle shops and abandoned buildings.

Ali promotes the free food through regular posts in Facebook groups for residents. When people don't turn up, he packs dozens of meals and drives them directly to denser areas, taxi stands or offices where he knows cleaners on their night shifts go hungry.

He described the handouts as a "small contribution" to people in need, something that's built into his faith as a Muslim.

"We are just a small-scale business, doing our job, like every human does in his own way," Ali said.

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Online G-20 summit lacks glam, and maybe results, amid virus

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — This weekend's summit of leaders from the Group of 20 stands out more for what it is not than for what it is.

Held online this year because of the coronavirus, the gathering of leaders of the world's preeminent rich and developing nations will not be an opportunity for kings, presidents and prime ministers to conduct the intimate diplomacy of closed-door meetings or pose for memorable photo-ops. Without red carpet arrivals, it will not be an occasion for its Saudi hosts to dazzle the world's media.

And it is not expected to yield a globally unified response to the worst pandemic in decades. While billions of dollars have been pledged for medicines and vaccines, G-20 countries have mostly focused on securing their own supplies.

A virtual summit does spare Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman the possibility that some leaders may have stood him up in Riyadh, two years after Western intelligence agencies said he bears ultimate responsibility for the killing of writer Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey by Saudi agents — a slaying he's denied any involvement in. But an online meeting also deprives the Saudis of a media spectacle to tout their position in the world.

Beyond putting a kink in Saudis plans, the pandemic has offered the G-20 an opportunity to prove how such bodies can facilitate international cooperation in crises — but has also underscored their shortcomings.

The G-20 — whose member-countries represent around 85% of the world's economic output and three-quarters of international trade — was founded in 1999 as a way for finance ministers and central bank governors to discuss the global economy.

In March, when border closures and lockdown orders to slow the spread of the virus affected well over a quarter of the world's population, Saudi King Salman convened G-20 leaders virtually.

At the time, the recorded global death toll from the virus had just climbed past 22,000. G-20 leaders vowed to share information and the material needed for research, to exchange epidemiological and clinical data, and to strengthen health systems. They also promised to work together to increase funding for vaccine research.

Quick research and sharing of scientific information for the development of COVID-19 tests and vaccines has happened. The work on vaccines, which began only this year, may result in viable candidates soon.

But it's arguable whether health systems have been strengthened; even in the wealthiest nations like the U.S. and those in Europe, hospitals have become overwhelmed, and testing and contact-tracing programs have struggled.

The Associated Press also found that China — a key G-20 member — was not entirely transparent with the World Health Organization in the initial stages of the pandemic, although many other nations have also not provided thorough details about their outbreaks.

The disease has now claimed more than 1.3 million lives, according to a count kept by Johns Hopkins University.

In a recent letter to G-20 leaders, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the world faces its biggest test since the Second World War.

"The pandemic must be a wake-up call to all leaders that division is a danger to everyone, and that prevention saves money and lives," he wrote.

He commended the recent G-20 decision to offer the hardest-hit poor nations an extension on debt repayments, and in the most severe cases, possible debt write-offs. But he also urged the group to expand coverage to include vulnerable middle-income countries.

Aside from offering an opportunity for global cooperation, G-20 summits are also an occasion for host countries to seize the spotlight. Saudi Arabia's turn at the rotating presidency for the first time has been an immense point of pride for the kingdom, and it has touted that role by using the G-20 logo as a backdrop for press briefings big and small.

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That it was deprived of hosting in-person events may cut both ways. While the range of virtual G-20 meetings the Saudis organized throughout the year would have otherwise brought to Riyadh hundreds of influential delegates, they would have also courted controversy — as they did, even from afar.

The mayors of New York and London, for example, refused to participate in a G-20-related meeting on urban development, citing Saudi Arabia's crackdown on human rights activists and its war in Yemen. Members of the U.S. Congress have called on the Trump administration to withdraw from the summit, and European Parliament members have issued similar calls to EU leaders.

It remains unclear whether U.S. President Donald Trump, preoccupied with challenging his election loss, will participate.

As it is, Prince Mohammed won't have to meet Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, whose government apparently had the Saudi consulate in Istanbul bugged to apply pressure over Khashoggi's slaying, or French President Emmanuel Macron, whose defense of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad has sparked protests by Muslims.

"Hosting major events such as the G-20 not only affords the kingdom the image of a powerful, modern country and global economic power, but also draws international attention away from the reality of rights abuses that occur mere miles away," Lina Al-Hathloul, whose sister, Loujain, has been imprisoned along with several other Saudi women's rights advocates, wrote in a Washington Post column.

But David Rundell, a career U.S. diplomat with 15 years' experience in Saudi Arabia, said the kingdom's message should be that isolation will not achieve the desired result — and engagement can.

"Saudi Arabia needs encouragement for its economic reforms, but also for its human rights record," said Rundell at a Chatham House event.

While the online nature of this year's gathering may sap it of glitz, many have noted that what happens at such summits isn't always equal to the weightiness of world affairs anyway.

Former U.S. President Barack Obama poked fun at the dynamics of past summits in an interview this week with *The Atlantic*.

"You get to Congress and then you get to the G-20, and at each level, you have this expectation that things are going to be more refined, more sophisticated, more thoughtful, rigorous, selfless, and it turns out it's all still like high school," he said.

Associated Press Medical Writer Maria Cheng in London contributed.

Follow Aya Batrawy on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ayaelb

GOP increasingly accepts Trump's defeat — but not in public

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Kamala Harris returned to the Senate this week for the first time as vice president-elect, her Republican colleagues offered their congratulations and Sen. Lindsey Graham greeted her with a fist bump.

It was a sign that many Republicans have privately acknowledged what they refuse to say openly: Democrat Joe Biden and Harris won the election and will take office in January.

The GOP's public silence on the reality of Biden's victory amounts to tacit approval of Trump's baseless claims of election fraud. That has significant repercussions, delaying the transition during a deadly pandemic, sowing public doubt and endangering Biden's ability to lead the portion of the country that may question his legitimacy.

"The real-world consequences are perilous," said Eddie Glaude, chair of the Department of African American studies at Princeton University. "The long-term implications are calcifying the doubt about the election and what that means for the body politic. It could lead to half the country not just being deeply suspicious of the democratic process but also actively hostile toward it. It becomes difficult to imagine how we move forward."

Republicans are closing the Trump era much the way they started it: by joining the president in shattering

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civic norms and sowing uncertainty in institutions. But their efforts to maintain a public face of support for the president began to deteriorate on Wednesday.

Backroom whispers about the futility of Trump's legal fight have become louder after Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani appeared in a Pennsylvania courtroom making wide and unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud in seeking to undo the election results. Asked about the case, Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., said, "Let me just say, I don't think they have a strong case."

And when White House chief of staff Mark Meadows visited with Senate Republicans, he encouraged them to "make the most" of their remaining time with Trump, according to two senators.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said the message from Meadows was "basically just that we got about 45 days left of the president's term." Meadows told them the administration wanted to make sure that if the senators "had ideas of things that the White House could and should do during that period of time, that we got them to him."

But even then, there remained a glimmer of denial.

"But he did, I have to be honest with you, he did say whether it's 45 days or four years and 45 days," Cornyn added.

Despite the private admissions, there has been no public effort to nudge Trump toward the exit.

Trump has declined to concede the presidential race and is mounting legal fights in several states, but there has been no indication or evidence of voter irregularities or widespread fraud in the election. The Trump-appointed head of the General Services Administration has held off on formally beginning the Biden transition to the White House, slowing the incoming administration's ability to prepare to grapple with a worsening pandemic that has already killed 250,000 Americans.

Trump's refusal to accept the results means the election disputes could drag on for weeks as states certify their tallies or push to mid-December, when the Electoral College is set to vote. And baseless claims about election fraud have filled conservative media without any rebuttal from Republicans, potentially undermining the Biden presidency before it even begins.

A Monmouth University poll released Wednesday showed that while 95% of Democrats believe the election was "fair and square," only 18% of Republicans do, while 70% of GOP voters believe some voter fraud took place.

A sense of paralysis has set in at the White House.

The West Wing has been hollowed out, with staffers quarantining after COVID-19 exposures and others actively looking for new jobs. The president has remained in the Oval Office well into the night but has stayed out of the public eye, tweeting baseless claims while largely giving up on governing and not taking a single question from a reporter since Election Day.

Republicans have said privately there's not much they can do except wait, giving the president the time and space he needs to see the results for himself. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, perceived by some Republicans as the one man who could urge Trump to cooperate with the Biden transition, has instead steadfastly backed the president, saying he's "100% within his rights" to legally contest the results.

GOP lawmakers have pointed to the more than 70 million votes that Trump garnered as well as his overwhelming popularity with Republicans, including among their respective bases of support back home. The chatter that Trump is already eyeing a 2024 campaign has also frozen Republicans wary of his Twitter account, and they have also expressed fear that being perceived as forcing the president to the exit may trigger the temperamental chief executive to make further risky decisions, such as troop drawdowns or more dismissals on the national security staff.

And, of course, there is Georgia.

Republicans need to win one of the two runoff elections set for January in the state in order to hang onto their Senate majority and prevent a Democratic sweep of Washington. Although Trump has not yet signaled much interest in helping with the races, Republicans have made the calculation that keeping his base fired up may be their best chance to secure a victory in a state where Biden has a narrow lead. (The Associated Press has not yet called that race.)

"Trump is behaving exactly as everyone should have expected he would do. Nothing he has done in the

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last two weeks is out of character," said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist who advised Florida Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential bid. "And Senate Republicans are responding to him the same way they always do: Ignore him and focus on the Senate calendar."

"But there's no guarantee this works out well for Republicans."

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Analysis: For Trump, sowing post-election chaos is the goal

By JULIE PACE AP Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is trying to turn America's free and fair election into a muddled mess of misinformation, specious legal claims and baseless attacks on the underpinnings of the nation's democracy.

The resulting chaos and confusion that has created isn't the byproduct of Trump's strategy following his defeat to Democrat Joe Biden. The chaos and confusion is the strategy.

Trump's blizzard of attacks on the election are allowing him to sow discontent and doubt among his most loyal supporters, leaving many with the false impression that he is the victim of fraudulent voting. That won't keep Trump in office — Biden will be sworn in on Jan. 20 — but it could both undermine the new president's efforts to unify a fractured nation and fuel Trump in his next endeavor, whether that's another White House run in 2024 or a high-profile media venture.

"This is all about maintaining his ego and visibility," said Judd Gregg, the former Republican governor and U.S. senator from New Hampshire. "He's raising a lot of money and he intends to use it."

The effects of Trump's strategy are already starting to emerge. A Monmouth University poll out Wednesday showed that 77% of Trump supporters said Biden's victory was due to fraud, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

More than two weeks after Election Day, Trump's approach remains both stunning and unsurprising. It amounts to an unprecedented attack on a democratic election by a sitting American president — one the Republican Party has been largely silent in condemning. But it is also precisely the scenario Trump spent much of 2020 laying the groundwork for, particularly with his unfounded claims that mail-in ballots would be subject to systemic fraud. That wasn't true before 2020 or in this election.

"His response should surprise no one. He foreshadowed it well before the election and it continues his pattern of declaring victory, regardless of the actual facts," said Tim Pawlenty, the former Republican governor of Minnesota.

The facts in this instance are not in dispute.

Biden eclipsed Trump by comfortable margins in key battleground states, including Michigan and Pennsylvania, exceeding the 270 Electoral College votes needed to win the White House and nearing 80 million votes nationwide, a record. Federal and state election officials have declared the contest free of widespread fraud, with some going so far as to call the 2020 race the most secure in U.S. history.

Trump responded by firing the messenger, Chris Krebs, the nation's top election security official, who has repeatedly vouched for the integrity of the 2020 vote.

The credible statements from Krebs and state officials across the country have done nothing to deter Trump from insisting without evidence that Democratic forces conspired to rig the election against him. He's refused to formally concede to Biden, holding up the president-elect's access to everything from pressing national security information to blueprints for the government's rollout of a COVID-19 vaccine that will largely occur on Biden's watch.

All the while the president and his allies have tried to push his claims in court. And prominent Republican lawmakers, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have said Trump should be given space to pursue all available legal pathways. Those pathways, however, are quickly closing, with judges across the country dismissing one lawsuit after another.

Some Trump allies acknowledge privately that using the courts to actually reverse Biden's victory isn't

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the point of their efforts. And they also see no real path to persuading GOP-controlled state legislatures to appoint electors that would overturn the will of the voters, though some Trump advisers were buoyed this week when a pair of Michigan Republicans voted against certifying Biden's overwhelming victory in Wayne County. They reversed course following a public outcry.

Rather than overturn the election results, Trump allies say the goal is to help keep the president's most loyal supporters engaged and energized for whatever he might pursue after he leaves office — even if that means leaving them ill-informed about the reality of what has unfolded in the election.

Trump has long relished blurring the lines between truth and fiction and taking advantage of the confusion that creates. If anything, his presidency has only emboldened those tendencies, given the ways in which the Republican Party and friendly media outlets have helped propel his versions of events, even when they are indisputably false.

Those same dynamics have continued to help prop up Trump through this post-election stretch. Some small conservative media outlets have refused to accept Biden's victory and have seen their audiences grow as a result. And most GOP leaders have helped give Trump cover by also stopping short of publicly acknowledging Biden's victory, despite the fact that many do so privately.

GOP lawmakers have their own strategy in play. The party's Senate majority hangs in the balance in a pair of runoff elections in Georgia in January, and some Republican strategists see an aggrieved Trump base as key to the party's success there. They're casting the Senate votes as a way to exact revenge for Trump's defeat in a "rigged" election and saddle Biden with a GOP majority in the chamber.

Others see the party's response as a signal that they're simply trying to get through the final weeks of his presidency without rocking the boat, even if that means allowing misinformation about the nation's electoral process to flourish.

"It's hard, cynical politics," said Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican strategist who backed Biden in the election. "They don't think the noise is an immediate threat so they're waiting him out."

In a stinging condemnation of his party, Murphy continued: "The elephant is out as the GOP symbol and the chicken is in."

EDITOR'S NOTE — Washington Bureau Chief Julie Pace has covered the White House and politics for The Associated Press since 2007. Follow her at <http://twitter.com/jpaceDC>.

'Tired to the bone': Hospitals overwhelmed with virus cases

By PAUL J. WEBER and SARAH RANKIN Associated Press

Overwhelmed hospitals are converting chapels, cafeterias, waiting rooms, hallways, even a parking garage into patient treatment areas. Staff members are desperately calling around to other medical centers in search of open beds. Fatigue and frustration are setting in among front-line workers.

Conditions inside the nation's hospitals are deteriorating by the day as the coronavirus rages across the U.S. at an unrelenting pace and the confirmed death toll surpasses 250,000.

"We are depressed, disheartened and tired to the bone," said Alison Johnson, director of critical care at Johnson City Medical Center in Tennessee, adding that she drives to and from work some days in tears.

The number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 in the U.S. has doubled in the past month and set new records every day this week. As of Tuesday, nearly 77,000 were hospitalized with the virus.

Newly confirmed infections per day in the U.S. have exploded more than 80% over the past two weeks to the highest levels on record, with the daily count running at close to 160,000 on average. Cases are on the rise in all 50 states. Deaths are averaging more than 1,155 per day, the highest in months.

The out-of-control surge is leading governors and mayors across the U.S. to grudgingly issue mask mandates, limit the size of private and public gatherings ahead of Thanksgiving, ban indoor restaurant dining, close gyms or restrict the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses.

New York City's school system — the nation's largest, with more than 1 million students — suspended in-person classes Wednesday amid a mounting infection rate, a painful setback in a corner of the country

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that suffered mightily in the spring but had seemingly beaten back the virus months ago.

Texas is rushing thousands of additional medical staff to overworked hospitals as the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients statewide accelerates toward 8,000 for the first time since a deadly summer outbreak.

In the worsening rural Panhandle, roughly half of the admitted patients in Lubbock's two main hospitals had COVID-19, and a dozen people with the virus were waiting in the emergency room for beds to open up Tuesday night, said Dr. Ron Cook, the Lubbock County health authority.

"We're in trouble," Cook said.

In the Texas border city of El Paso, overwhelmed morgues have begun paying jail inmates \$2 an hour to help transport the bodies of virus victims. The crush of patients is forcing the city to send its non-COVID-19 cases to hospitals elsewhere in the state.

More than 5,400 extra medical personnel have been deployed around Texas by the state alone, said Lara Anton, a spokeswoman for the Texas Department of State Health Services. And that doesn't include the help surging into Texas from the military and volunteer organizations.

"There are only so many medical personnel to go around," said Dr. Mark McClellan, a former head of the Food and Drug Administration.

Ballad Health system, which is located in the Appalachian mountains and includes the Tennessee hospital where Alison Johnson works, has warned that it and its workers are stretched so thin that without a change in course, its hospitals might have to turn patients away. Ballad reported having just 16 available ICU beds Wednesday and about 250 team members in isolation or quarantine. It is trying to recruit hundreds more nurses.

In Idaho, doctors warned that hospitals have almost reached the point where they need to ration care, unable to treat everyone because there aren't enough beds or staffers to go around.

"Never in my career did I think we would even contemplate the idea of rationing care in the United States of America," said Dr. Jim Souza, chief medical officer for St. Luke's Health System.

In Reno, Nevada, Renown Regional Medical Center began moving some coronavirus patients into its parking garage.

Video of the converted garage before it opened to patients showed rows and rows of beds separated by moveable white screens set up on one level of the stark, cavernous garage, each section designated by letters and each bed space marked by a number on the ground. The garage unit currently houses 27 patients but at peak capacity will have enough beds to accommodate more than 1,400, said Dr. Paul Sierzenski, Renown's chief medical officer for acute care.

In Kansas, hospitals are converting spaces such as chapels and cafeterias for use by COVID-19 patients, said Cindy Samuelson, spokeswoman for the Kansas Hospital Association.

Stormont Vail Health in Topeka, Kansas, devoted an entire hospital floor to COVID-19 patients as their numbers swelled, hitting 90 on Wednesday. The hospital also converted two surgery waiting rooms for use by non-infected patients, spokesman Matt Lara said.

Kansas health chief Dr. Lee Norman said a system that he likened to air traffic control for coronavirus patients is being put in place so nurses from rural hospitals can make a single call to find a larger hospital that can take their sickest patients.

In some cases, nurses and doctors in Kansas have been spending up to eight hours looking for a large hospital with an opening in cities as far away as Denver, Omaha or Kansas City.

"The problem with this is, by the time you transfer these patients out they already are very ill at that point," said Kansas nurse practitioner Perry Desbien.

At the same time, patience is wearing thin over the lack of mask wearing that is contributing to the problem in rural areas.

"It kind of feels like we're just, you know, yelling into the abyss," said Cheyanne Seematter, a registered nurse at Stormont Vail. "We keep telling everybody to stay home, wear a mask, that it is actually bad here."

Maryland health officials similarly set up a centralized clearinghouse with information on available ICU

beds so that hospitals need only make a single phone call. State authorities also issued an emergency order prohibiting most hospital visitors until further notice.

Weber reported from Austin, Texas, Rankin from Richmond, Va. Associated Press writers John Hanna and Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas; Suman Naishadham in Phoenix, Brian Witte in Annapolis, Maryland; and Terry Wallace in Dallas also contributed.

Report finds Australian troops unlawfully killed 39 Afghans

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A shocking Australian military report into war crimes has found evidence that elite Australian troops unlawfully killed 39 Afghan prisoners, farmers and civilians.

Australian Defence Force Chief Gen. Angus Campbell said Thursday the shameful record included alleged instances in which new patrol members would shoot a prisoner in order to achieve their first kill in a practice known as "bleeding." He said the soldiers would then plant weapons and radios to support false claims the prisoners were enemies killed in action.

Campbell told reporters in Canberra the illegal killings began in 2009, with the majority occurring in 2012 and 2013. He said some members of the elite Special Air Service encouraged "a self-centered, warrior culture."

The chief was announcing the findings of a four-year investigation by Maj. Gen. Paul Brereton, a judge and Army reservist who was asked to look into the allegations and interviewed more than 400 witnesses and reviewed thousands of pages of documents. Brereton recommended 19 soldiers be investigated by police for possible charges, including murder.

"To the people of Afghanistan, on behalf of the Australian Defence Force, I sincerely and unreservedly apologize for any wrongdoing by Australian soldiers," Campbell said.

He said he'd spoken directly to his Afghan military counterpart to express his remorse.

"Such alleged behavior profoundly disrespected the trust placed in us by the Afghan people who had asked us to their country to help them," Campbell said. "It would have devastated the lives of Afghan families and communities, causing immeasurable pain and suffering. And it would have put in jeopardy our mission and the safety of our Afghan and coalition partners."

As well as the 39 killings, the report outlines two allegations of cruel treatment. It says that none of the alleged crimes were committed during the heat of battle.

Only parts of the report have been made public. Many details, including the names of alleged killers, remain redacted.

The report said a total of 25 current or former troops were involved as perpetrators or accessories in 23 separate incidents, with some involved just once and a few multiple times.

It said some Australian troops would regularly carry "throw downs" — things like foreign pistols, radios and grenades that they could plant on those they killed so the Afghan civilians would appear like combatants in photographs.

The report said most of the alleged crimes were committed and concealed at a patrol commander level by corporals and sergeants, and that while higher-level troop and squadron commanders had to take some responsibility for the events that happened on their watch, they weren't primarily to blame.

The report paints a picture of a toxic culture in which soldiers were competing against those from other squadrons, accounts of deaths were sanitized or embellished, and many procedures to ensure safety and integrity had broken down.

"Those who wished to speak up were allegedly discouraged, intimidated and discredited," Campbell said.

The report recommended 19 soldiers be referred to federal police for criminal investigation. Campbell said he's accepting all the report's recommendations.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison has already announced a special investigator will help pursue possible prosecutions because the workload would overwhelm existing police resources.

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Many troops are also likely to be stripped of their medals and the defense force will undergo significant structural changes. The report says that where there is credible evidence of unlawful killings, Afghan families should be compensated immediately by Australia without waiting for the criminal cases to proceed.

"This will be an important step in rehabilitating Australia's international reputation, in particular with Afghanistan, and it is simply the right thing to do," the report states.

Iota's devastation comes into focus in storm-weary Nicaragua

By CARLOS HERRERA Associated Press

MACIZO DE PEÑAS BLANCAS, Nicaragua (AP) — The devastation caused by Hurricane Iota became clearer Wednesday as images emerged showing piles of wind-tossed lumber that used to be homes and concrete walls that were pounded into pieces by the second Category 4 storm to blast Nicaragua's Caribbean coast in two weeks.

Nicaragua Vice President and first lady Rosario Murillo on Wednesday raised the nation's death toll to 16. The victims were spread across the country, swept away by swollen rivers or buried in landslides.

Rescuers searched at the site of a landslide in northern Nicaragua, where the local government confirmed four deaths and neighbors spoke of at least 16. A short video from the nation's emergency management agency showed a massive bowl-shaped mountainside shrouded in clouds that collapsed. Police blocked media access to the site on the Macizo de Peñas Blancas, a mountain in Matagalpa province, about 80 miles (130 kilometers) north of Managua.

There were seven confirmed dead at the mountain, and the search continued, Murillo said.

Miguel Rodríguez, who works on a ranch next to the site, said he saw at least seven bodies.

"The landslide came with all the dirt, and it became like a river going down. It took all of the little houses that were there. There were five homes, five families," Rodríguez said.

One home was spared on the other side of the slide. But it was in a precarious position, and rescuers were trying to reach it, he said.

Nicaragua's army said it was sending 100 rescuers to the site. Access was complicated by downed trees blocking roads.

Rolando José Alvarez, the Roman Catholic bishop of Matagalpa, said via Twitter that priests were being sent to the area.

In the coastal city of Bilwi, a distraught Filimon Wilfred, 72, said Iota had destroyed his family's five houses leaving its 18 members homeless.

"The hurricane came, it destroyed my house, my daughter's house. It destroyed five houses in total," Wilfred said. "Where am I going to live?"

Late Wednesday, Guatemalan authorities said two people had died and two were missing following a landslide near Purulha in central Guatemala.

Iota arrived Monday evening with winds of 155 mph (250 kph), hitting nearly the same location as Hurricane Eta two weeks earlier. By early Wednesday, Iota had dissipated over El Salvador, but the storm's torrential rains remained a threat. Parts of neighboring Honduras were still under water from Eta.

The storm's center passed just south of Tegucigalpa, the mountainous capital of Honduras, where residents of low-lying, flood-prone areas were evacuated, as were residents of hillside neighborhoods vulnerable to landslides.

Along Honduras' remote eastern coast, people fled their homes as waters rose.

"What affected us most here was the flooding," said Teonela Paisano Wood, mayor of the Honduran town of Brus Laguna. "We are in danger if it keeps raining."

Mirna Wood, vice president of the Miskito ethnic group in Honduras' far eastern Gracias a Dios region, was in Tegucigalpa collecting donations for her community ravaged by Eta when Iota hit.

Some 40,000 people in the area had moved to shelters, but others remained stranded near the border with Nicaragua. Some were rescued by Nicaraguan authorities, she said.

"We are facing an incredible emergency," Wood said. "There is no food. There is no water."

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Panama reported that one person was killed and another missing in its western Indigenous autonomous Ngabe Bugle area near the border with Costa Rica.

Earlier this month, Eta caused more than 130 deaths as it triggered flash floods and mudslides in parts of Central America and Mexico. The storm also left tens of thousands homeless in Honduras, which reported 74 deaths and nearly 57,000 people in shelters, mostly in the north.

Before hitting Nicaragua, Iota blew over the tiny Colombian island of Providencia, where Colombian President Ivan Duque said one person was killed and 98% of the island's infrastructure was "affected."

Iota was the 30th named storm of this year's historically busy Atlantic hurricane season. It also developed later in the season than any other Category 5 storm on record, topping a Nov. 8, 1932, Cuba hurricane, said Colorado State University hurricane researcher Phil Klotzbach.

The hurricane season officially ends Nov. 30.

Associated Press writers Christopher Sherman in Mexico City, Marlon González in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, and Manuel Rueda in Bogota, Colombia, contributed to this report.

US drops case against ex-Mexican general after pressure

By LARRY NEUMEISTER, MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARK STEVENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The United States on Wednesday dropped a high-profile drug trafficking and money laundering case against a former Mexican defense secretary, an extraordinary reversal that followed an intense pressure campaign from Mexico.

The full scope of Mexico's pressure was not clear and officials were vague about what led them to drop charges in a case they celebrated as a major breakthrough just last month, when federal agents nabbed retired Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos in Los Angeles.

Two officials, one Mexican and one American, said Mexico's tactics involved threatening to expel the Drug Enforcement Administration's regional director and agents unless the U.S. dropped the case. But they said that was only part of the negotiation. They would not elaborate.

The officials asked not to be named because they were not authorized to speak publicly about the case.

A judge in New York City approved the dismissal of charges on Wednesday, capping a lightning-fast turnaround in a case that drew loud protests from top officials in Mexico and threatened to damage the delicate relationship that enables investigators in both countries to pursue drug kingpins together.

Mexico depicted the case as a victory for the country's sovereignty and its demand to be treated as an equal partner by the United States, a striking position given that most think that Mexico's court system — and corrupt officials — are the weak links in the country's fight against drug trafficking.

The U.S. cited America's relationship with Mexico as its reason for dropping the case.

"The United States determined that the broader interest in maintaining that relationship in a cooperative way outweighed the department's interest and the public's interest in pursuing this particular case," Seth DuCharme, the acting U.S. Attorney in Brooklyn, told the judge at a hearing.

He said the decision to drop the charges was made by Attorney General William Barr.

Mexican Foreign Relations Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said Wednesday that he told Barr that the U.S. had to choose between trying Cienfuegos and having continued cooperation.

"It is in your hands. You can't have both," Ebrard said he told Barr. "You cannot have close cooperation with all of Mexico's institutions and at the same time do this."

The Justice Department declined comment when asked about Ebrard's account.

By early evening, a charter jet carrying Cienfuegos, accompanied by U.S. Marshals, had landed in Mexico.

Cienfuegos, 72, was secretly indicted by a federal grand jury in New York in 2019. He was accused of conspiring with the H-2 cartel in Mexico to smuggle thousands of kilos of cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine and marijuana while he was defense secretary from 2012 to 2018.

Prosecutors said intercepted messages showed that Cienfuegos accepted bribes in exchange for ensuring the military did not take action against the cartel and that operations were initiated against its rivals.

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He was also accused of introducing cartel leaders to other corrupt Mexican officials.

Mexican officials complained that the U.S. failed to share evidence against Cienfuegos and that his arrest came as a surprise. It also caused alarm within Mexico's military, which has played a crucial role in operations against drug cartels.

Gladys McCormick, a history professor at Syracuse University who specializes in the U.S.-Mexico relationship, said prosecuting Cienfuegos would have been enormously fraught for the United States.

"Following through on prosecuting Cienfuegos would have compromised intelligence gathering and joint military operations for years to come, which is part of the reason why the original arrest was so scandalous," McCormick said. "He truly is untouchable and sacrosanct because of both what he represents and the secrets he carries with him."

Mexico has repeatedly extradited major drug suspects, including at least some former elected officials, for trial in the United States. In the case of Cienfuegos, Mexican officials have taken no official position on whether he is innocent or guilty, saying that was up to the attorney general's office to decide.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said Mexico's Attorney General's Office would decide whether Cienfuegos was placed in custody once he is returned. But given that there are no charges yet in Mexico, he is likely to be set free.

"This does not signify impunity; it means that an investigation will be started," López Obrador said.

It is rare for a highly prized defendant in a U.S. case to be arrested and then released in short order for reasons of diplomacy. Historically, it has been more likely to occur in cases involving espionage than drug trafficking.

U.S. prosecutors in Manhattan have recently resisted diplomatic efforts by another U.S. ally, Turkey, to get charges dropped against a large state-owned bank accused of violating sanctions on Iran.

Cienfuegos, a general who led Mexico's army department for six years under then-President Enrique Peña Nieto, was the highest-ranking former Mexican Cabinet official arrested since top security official Genaro García Luna was arrested in Texas in 2019.

Analysts said Cienfuegos is unlikely to face charges in Mexico.

"That is not going to happen, we all know it," columnist Carlos Loret de Mola wrote in the newspaper *El Universal*. "He will return to Mexico and be set free, because that is the promise that President López Obrador made to the army."

Outside the Brooklyn courthouse, defense attorney Edward Sapone noted that Cienfuegos has pleaded not guilty and had planned to prove his innocence.

Cienfuegos spoke little in court, answering a few questions from the judge through an interpreter.

López Obrador has entrusted Mexico's army and navy with a broader range of tasks than most other previous Mexican presidents, and he faced pressure to win Cienfuegos' return.

The old ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party had previously called on Mexico's government to pay Cienfuegos' legal fees, and on Tuesday it celebrated the decision to drop the charges. Party leader Alejandro Moreno wrote in his Twitter account that the party "resolutely supports Gen. Salvador Cienfuegos. ... We should all congratulate ourselves and always support our armed forces."

Mike Vigil, the Drug Enforcement Administration's former chief of international operations, said the decision "is nothing more than a gift, a huge gift" from President Donald Trump to López Obrador, probably given as a favor for past help on immigration issues.

He said the chances of Cienfuegos being convicted in Mexico are "slim to none," noting the former defense secretary's political connections in Mexico and the country's idolization of the military.

U.S. civil rights lawyer Ron Kuby said the Cienfuegos case marks an odd capstone to the Trump administration.

"It is ironic ... that Trump began his administration screaming about Mexicans who were bringing in drugs and ends his presidency by preventing the prosecution of a Mexican general who is a drug lord."

Associated Press writers Joshua Goodman in Miami and E. Eduardo Castillo in Mexico City contributed

to this report.

Trump targets vote certification in late bid to block Biden

By ZEKE MILLER, CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Getting nowhere in the courts, President Donald Trump's scattershot effort to overturn President-elect Joe Biden's victory is shifting toward obscure election boards that certify the vote as Trump and his allies seek to upend the electoral process, sow chaos and perpetuate unsubstantiated doubts about the count.

The battle is centered in the battleground states that sealed Biden's win.

In Michigan, two Republican election officials in the state's largest county initially refused to certify results despite no evidence of fraud. In Arizona, officials are balking at signing off on vote tallies in a rural county.

The moves don't reflect a coordinated effort across the battleground states that broke for Biden, local election officials said. Instead, they seem to be inspired by Trump's incendiary rhetoric about baseless fraud and driven by Republican acquiescence to broadsides against the nation's electoral system as state and federal courts push aside legal challenges filed by Trump and his allies.

Still, what happened in Wayne County, Michigan, on Tuesday was a jarring reminder of the disruptions that can still be caused as the nation works through the process of affirming the outcome of the Nov. 3 election.

There is no precedent for the Trump team's widespread effort to delay or undermine certification, according to University of Kentucky law professor Joshua Douglas.

"It would be the end of democracy as we know it," Douglas said. "This is just not a thing that can happen."

Certifying results is a routine yet important step after local election officials have tallied votes, reviewed procedures, checked to ensure votes were counted correctly and investigated discrepancies. Typically, this certification is done by a local board of elections and then, later, the results are certified at the state level.

But as Trump has refused to concede to Biden and continues to spread false claims of victory, this mundane process is taking on new significance.

Among key battleground states, counties in Michigan, Nevada and Wisconsin have all made it through the initial step of certifying results. Except for Wayne County, this process has largely been smooth. Arizona, Pennsylvania and Georgia still haven't concluded their local certifications.

Then all eyes turn to statewide certification.

In Wayne County, the two Republican canvassers at first balked at certifying the vote, winning praise from Trump, and then reversed course after widespread condemnation. A person familiar with the matter said Trump reached out to the canvassers, Monica Palmer and William Hartmann, on Tuesday evening after the revised vote to express gratitude for their support.

Time is running short for Trump. Across the nation, recounts and court challenges must wrap up and election results must be certified by Dec. 8. That's the constitutional deadline ahead of the Electoral College meeting the following week.

Matt Morgan, the Trump campaign's general counsel, said last week the campaign was trying to halt certification in battleground states until it could get a better handle on vote tallies and whether it would have the right to automatic recounts. Right now, Trump is requesting a recount in Wisconsin in two counties, and Georgia is doing an hand audit after Biden led by a slim margin of 0.3 percentage points, but there is no mandatory recount law in the state. The law provides that option to a trailing candidate if the margin is less than 0.5 percentage points.

Some in the president's orbit have held out hope that by delaying certification, GOP-controlled state legislatures will get a chance to select different electors, either overturning Biden's victory or sending it to the House, where Trump would almost surely win.

But most advisers to the president consider that a fever dream. Trump's team has been incapable of organizing even basic legal activities since the election, let alone the widescale political and legal apparatus needed to persuade state legislators to try to undermine the will of their states' voters.

Lawsuits have been filed by Trump allies in Michigan and Nevada seeking to stop certification. Trump

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personal attorney Rudy Giuliani argued to stop vote certification in Pennsylvania on Tuesday, the first time he'd been in a courtroom in decades. And the same day, the Arizona Republican Party asked a judge to bar Maricopa County, the state's most populous, from certifying until the court issues a decision about the party's lawsuit seeking a new hand count of a sampling of ballots.

The party is also putting pressure on county officials across the state to delay certification, even though there hasn't been any evidence of legitimate questions about the vote tally showing that Biden won Arizona.

"The party is pushing for not only the county supervisors but everyone responsible for certifying and canvassing the election to make sure that all questions are answered so that voters will have confidence in the results of the election," said Zach Henry, spokesman for the Arizona Republican Party.

While most counties in Arizona are pressing ahead with certification, officials in Mohave County decided to delay until Nov. 23, citing what they said was uncertainty about the fate of election challenges across the country.

"There are lawsuits all over the place on everything, and that's part of the reason why I'm in no big hurry to canvass the election," Mohave County Supervisor Ron Gould said Monday.

Officials in all of Georgia's 159 counties were supposed to have certified their results by last Friday. But a few have yet to certify as the state works through a hand tally of some 5 million votes.

"They are overwhelmed, and they are trying to get to everything," said Gabriel Sterling, a top official with the Georgia Secretary of State's Office. "Some of these are smaller, less resourced counties, and there are only so many people who can do so many things."

In addition, a few counties must recertify their results after previously uncounted votes were discovered during the audit.

Once counties have certified, the focus turns to officials at the state level who are charged with signing off on the election. This varies by state. For instance, a bipartisan panel in Michigan certifies elections, but in Georgia it's the responsibility of the elected secretary of state, who has already faced calls by fellow Republicans to resign.

In Nevada, Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske's role in certification is largely ministerial, but she still got a batch of emails urging her not to certify "potentially fraudulent election results," a spokeswoman said Wednesday. The Justice Department had been looking into one potential case of fraud in the state over voter rolls, but an AP analysis found the case doesn't appear to hold much water.

In Pennsylvania's Luzerne County, a Republican board member, Joyce Dombroski-Gebhardt, said she will not certify the county's election without an audit of at least 10% of the votes to ensure that some voters did not vote twice.

Trump won the county, where the election board is made up of three Democrats and two Republicans. A Democrat on the board, Peter Oullette, said he had no doubt that the rest of the board will sign the certification on Monday.

Philadelphia also had plans to certify results on Monday.

And some delays could still happen given the crushing workload election officials faced this year during the pandemic, according to Suzanne Almeida with Common Cause Pennsylvania, a good government group that helps with voter education and monitors election work in the state.

"A delay in certification doesn't necessarily mean there are shenanigans; sometimes it just takes longer to go through all the mechanics to get to certification," Almeida said.

Cassidy reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Bob Christie and Jacques Billeaud in Phoenix; Marc Levy in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Scott Bauer in Madison, Wisconsin; Kate Brumback in Atlanta; and Ken Ritter in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

Barack Obama memoir off to record-setting start in sales

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Former President Barack Obama's "A Promised Land" sold nearly 890,000 copies in

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the U.S. and Canada in its first 24 hours, putting it on track to be the best selling presidential memoir in modern history.

The first-day sales, a record for Penguin Random House, includes pre-orders, e-books and audio.

"We are thrilled with the first day sales," said David Drake, publisher of the Penguin Random House imprint Crown. "They reflect the widespread excitement that readers have for President Obama's highly anticipated and extraordinarily written book."

The only book by a former White House resident to come close to the early pace of "A Promised Land" is the memoir by Obama's wife, Michelle Obama, whose "Becoming" sold 725,000 copies in North America its first day and has topped 10 million worldwide since its release in 2018. "Becoming" is still so in demand that Crown, which publishes both Obamas and reportedly paid around \$60 million for their books, has yet to release a paperback.

As of midday Wednesday, "A Promised Land" was No. 1 on Amazon.com and Barnes & Noble.com. James Daunt, CEO of Barnes & Noble, said that the superstore chain easily sold more than 50,000 copies its first day and hoped to reach half a million within 10 days.

"So far it has been neck and neck with Michelle Obama's book," he said.

By comparison, Bill Clinton's "My Life" sold around 400,000 copies in North America its first day and George W. Bush's "Decision Points" around 220,000, with sales for each memoir currently between 3.5 and 4 million copies. The fastest selling book in memory remains J.K. Rowling's seventh and final Harry Potter novel, "Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows," which came out in 2007 and sold more than 8 million copies within 24 hours.

Obama's 768-page memoir, which came out Tuesday and has a list price of \$45, had unusually risky timing for a book of such importance to the author, to readers and to the publishing industry. It came out just two weeks after Election Day and could have been overshadowed had the race still been in doubt or perhaps unwanted by distressed Obama fans if President Donald Trump had defeated Democratic nominee Joe Biden. But Biden won and his victory likely renews interest in an era when he was Obama's trusted and popular vice president.

Obama himself acknowledges that he didn't intend for the book, the first of two planned volumes, to arrive so close to a presidential election or to take nearly four years after he left the White House — months longer than for "My Life" and two years longer than "Decision Points." In the introduction to "A Promised Land," dated August 2020, Obama writes that "the book kept growing in length and scope" as he found he needed more words than expected to capture a given moment — a bind many authors well understand. He was also working under conditions he "didn't fully anticipate," from the pandemic to the Black Lives Matters protests, to, "most troubling of all," how the country's "democracy seems to be teetering on the brink of crisis."

Because of the pandemic, Obama will not go on the all-star arena tour Michelle Obama had for "Becoming." But he benefits from the attention of any memoir by a former president and by the special attention for Obama, who has the rare stature among politicians of writing his own books and for attracting as much or more attention for how he tells a story than for the story itself. Obama has already written two acclaimed, million-selling works, "Dreams from My Father" and "The Audacity of Hope, which came out in 2006. His new book covers some of the same time period as his previous ones, while continuing his story through the first 2 1/2 years of his presidency and the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden by the Navy SEALs.

Publishers Weekly praised the book as "shot through with memorable turns of phrase," while other reviews were more qualified, calling the book all too reflective of Obama's thoughtful, even-handed style. The New York Times' Jennifer Szalai wrote that the "most audacious thing" about "A Promised Land" is "the beaming portrait" of Obama on the cover. The Washington Post's Carlos Lozada noted that in "domestic policy and foreign affairs, in debates over culture and race, Obama splits differences, clings to the middle ground and trusts in process as much as principle."

"It turns out he is not a 'revolutionary soul' but a reformist one, 'conservative in temperament if not in vision.' Behind those dreams, the audacity and all that promise is a stubborn streak of moderation," Lozada

wrote.

Obama's book is the highlight of publishing's holiday season and for some independent bookstores, the potential difference between remaining in business or closing. Publishing sales have been surprisingly stable during the pandemic, but much of the benefit has gone to Amazon.com as readers turned increasingly to online purchases. The American Booksellers Association, the independent sellers' trade group, has warned that hundreds of stores could go out of business if holiday sales fall short.

Kris Kleindienst, co-owner of Left Bank Books in St. Louis, anticipates selling around 1,000 copies by the end of the year, a number which makes "a HUGE difference" for annual revenues, she wrote in an email. Sarah McNally, owner of McNally Jackson Books in Manhattan, said she sold around 600 copies in the first 24 hours, a pace exceeded only by the final Harry Potter book.

"It's not hard to be a bright spot this year, a year when we would have gone out of business without federal aid," McNally said. "But Obama does feel like a savior, as do our customers for buying this from us."

Over 1,000 evacuated in Nevada wildfire start returning home

By SCOTT SONNER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A day after a wind-whipped wildfire in northern Nevada roared through a neighborhood in Reno and destroyed at least five houses, more than 1,000 people who were forced to evacuate — including the mayor — started returning home Wednesday.

Another fire about 100 miles (160 kilometers) south and across the border in California also exploded in strong winds Tuesday, killing one person, driving hundreds from their homes and destroying 80 structures in and around a small community, including some houses.

Rains overnight helped tamp down the flames in both places. Crews in Reno had feared another lashing of strong winds would revive the fire Wednesday, but those conditions subsided. They even got better control of the flames that damaged 15 other structures near the Sierra Nevada foothills. The fire was halfway contained, and they expected to have it fully contained by Friday.

Two firefighters were injured while battling the blaze over 2 square miles (5 square kilometers) but have been treated and released. One suffered an allergic reaction, and the other injured a leg while helping evacuate 1,300 residents.

Extremely dry conditions helped fuel the blaze in rugged, hard-to-reach canyons that run between homes in the densely populated neighborhood, Reno Fire Chief David Cochran said.

"Even though there was literally snow on the ground in some areas, a wind-driven fire like that is almost impossible to stop," Cochran said.

Nevada is experiencing drought, with much of it in extreme drought, and it's moved in and out of such dry conditions for years. Numerous studies have linked bigger wildfires in America to climate change from the burning of coal, oil and gas, which has made parts of the U.S. West much drier and more flammable.

Investigators from the state and Reno fire marshal's office as well as the utility NV Energy were trying to find the cause of the fire.

Fire Department incident commander Mark Winkelman said the fire started about 200 yards (183 meters) from the origin point of a November 2011 fire that destroyed 27 homes. That blaze was ignited by arcing power lines at a substation in strong winds, he said.

The so-called Caughlin Fire in 2011 was one of the first in the area to make it clear that dangerous wildfires no longer were confined to hot, dry summer months, said Cochran, the fire chief.

"That was sort of a watershed mark nine years ago where we realized there is no fire season — fire season is year-round," he said, adding that vegetation has become drier and burns easier.

On Tuesday, the wind made it impossible to send up aircraft to help fight the flames, with support from local and federal agencies in northern Nevada and neighboring California critical before wet weather moved in later, authorities said.

"It takes a village, as it were, to put out something like this. No one fire department can ever be staffed or equipped to handle something like this," Cochran said.

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Reno Mayor Hillary Schieve, who said her own evacuation was complicated because she's under a COVID-19 quarantine, said the fierce firefighting effort helped avert a much bigger disaster.

"These fires are a huge reminder how things can change so quickly on a moment's notice," Schieve said. "We did have a lot of hands on deck."

She was isolating because she was in contact with Gov. Steve Sisolak, who recently announced he had tested positive for the virus and on Tuesday declared a state of emergency over the fire.

The other blaze, across the border in California's remote Mono County, exploded to more than 45 square miles (117 square kilometers) Tuesday, burning into the tiny community of Walker. Rain and snow slowed its growth Wednesday, according to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

One person died, but authorities offered no details. While about 800 residents remained under evacuation orders, a highway reopened. The cause of the fire wasn't yet known, and the land agency said officials were still assessing the damage.

Mono County sheriff's spokeswoman Sarah Roberts said an unknown number of homes were among the losses from the wind-driven fire.

"The winds were horrific yesterday," Roberts said.

Antczak reported from Los Angeles. Associated Press writer Paul Davenport in Phoenix contributed to this report.

GOP increasingly accepts Trump's defeat — but not in public

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Kamala Harris returned to the Senate this week for the first time as vice president-elect, her Republican colleagues offered their congratulations and Sen. Lindsey Graham greeted her with a fist bump.

It was a sign that many Republicans have privately acknowledged what they refuse to say openly: Democrat Joe Biden and Harris won the election and will take office in January.

The GOP's public silence on the reality of Biden's victory amounts to tacit approval of Trump's baseless claims of election fraud. That has significant repercussions, delaying the transition during a deadly pandemic, sowing public doubt and endangering Biden's ability to lead the portion of the country that may question his legitimacy.

"The real-world consequences are perilous," said Eddie Glaude, chair of the Department of African American studies at Princeton University. "The long-term implications are calcifying the doubt about the election and what that means for the body politic. It could lead to half the country not just being deeply suspicious of the democratic process but also actively hostile toward it. It becomes difficult to imagine how we move forward."

Republicans are closing the Trump era much the way they started it: by joining the president in shattering civic norms and sowing uncertainty in institutions. But their efforts to maintain a public face of support for the president began to deteriorate on Wednesday.

Backroom whispers about the futility of Trump's legal fight have become louder after Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani appeared in a Pennsylvania courtroom making wide and unsubstantiated claims of voter fraud in seeking to undo the election results. Asked about the case, Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., said, "Let me just say, I don't think they have a strong case."

And when White House chief of staff Mark Meadows visited with Senate Republicans, he encouraged them to "make the most" of their remaining time with Trump, according to two senators.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said the message from Meadows was "basically just that we got about 45 days left of the president's term." Meadows told them the administration wanted to make sure that if the senators "had ideas of things that the White House could and should do during that period of time, that we got them to him."

But even then, there remained a glimmer of denial.

"But he did, I have to be honest with you, he did say whether it's 45 days or four years and 45 days,"

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Cornyn added.

Despite the private admissions, there has been no public effort to nudge Trump toward the exit.

Trump has declined to concede the presidential race and is mounting legal fights in several states, but there has been no indication or evidence of voter irregularities or widespread fraud in the election. The Trump-appointed head of the General Services Administration has held off on formally beginning the Biden transition to the White House, slowing the incoming administration's ability to prepare to grapple with a worsening pandemic that has already killed 250,000 Americans.

Trump's refusal to accept the results means the election disputes could drag on for weeks as states certify their tallies or push to mid-December, when the Electoral College is set to vote. And baseless claims about election fraud have filled conservative media without any rebuttal from Republicans, potentially undermining the Biden presidency before it even begins.

A Monmouth University poll released Wednesday showed that while 95% of Democrats believe the election was "fair and square," only 18% of Republicans do, while 70% of GOP voters believe some voter fraud took place.

A sense of paralysis has set in at the White House.

The West Wing has been hollowed out, with staffers quarantining after COVID-19 exposures and others actively looking for new jobs. The president has remained in the Oval Office well into the night but has stayed out of the public eye, tweeting baseless claims while largely giving up on governing and not taking a single question from a reporter since Election Day.

Republicans have said privately there's not much they can do except wait, giving the president the time and space he needs to see the results for himself. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, perceived by some Republicans as the one man who could urge Trump to cooperate with the Biden transition, has instead steadfastly backed the president, saying he's "100% within his rights" to legally contest the results.

GOP lawmakers have pointed to the more than 70 million votes that Trump garnered as well as his overwhelming popularity with Republicans, including among their respective bases of support back home. The chatter that Trump is already eyeing a 2024 campaign has also frozen Republicans wary of his Twitter account, and they have also expressed fear that being perceived as forcing the president to the exit may trigger the temperamental chief executive to make further risky decisions, such as troop drawdowns or more dismissals on the national security staff.

And, of course, there is Georgia.

Republicans need to win one of the two runoff elections set for January in the state in order to hang onto their Senate majority and prevent a Democratic sweep of Washington. Although Trump has not yet signaled much interest in helping with the races, Republicans have made the calculation that keeping his base fired up may be their best chance to secure a victory in a state where Biden has a narrow lead. (The Associated Press has not yet called that race.)

"Trump is behaving exactly as everyone should have expected he would do. Nothing he has done in the last two weeks is out of character," said Alex Conant, a Republican strategist who advised Florida Sen. Marco Rubio's 2016 presidential bid. "And Senate Republicans are responding to him the same way they always do: Ignore him and focus on the Senate calendar."

"But there's no guarantee this works out well for Republicans."

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Biden approaches 80 million votes in historic victory

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

President-elect Joe Biden's winning tally is approaching a record 80 million votes as Democratic bastions continue to count ballots and the 2020 election cracks turnout records.

Biden has already set a record for the highest number of votes for a winning presidential candidate, and President Donald Trump has also notched a high-water mark of the most votes for a losing candidate.

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With more than 155 million votes counted and California and New York still counting, turnout stands at 65% of all eligible voters, the highest since 1908, according to data from The Associated Press and the U.S. Elections Project.

The rising Biden tally and his popular vote lead — nearly 6 million votes — come as Trump has escalated his false insistence that he actually won the election, and his campaign and supporters intensify their uphill legal fight to stop or delay results from being certified, potentially nullify the votes of Americans.

“It’s just a lot of noise going on, because Donald Trump is a bull who carries his own china shop with him,” said Douglas Brinkley, a presidential historian at Rice University. “Once the noise recedes, it’s going to be clear that Biden won a very convincing victory.”

Biden currently has an Electoral College lead of 290-232. But that does not include electors from Georgia, where Biden leads Trump by 0.3 percentage points as officials conduct a hand tally. The AP has not called the race, but if Biden’s lead holds he will win the Electoral College on 306-232 vote — the identical margin Trump won in 2016. Back then Trump described it as a “landslide.”

Trump sealed that victory with 77,000 votes across three battleground states, while Biden’s margin would be slightly narrower — about 45,000 votes across Arizona, Georgia and Wisconsin.

That slimmer win, however, is still decisive by election law standards, notes Rick Hasen, a professor at the University of Irvine and an expert on voting.

While Biden’s margins in states like Arizona and Wisconsin seem small — between 12,000 and 20,000 votes — those races aren’t nearly narrow enough to be considered likely to flip through a recount or lawsuits. Recounts typically shift total votes by only a few hundred votes. In 2000, the Florida recount and legal battle for the White House was prompted by a 537-vote margin.

“If you’re talking about it being close enough to be within what those of us in the field call the margin of litigation, this is not within the margin of litigation,” Hasen said.

Timothy Naftali, a presidential historian at New York University, has compared Biden’s still-growing popular vote and Electoral College margins to those of every winner of a presidential election since 1960. His finding: Biden’s win was right in the middle — tighter than landslides like Barack Obama’s 2008 win or Ronald Reagan’s 1984 wipeout reelection, but broader than Trump’s 2016 victory or either of George W. Bush’s two wins.

The closest analogy was Obama’s reelection, which he won by virtually the same margin as Biden has now.

“Did anyone think 2012 was a narrow victory? No,” Naftali said.

Despite that, Trump and his allies are continuing to try to stop certification of the election, in a longshot attempt to deny states the ability to seat electors supporting Biden. These efforts are very unlikely to succeed, but they reached a new pitch this week when two Republican members of the board of canvassers in Michigan’s largest county Tuesday night managed to block certification of the votes there. They allowed certification to proceed after an outcry, but it was a sign of how deeply Trump’s baseless claims of mass fraud have permeated.

In fact, argued Michael McDonald, a University of Florida professor who tracks vote counts for the U.S. Elections Project, the relatively narrow Biden wins in battleground states tell a different story than the one the president is pushing.

Democrats have worried that the gap between the popular vote and the Electoral College tallies is growing as Democratic voters cluster on the coasts and outside of battleground states. That dynamic could make it difficult for Democrats to win congressional races, creating a lasting disadvantage when it comes to advancing policies.

“If there’s anything in the data here, it reveals how the system is stacked against the Democrats, not stacked against Trump,” McDonald said.

Empty desks: Coronavirus robs US classrooms of teachers

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — In July, fourth-grade teacher Susanne Michael was ecstatic as she celebrated

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the adoption of a former student from a troubled home and two of the girl's brothers. For the festivities, Michael dressed them and her other children in matching T-shirts that read "Gotcha FOREVER."

By October, the 47-year-old Jonesboro, Arkansas, woman was dead — one of an estimated nearly 300 school employees killed by the coronavirus in the U.S. since the outbreak took hold. All together, the U.S. had more than 250,000 confirmed virus deaths as of Wednesday.

"She just basically would eat, sleep and drink teaching. She loved it," said her husband, Keith Michael, who is now left to raise the three new additions, ages 3, 8 and 13, along with the couple's two other children, 16 and 22.

Across the U.S., the deaths of educators have torn at the fabric of the school experience, taking the lives of teachers, principals, superintendents, coaches, a middle school secretary, a security guard. The losses have forced school boards to make hard decisions of whether to keep classrooms open and have left students and staff members grief-stricken.

Harrisburg Elementary, where Michael taught, remained open after her death, but 14 counselors descended on the school the next morning to help distraught students and teachers.

"I can honestly tell you now, none of us would have made the day if it were not for them," Harrisburg School Superintendent Chris Ferrell recalled, choking up.

At home, Susanne Michael's death has been particularly hard for her toddler. "He will just point to the sky and say, 'Mama is up there,'" her husband said.

His wife had diabetes, was a uterine cancer survivor and had just one kidney. Therein lies the main challenge of operating schools: While children generally have mild cases or no symptoms at all, about 1 in 4 of their teachers, or nearly 1.5 million of them, have a condition that raises their risk of getting seriously ill from the coronavirus, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Early research suggested that children are unlikely to contract or spread the coronavirus — an idea that influenced school reopenings in some communities. But Laura Garabedian, a professor of population medicine at Harvard Medical School, said much of that research was conducted during lockdowns when children were home and testing wasn't being done on those with mild or symptomless cases.

"I think the key question is whether being at school puts teachers at increased risk of getting COVID. I don't think we know that," she said. But she added: "There are kids who definitely transmit it, and we know that."

With community spread rampant across much of the country and contact tracers overwhelmed, it is often hard to tell where teachers are becoming infected.

When cases can be traced back to their source, it is often an informal gathering, a restaurant or a sporting event, not a classroom, said Emily Oster, a Brown University economics professor whose analysis of in-school infection data from all 50 states found that bringing students together in schools does not appear to be driving the spread.

"I don't think anyone would claim that no one has gotten COVID at a school. That would be unrealistic," she said. "But in most of the cases we are seeing among people who are affiliated with schools, the actual case was not acquired at a school."

Her database identified 17 cases per 100,000 students and 26 per 100,000 staff members as of Friday. She said the staff rate is slightly higher than the general rate in the community.

"There are people who would say if even one teacher acquires COVID at a school and dies, then it would not have been worth it to open schools," Oster said. "I think that argument is complicated because people are going to suffer tremendously from schools being closed, but that is a tricky calculus."

Keith Michael, who is the transportation supervisor for the city of Jonesboro, talked with his wife about the risk of returning to her school before classes started and suspects she might have been infected there.

Through the summer, his wife largely stayed at home, going out mainly to buy groceries. She worked diligently to space out desks in her classroom, according to her husband, though he added, "When you have a full classroom it is impossible to totally socially distance everyone."

Soon, she was coughing, feverish and vomiting violently. She spent nearly two weeks on a ventilator before a blood clot broke loose and killed her.

Her death was another blow to the newly adopted children, the oldest of whom, Holly, met Susanne Michael during a year in which the youngster often missed class to care for her baby brother. When welfare officials stepped in, the Michaels volunteered to become the girl's foster parents.

A social worker "showed up with Holly and the two brothers, and they said they were going to take them to two separate places," Keith Michael recalled. His wife, he said, "looked at me and I knew what she was fixin' to ask." The couple ended up taking all three children.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, which has kept count of educators killed by the virus, said the stories "break your heart."

They include 71-year-old South Carolina first-grade teacher Margie Kidd and 53-year-old Iowa special education assistant Jennifer Crawford. Their families said they suspect the two were infected at school.

A district in Phoenix lost special education worker Nawaialoha Keli'imahiai Kalai to COVID-19 earlier this month and began its board meeting with a moment of silence before deciding to keep classrooms open. There, too, grief counselors provided support to children and staff members.

"I am devastated by the fact that remote education is not an effective substitute. And I want probably as much as anybody else to reopen school buildings for children," Weingarten said.

"But here is the caveat: You have to have the safeguards that the CDC recommends, and you can't have a spike going on at the same time. And you have to have the testing, and all of that is expensive."

Trump-friendly Newsmax seeks to cut into Fox's viewership

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Now that his largely invisible network has suddenly been flooded by fans of President Donald Trump, Newsmax television personality Grant Stinchfield is puffing out his chest.

"They don't know what to do with all of us," Stinchfield said on the air Monday night. "We're killing it here on Newsmax with a tactic they've never tried. It's called the truth, the stone-cold truth, and once you get a taste of it, you will never tolerate being lied to again."

The conservative network's critics suggest the opposite is true, that Newsmax's viewers are being presented discredited stories such as a voting system that changed or deleted votes, questions about how closely Republicans were able to monitor vote-counting and the volume of absentee ballots being accepted.

There is no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election. In fact, election officials from both political parties have stated publicly that the election went well and international observers confirmed there were no serious irregularities.

Newsmax's burst, whether or not it lasts, has been astonishingly swift and could foreshadow significant competition to Fox News Channel's dominance with conservative viewers in two decades.

"We've really cornered Fox from the right," said Chris Ruddy, Newsmax founder and friend of Trump. "They've never had that."

From the beginning of July to the week before Election Day, Newsmax averaged 58,000 viewers from 7 to 10 p.m. on weekdays. That jumped to 568,000 the week after the election, the Nielsen company said. In the same period, daytime viewership increased from 46,000 to 450,000.

For the same dates, Fox News averaged 3.6 million viewers in the evening, Nielsen said. Fox's prime-time viewership during the two weeks after the election was up 50 percent over last year.

"We love competition. We have always thrived on competition," Fox Corp. CEO Lachlan Murdoch said on an Election Day earnings call.

Ruddy traced much of Newsmax's increase to Trump supporters angered by Fox's election night call that Democrat Joe Biden had won Arizona — ahead of any other news organization. While that call proved correct, for the president's backers it was an ill-timed sign of insufficient loyalty from their favorite network.

Trump, who criticized Fox throughout the campaign, has driven the point home with repeated tweets suggesting his followers check out Newsmax or a smaller rival that also presses a conservative viewpoint, One America News Network.

"There's a large part of the country that wants to have a voice, the same people who gave birth to what

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turned into a very robust Fox News," said Michael Clemente, Newsmax's CEO until last April and a former Fox News executive. "Now, more than ever, they want to be heard, and have influence equal to their peers on the coasts. Their loyalty is to that voice and not to any place or another."

Newsmax says it has an editorial staff of 70, including those attached to its website, which at midday Wednesday led with stories about Trump's press secretary calling restrictions on Thanksgiving gatherings "Orwellian," and the president's latest false tweet claiming an election victory.

The television network is running a clever ad telling conservative viewers not to be "out-foxed," but it was telling on Monday that both Newsmax and OANN spent considerable time discussing an interview that was conducted on Fox, where a Trump lawyer predicted her client would win by millions of votes.

Programming generally consists of news talk shows, and it's not difficult to see where the loyalty lies.

"Donald Trump is the most powerful person in the world," said Greg Kelly, a former personality at Fox's New York affiliate who is Newsmax's most polished broadcaster. "Not because he's president, but because he's loved by so many people."

When Newsmax's Chris Salcedo asked a question about Biden during an interview Monday with Trump aide Peter Navarro, he was quickly brushed off.

"As far as I'm concerned, President Trump is going to have a second term," Navarro said.

Newsmax hasn't declared Biden the president-elect, unlike other news organizations, including Fox and The Associated Press. They say they are waiting for final certification of the vote before doing so.

Even though Ruddy conceded in an interview that Trump has an extremely narrow chance of overturning the results, he said it's up to the states, not media organizations, to declare a winner. When that process is done, Newsmax will accept the winner, he said.

But if Trump's chances of overturning the results are so small, why should a discussion about them dominate Newsmax's airtime?

"I think that people that are not pro-Trump or don't like him think we should get past it or they are tired of it," he said. "But conservatives are quite anxious to hear about developments."

He said he differs from Trump in believing the administration should be cooperating in a transition, even if the president holds out hope that the results could somehow be overturned.

"I would tell him if I speak to him that I think they should engage in a transition," he said.

The spotlight on smaller rivals comes at an extraordinarily tumultuous time at Fox. There's always been a tension between the news and opinion sides of the network, but this time it's reflected in the ultimate "unspinnable" story of election results, said Nicole Hemmer, a Columbia University professor and author of "Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics."

In some respects, the surge in Newsmax's viewership represents a temper tantrum by some Fox viewers, she said.

For Newsmax, a big question is whether its programming is compelling enough to hold viewers who are clearly sampling. Besides Kelly, former Trump press secretary Sean Spicer is Newsmax's best-known personality. Both their shows are aired twice a night; Ruddy said a new prime-time show will start next month and another is in the works.

"It's going to be a challenge for (Newsmax) to grow their numbers in the way that Fox did because of the lack of a news operation," Hemmer said.

Associated Press Television Writer Lynn Elber in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

Catholics divided as bishops examine Biden's abortion stance

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Catholics split almost evenly in supporting Donald Trump or Joe Biden in the presidential election. Now they're sharply divided over a declaration by the head of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that the president-elect's support for abortion rights presents the church with a "difficult and complex situation."

The USCCB's president, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, made that statement Tuesday near the

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close of the conference's national meeting and announced the formation of a working group of bishops to assess the dilemma. Some experts said it's possible the group will discuss whether Biden — a practicing Roman Catholic — should be barred from partaking in Holy Communion.

Catholic anti-abortion activists hope the bishops follow through with tough words and action, making clear that Catholic politicians who support abortion are in breach of church teaching.

Biden's policy agenda "is incompatible with the Catholic position on abortion and the protection of innocent human life," said Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the Susan B. Anthony List, a leading anti-abortion group.

But others criticized the USCCB as setting the stage for potential conflict with the president-elect just days after he received a congratulatory call from Pope Francis. Biden said he hopes to work with the pontiff on issues such as climate change, poverty and immigration.

"The USCCB leadership simply can't embrace the idea of engagement and goodwill that Pope Francis has asked of them," said David Gibson, director of Fordham University's Center on Religion and Culture. "That the pope called to congratulate Biden and discussed working together while the American bishops capped their meeting with plans to do battle with the incoming president says it all."

Natalia Imperatori-Lee, a professor of religious studies at Manhattan College, also was dismayed by the USCCB.

"It seems they'd like to start an antagonistic relationship with only the second Catholic to be elected the president of this country," she said via email. "This is appalling."

"The bishops have chosen to continue the culture war that uses abortion to drive wedges in our church and our society, because they see that as a winning issue for them," she wrote.

Gomez has welcomed many of Biden's stances, including on immigration, racial justice and climate change. But some conservative bishops, citing the church's opposition to abortion, have been outspoken in their criticism after Gomez congratulated Biden on his victory.

On Tuesday, as the USCCB ended the public portion of its meeting, Gomez read a statement that arose from discussions with some of the agitated bishops.

"The president-elect has given us reason to think he will support some good policies" but also some that "undermine our preeminent priority of the elimination of abortion," the archbishop said.

"These policies pose a serious threat to the common good," Gomez added. "When politicians who profess the Catholic faith support them ... it creates confusion among the faithful about what the church actually teaches on these questions."

Gomez said he would form a working group to address the matter, headed by the USCCB's vice president, Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron.

Two Catholic academics, responding to queries from The Associated Press, did not rule out the possibility that the working group could discuss whether Biden should be barred from partaking in Holy Communion because of his abortion stance.

That question "does not turn on what political office he holds, but on his public conduct as a Catholic," said Edward Peters, professor of canon law at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit.

"His prominence in public life makes his case more visible, certainly," Peters added. "But, in the end, it is his own behavior that determines whether he should be refused Holy Communion."

Thomas Groome, a theology professor at Boston College, said conservative bishops on the working group would likely push for Biden to be denied Communion. But he noted that Biden's support for abortion rights is, according to many surveys, shared by most U.S. Catholics.

Groome called Gomez's statement "dreadfully unfortunate" and said "the bishops should be helping bring us together rather than driving us apart."

Chieko Noguchi, a USCCB spokeswoman, said the working group has not yet met and declined to comment on whether it would discuss a potential Communion ban for Biden. There has been no response by Biden's transition team to AP requests for comment.

Divisions within the USCCB's ranks over the president-elect have been stark, with some, such as Bishop

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Joseph Strickland of Tyler, Texas, balking at recognizing his victory.

"I appreciate Archbishop Gomez' acknowledgment that Vice President Biden's proposed policies are divergent from Catholic teaching in significant ways," Strickland tweeted Tuesday. "It remains troubling that the USCCB treats the election as certified when it is not & it continues to be a source of division."

Journalists for Catholic news outlets pointed out that the USCCB did not wait for election results to be certified in 2016, when it swiftly congratulated Trump after Election Day.

Kristan Hawkins, a Catholic who is president of Students for Life of America, said leaders of the U.S. church need to be blunter in condemning Catholic politicians who support abortion rights.

"This pretense that ending preborn life is negotiable with the church does create chaos and confusion," Hawkins said. "This failure of leadership gives women who know that abortion is wrong the permission they're looking for to get an abortion."

However, Jamie Manson, president of Catholics for Choice, said Gomez's claim that Biden's position creates confusion among church members is "condescending."

"They are, in fact, well-informed and have used their consciences in their choice both to elect President-elect Biden and to support reproductive health care," she said.

In the election, 50% of Catholic voters backed Trump and 49% favored Biden, according to VoteCast, a survey of more than 110,000 voters nationwide conducted for The Associated Press by NORC at the University of Chicago.

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Dems nominate Pelosi as speaker again to lead into Biden era

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats nominated Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday to be the speaker who guides them again next year as Joe Biden becomes president, and she quickly seemed to suggest these would be her final two years in the leadership post.

The California Democrat, the first woman to be speaker, was nominated by acclamation as the party's lawmakers used a pandemic-induced virtual meeting to pick their leaders. Pelosi already has served six years in the job, but the next two loom as her toughest.

After unexpectedly losing at least 10 incumbents in this month's elections, Democrats will have about a 222-213 majority, the tightest margin in two decades. That prospect has demoralized many Democrats and ignited blame-trading between moderates and progressives over why they flopped on Election Day.

In addition, Biden and Congress will confront an uncontrolled coronavirus pandemic, a virus-stifled economy and jagged divisions among voters who largely either idolize or detest outgoing President Donald Trump. And there's anxiety already among Democrats looking ahead to 2022 and the midterm elections, which historically are punishing for the party that controls the White House.

Against that backdrop, many House Democrats have for years impatiently insisted it's time for fresh leadership. Pelosi and her top two lieutenants, Steny Hoyer of Maryland and Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, have served in their positions together for over a dozen years and each is age 80 or older.

Pelosi called for unity when she addressed her colleagues Wednesday after winning the nomination. "The theme, I think, of what we do next has to be about justice" in the economy, health care and policing, she said, according to a transcript released by her office.

When a reporter asked Pelosi later whether the next two years would be her last as speaker, it was little surprise that she mentioned a commitment she made in 2018. Scrambling to win enough votes to become speaker, she said then that she would agree to limit her term to four more years.

"I can't wait to be working with Joe Biden and preparing us for our transition into the future," she said Wednesday. "So I don't want to undermine any leverage I may have, but I made the statement."

Biden's office said the president-elect called Pelosi to congratulate her selection and spoke of working

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together "on a shared agenda to get COVID-19 under control and build our economy back better."

All House members will pick the speaker when the new Congress convenes in early January. Hoyer was reelected majority leader and Clyburn as the No. 3 Democratic leader on Wednesday, party posts that need no House approval. Pelosi, Hoyer and Clyburn all won without opposition.

To become speaker again, Pelosi will need more votes than House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., who's likely to garner nearly unanimous GOP support. That means Pelosi will need roughly 218 votes to prevail and can ill afford to lose more than a sprinkling of Democratic support.

Though she's likely to succeed, it won't be simple because when Pelosi was elected speaker in January 2019, 15 Democrats opposed her. Ten remain in Congress plus New York Rep. Anthony Brindisi, whose race remains uncalled, and New Jersey Rep. Jeff Van Drew, who became a Republican.

Rep. Kurt Schrader, D-Ore., who has opposed Pelosi before, said he is open to backing her this time, adding that he thinks "she gets it" about needing to moderate the Democrats' brand.

"Frankly, there's a time to move on," he said in an interview Wednesday. He cited Democrats' retaining House control and winning the White House and said, "Nancy knows it's smart to quit at the top of her game."

There will also be at least 15 first-term Democrats in the freshmen next year, and it was unclear how many will support Pelosi. Hinting that she won't try leading Democrats again in 2022 may help her nail down the votes she needs.

One favorite to succeed her is New York Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, 50, a four-term Brooklyn lawmaker. His skills range from consensus building to launching stinging oratorical salvos at Trump, who he this week called the "hater in chief."

Other Democrats eager to move up in leadership ranks include Reps. Katherine Clark of Massachusetts, David Cicilline of Rhode Island and Tony Cardenas of California. Jeffries and Clark were elected to top leadership posts on Wednesday, with Clark defeating Cicilline for the No. 4 job.

"The new ideas, the freshness that comes with that is important for the American people to see," said Rep. Tim Ryan, D-Ohio, who's unsuccessfully challenged Pelosi before but now says he's a supporter. "And so yeah, I think she does another couple of years, allows everyone else to move up, I think is a good thing."

It's unclear whether Hoyer, a moderate, or Clyburn, Congress' highest-ranking Black lawmaker, would attempt to succeed Pelosi. Clyburn's status within the party was supercharged this year when he revived Biden's near-comatose bid for the Democratic presidential nomination in February by helping him win the South Carolina primary.

Pelosi came to Congress in 1987 and has led House Democrats, both as the minority and majority party, ever since 2003. When Democrats recaptured the majority in 2018 and she regained the speakership, she had early clashes with far left newcomers such as Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., but those were subsumed as the party pulled together to oust Trump.

Pelosi has won wide acclaim among Democrats as a leading Trump foe in battles over impeachment, immigration and health care. She's given as good as she's gotten from the insult-prone Republican president, sometimes directly to his face, prompting him to call her "Crazy Nancy" and supporters to create memes and action figures honoring her.

Pelosi has pushed bills through the House — before they died in the GOP-run Senate — embodying Democratic priorities such as overhauling ethics and campaign finance laws, lowering health care costs and rebuilding infrastructure. She's also been a prodigious fundraiser for candidates.

Pfizer: COVID-19 shot 95% effective, seeking clearance soon

By LINDA A. JOHNSON and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

Pfizer said Wednesday that new test results show its coronavirus vaccine is 95% effective, is safe and also protects older people most at risk of dying — the last data needed to seek emergency use of limited shot supplies as the catastrophic outbreak worsens across the globe.

The announcement from Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, just a week after they revealed the first promising preliminary results, comes as the team is preparing within days to formally ask U.S. regulators

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to allow emergency use of the vaccine. Anticipating that, a Food and Drug Administration advisory panel is on standby to publicly debate the data in early December.

The companies also have begun "rolling submissions" for the vaccine with regulators in Europe, the U.K. and Canada and soon will add this new data.

Pfizer and BioNTech had initially estimated the vaccine was more than 90% effective after counting a group of the earliest infections that occurred in its final-stage testing. With the new announcement, they have accumulated more infections — 170 — and said only eight of them occurred in volunteers who got the actual vaccine rather than a comparison dummy shot. One of those eight developed severe disease, the companies said.

"This is an extraordinarily strong protection," Dr. Ugur Sahin, BioNTech's CEO and co-founder, told The Associated Press.

Even if regulators agree, he dispelled any notion that an end to the pandemic is around the corner, warning "we are now awaiting a hard winter."

"The available vaccine doses are just too small to ensure that we could make a significant difference to the society" right away, Sahin said. But next year if several companies' vaccine candidates also work, "we might be able to get control of this pandemic situation late summer 2021."

The companies have not yet released detailed data on their study, and results have not been analyzed by independent experts. Also still to be determined are important questions such as how long protection lasts and whether people might need boosters — leading experts to caution that people should focus less on the specific numbers and more on the overall promise.

Earlier this week, competitor Moderna Inc. also announced similar effectiveness of its own COVID-19 vaccine candidate, which is made with the same, brand-new technology — using a snippet of the genetic code of the coronavirus to train the body to recognize if the real virus comes along.

For both, "there's every reason to be enormously optimistic," said Dr. Paul Offit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, one of FDA's advisers.

"When these vaccines roll out, you're only going to know it's effective for a limited period of time," he cautioned, adding that more follow-up information will come. "You don't want to oversell it, but you don't want to undersell it."

All eyes are on the progress of potential vaccines as the grim infection toll jumps in the U.S. and abroad as winter weather forces people indoors, in the close quarters that fuels viral spread.

Pfizer and BioNTech said the vaccine was more than 94% effective in adults over age 65, though it is not clear exactly how that was determined with only eight infections in the vaccinated group to analyze and no breakdown provided of those people's ages.

Sahin said there were enough older adults enrolled in the study and among the placebo recipients who became infected that he is confident "this vaccine appears to work in the higher-risk population."

While initial supplies will be scarce and rationed, as the supply grows Sahin said the companies have a responsibility to help ensure access for lower income countries as well.

In the U.S., officials expect enough doses of both Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines to vaccinate only about 20 million people at first. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will determine who is first in line, expected to include health workers and older adults.

Whatever that prioritization, Gen. Gustavo Perna of the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed pledged a "fair and equitable" distribution across the U.S. of FDA-authorized doses as they become available. Pfizer would handle shipping of its own doses; the warp speed program will help with support and distributing additional companies' vaccines if and when they become available.

In addition to the protection findings, Pfizer and BioNTech also said no serious vaccine side effects have been reported, with the most common problem being fatigue after the second vaccine dose, affecting about 4% of participants.

The study has enrolled nearly 44,000 people in the U.S. and five other countries. The trial will continue to collect safety and effectiveness data on volunteers for two more years.

Pfizer and BioNTech said they expect to produce up to 50 million vaccine doses globally in 2020 and up

to 1.3 billion doses in 2021.

AP Medical Writer Lauran Neergaard contributed to this report.

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Boeing Max cleared for takeoff, 2 years after deadly crashes

By DAVID KOENIG and TOM KRISHER AP Business Writers

After nearly two years and a pair of deadly crashes, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration has cleared Boeing's 737 Max for flight.

The nation's air safety agency announced the move early Wednesday, saying it was done after a "comprehensive and methodical" 20-month review process.

Regulators around the world grounded the Max in March 2019, after the crash of an Ethiopian Airlines jet. That happened less than five months after another Max flown by Indonesia's Lion Air plunged into the Java Sea. A total of 346 passengers and crew members on both planes were killed.

Federal Aviation Administration chief Stephen Dickson signed an order Wednesday rescinding the grounding. U.S. airlines will fly the Max once Boeing updates critical software and computers and pilots receive training in flight simulators.

The FAA says the order was made in cooperation with air safety regulators worldwide.

The move follows exhaustive congressional hearings on the crashes that led to criticism of the FAA for lax oversight and Boeing for rushing to implement a new software system that put profits over safety and ultimately led to the firing of its CEO.

Investigators focused on anti-stall software that Boeing had devised to counter the plane's tendency to tilt nose-up because of the size and placement of the engines. That software pushed the nose down repeatedly on both planes that crashed, overcoming the pilots' struggles to regain control. In each case, a single faulty sensor triggered the nose-down pitch.

The new software now requires inputs from two sensors to activate the software, which Boeing says does not override pilot controls like it did in the past.

The company changed the software so it doesn't repeatedly point the nose of the plane down to counteract possible aerodynamic stalling.

On a conference call with reporters, Dickson said the Max is now the most scrutinized transport aircraft in history, with over 40 FAA employees working tens of thousands of hours on the plane.

"The design changes we have overseen make it impossible for these accident scenarios to reoccur," he said.

He said that if FAA knew after Lion Air what it learned during this review of the plane, it should have grounded the plane after the first crash.

"These events and the lessons we have learned as a result have reshaped our company and further focused our attention on our core values of safety, quality and integrity," Boeing CEO David Calhoun said in a statement.

The aircraft maker's redemption comes in the middle of a pandemic that has scared away passengers and decimated the aviation industry, limiting its ability to make a comeback. Air travel in the U.S. alone is down about 65% from a year ago.

Boeing sales of new planes have plunged because of the Max and the coronavirus pandemic. Orders for more than 1,000 Max jets have been canceled or removed from Boeing's backlog this year. Each plane has a sticker price of \$99 million to \$135 million, although airlines routinely pay less.

Boeing shares fell 2.1% to \$205.55 in trading Wednesday afternoon. That's about half of the all-time high of \$440.62 reached on March 1, 2019, just days before the Ethiopian crash, but well above the \$95 trough in March, when the pandemic caused massive disruptions to travel and the global economy.

John Hansman, an aeronautics professor at MIT, said people typically avoid airplanes for a few months

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after there are problems. But the Max case is unusual, and were it not for the novel coronavirus, Hansman said he would feel safe flying on a Max.

"It's probably the safest airplane to be on," he said.

Relatives of people who died in the crashes aren't convinced. They accused Boeing of hiding critical design features from the FAA.

"The flying public should avoid the Max," said Michael Stumo, whose 24-year-old daughter died in the second crash. "Change your flight. This is still a more dangerous aircraft than other modern planes."

American is the only U.S. airline to put the Max in its schedule so far, starting with one round trip daily between New York and Miami beginning Dec. 29. United expects to start using the plane early next year, while Southwest said its Max jets won't fly before the second quarter of 2021.

Some consumer groups urged airlines to fully disclose when Max flights are planned. That's usually on an airline's website, although passengers have to know where to click. Advocates are concerned about airlines using the Max in a last-minute switch.

Nearly 400 Max jets were in service worldwide when they were grounded, and Boeing has built and stored about 450 more since then. All have to undergo maintenance before they can fly.

Pilots must also undergo simulator training, which was not required when the aircraft was introduced. Hansman said training for qualified 737 pilots shouldn't take long because Boeing has fixed software problems.

Boeing's reputation has taken a beating since the crashes. Its then-CEO, Dennis Muilenburg, initially suggested that the foreign pilots were to blame. However, congressional investigators discovered an FAA analysis — conducted after the first Max crash — that predicted there would be 15 more crashes during the plane's life span if the flight-control software were not fixed.

Boeing was repeatedly wrong about how quickly it could fix the plane. When those predictions continued to be wrong, and Boeing was perceived as putting undue pressure on the FAA, Muilenburg was fired in December 2019.

After an 18-month investigation, the House Transportation Committee heaped blame on Boeing, which was under pressure to develop the Max to compete with a plane from European rival Airbus, and the FAA, which certified the Max and was the last agency in the world to ground it after the crashes. The investigators said Boeing suffered from a "culture of concealment," and pressured engineers to rush the plane to the market.

Among the criticisms was the FAA's use of Boeing employees to inspect and evaluate the Max, with some workers feeling pressured by the company to act in its favor.

Dickson said the so-called designee program has changed, with the FAA handling all evaluations of the Max itself. FAA inspectors will check every new Max before it's cleared for flight, he said.

The designee program will continue on future aircraft, he said, but the agency is "implementing various measures to make sure there's a free flow of communication and data between manufacturers and the FAA."

Dickson — a former Air Force and Delta Air Lines pilot — flew the Max personally before it was cleared.

Europe's aviation regulator, the European Union Aviation Safety Agency, said it will take public comment on plans to clear the Max for flight and expects to finalize a plan by early next year. Some EU states will have to lift their own grounding notices as well. Regulators in Canada and China are still doing their own reviews.

Relatives say it's too soon, and they and their lawyers say Boeing and the FAA are withholding documents. Anton Sahadi, who lives in Jakarta, Indonesia, and lost two brothers in the Lion Air crash, said it's too early for the Max to fly again.

"The cases from the incidents are not 100% finished yet," he said. "I think all the victims' family in Indonesia and Ethiopia will feel the same, so regretful, why it can fly again because we are still in the recovery process for our problems because of the incidents."

Naoise Ryan, an Irish citizen whose husband died in the Ethiopian crash, said the Max is "the same airplane that crashed not once but twice because safety was not a priority for this company."

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Koenig, who reported from Dallas, can be reached at www.twitter.com/airlinewriter. Krisher reported from Detroit. Edna Tarigan in Jakarta, Indonesia, and David Risling in Berlin contributed.

Charlie Brown specials to air on TV, after all, in PBS deal

NEW YORK (AP) — The “Great Pumpkin” never showed on broadcast television this year, but after a deal with PBS, the Charlie Brown Thanksgiving and Christmas specials will return to the air.

Last month, Apple TV+ became the new home to the beloved Peanuts holiday specials. That sparked an outcry from viewers who were accustomed to annually tuning in on network TV. Apple offered each special to stream for free for a handful of days, but that didn’t stop online petitions from gathering hundreds of thousands of signatures.

On Wednesday, Apple bowed to the backlash, announcing it had teamed up with PBS for ad-free broadcasts of “A Charlie Brown Thanksgiving” (on Nov. 22) and “A Charlie Brown Christmas” (on Dec. 13).

Both specials will also be available for free during three-day windows on Apple TV+ (Nov. 25-27 for “Thanksgiving” and Dec. 11-13 for “Christmas.”) For subscribers, the specials will be available beginning Nov. 18 and Dec. 4, respectively.

America’s bellwethers crumbled in aligning with Trump in ‘20

By CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (AP) — A glass case in the history museum on the main street through this city celebrates its curious place in American lore: There’s a photo of John F. Kennedy Jr. on the courthouse steps, and Richard Nixon at Terre Haute’s little airport. A newsreel playing on a loop describes it as “magic town.”

Vigo County, with about 107,000 people on the western edge of Indiana, long had some mysterious mix of quirky politics, demographics, geography, religion, labor and luck so that it had become America’s most reliable presidential bellwether.

Since 1888, this exhibit boasts, the county voted in line with the nation in every presidential election but two. It missed in 1908 and 1952, then remained a perfect predictor of the U.S. mood, a rare place to toggle between Republicans and Democrats in harmony with America.

“That’s wrong now. We’re going to have to change that poster,” said Susan Tingley, the executive director of the museum, which is in an old overalls factory that closed long ago, like most of the local factories.

Vigo County’s most recent winning streak ended this year, as it did for nearly all the country’s reliable bellwethers, most of them blue-collar, overwhelmingly white communities in the Rust Belt. Of the 19 counties that had a perfect record between 1980 and 2016, all but one voted to reelect President Donald Trump, who lost to Joe Biden in both the national popular vote and in nearly every battleground state.

The country’s tribalized politics seem to have finally reached these places that used to routinely swing from one party to the other. The only county that maintained its place as a bellwether is Clallam County, in Washington state.

The ones in the middle all crumbled, leaving many here wondering whether this was merely a Trump-fueled fluke or whether the country has cleaved itself so firmly into two opposing camps that these old political standard-bearers are obsolete. Is Vigo County just one more reliably red square in the red middle of America?

“It speaks to an evolution in American politics,” said David Niven, a political scientist at the University of Cincinnati who analyzed the state of Ohio’s fall from bellwether status this year.

Niven notes these bellwethers were born when political battle lines tended to be drawn more cleanly along economic lines. These middle-class communities were in the center and up for grabs. But as national politics become less about economics and more about culture wars and identity, Democrats have lost their grip in places such as Vigo County that are overwhelmingly white, he said.

Now the places emerging as possible new bellwethers have more racially diverse populations. Delaware’s Kent County last missed in 1992. Its population is 60% white and 27% Black. Blaine County in Montana, which last missed in 1988, is more than 50% Native American.

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Vigo County doesn't look much like America, and its place as its foremost presidential predictor relied on a certain degree of luck, said Matt Bergbower, a political scientist at Indiana State University. It is not as diverse as the nation, with a population that is 85% white. It is not as wealthy or highly educated, either.

But for generations its conservative tilt on social issues was balanced by left-leaning idiosyncrasies. There are four colleges in Terre Haute, a remarkable number for a city its size. It is the birthplace of Eugene V. Debs, a champion for workers' rights who ran for president as a socialist five times in the early 20th century. The county's blue-collar workforce was heavily organized and union halls dotted the city.

Terre Haute was once so defined by its factories it even smelled of them. Big industrial plants lined the banks of the Wabash River, and the odor of fermentation and chemicals was in the air. People are happy that the smell is gone now. But it drifted away as the plants closed down, and with it went countless good-paying jobs.

The Democratic-leaning ingredients in town diminished, too. Many young people now leave, seeking better jobs in bigger cities. As industry crumbled, union membership declined.

Trump won in Terre Haute by 15 percentage points, holding his margin of victory in 2016. But local political observers on both sides of the aisle marveled at the dramatic spike in straight-ticket Republican ballots: 11,744, more than one-quarter of all the presidential votes cast. The county government, for the first time anyone can remember, will now be controlled almost entirely by Republicans.

"If you would have told me 10 years ago we would have more straight-ticket Republicans in this county than Democrats, I'd have said you're a liar," said Frank Rush, a Republican radio talk show host who voted for Trump.

Rush said Vigo County might be saying goodbye to its bellwether history, but it remains a barometer for the worries and values of the geographic middle of America. People in growing big cities just can't understand life in a place like this, where it feels like the country is moving on without them.

"And Trump, love him or hate him, approve or disapprove, he at least gave the impression that he really cared about these folks that thought they were left behind and ignored," Rush said. "That's why they rallied to his side."

Todd Thacker, business manager of the local International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, said he's willing to take part of the blame for the way this election turned out. He tried mightily to persuade his members to "vote your paycheck" and elect Democrats who support organized labor. But he watched as many instead aligned themselves based on polarizing wedge issues — "God, guns and gays," he derides it.

Thacker is an avid hunter, he has a concealed carry permit and owns many guns. But the polarized political landscape today has, he said, "brainwashed people to think that if you're a Democrat, you can't be a patriotic gun-owning flag-waving American."

Trump managed to stoke that fear and people listened, fueled by misinformation on social media and pundits bellowing all day about how the other side will destroy democracy.

"He's not a politician, he's a scam artist," said Thacker, who tried to remind people that President Barack Obama didn't come take people's guns, President Bill Clinton didn't, either.

His union supported a program called "Unity in the Community," that as a response to the national reckoning on racism tried to bring together the police and the Black community. One of his members accused him of supporting a "Marxist" movement.

Thacker says typically about 35% of his members vote Republican. This year, he thinks it increased.

The Trump supporters in the union include Craig Rudisel, who spent 23 years in the military before joining the electricians' local and has a Trump sign as big as a bathtub on his front lawn.

"I've had conversation with people I work with and they say 'you need to support your brotherhood, you need to support your paycheck,'" said Rudisel, 50. "And I say 'I have to support my conscience.'"

Rudisel is drawn to Trump's position on guns, abortion and taxes. He wears a Make America Great Again cap every day, and was unfazed to receive an anonymous typewritten letter in the mail from someone who described in vulgar terms how much they disapprove of his Trump sign. He likes that Trump upsets people, and he doesn't mind doing it, either.

"He wants to make America great again, and that's what we want," he said. "We are tired of liberal

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progressive ideals. That's not what our country was founded on and that's not how this county should be going in the future. I want the country that I grew up in for my grandson and granddaughter."

Rudisel is proud of Vigo County's bellwether history. Like many here, he can off the top of his head rattle off the details of the few elections it missed and that is part of why he has clung to the hope that Trump hasn't lost. Trump has claimed there was widespread voter fraud, despite offering no evidence to support that charge.

Rudisel thinks what happened here is proof. Vigo County and the rest of the bellwethers always get it right and opted for Trump, so he must be the rightful winner, Rudisel thinks.

Other Trump supporters also pointed to Vigo's past performance as a sign that the election fight might not be over.

Ken Warner, a stockbroker, said he will accept a Biden presidency but he wonders how so many bellwethers could get it wrong, all at once.

Warner, 64, has toggled between Republicans and Democrats, and wasn't terribly excited about Trump in the 2016 primary. Warner remains uneasy about the president's personality. He cringed when Trump antagonized governors during the pandemic and hurled childish insults at people such as the late Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz.

But he grew more enthusiastic about Trump throughout his presidency. He cheered for Trump's economic policies. He supported the tax cuts, the tariffs and his tough stance on China.

The Trump era hasn't been a boon for Indiana's factory towns. The sector was recovering from the Great Recession when Trump took office, but that began to stall in 2019. Then the coronavirus caused a plunge in factory jobs in the state, which are now down by almost 40,000 from a year ago.

Warner believes if Trump had gotten a second term, things might have improved. He worries the economy will stagnate under a Democratic administration.

"I think his tweets were part of his downfall," Warner said. "But the people that voted for Trump didn't vote for him for his personality. They voted for results."

Joe Etling was certain that the people of Vigo County would punish Trump for his temperament. Every four years, Etling, who has run the county's Democratic Party for 24 years, is asked by pundits and politicians to guess who will win the presidential election. This year he said Biden.

"People in this county are good, decent people. They treat people with respect, they're polite and if you're out and about, people on the streets are going to welcome you. Well, when you hear some of the things that the president says publicly, they're not real friendly, they're not real polite, they're not real courteous," he said. "My sense is if you had Joe Biden and Donald Trump in a room with people in Vigo County, they would have substantially more in common with Joe Biden than they ever would have Donald Trump. And yet."

Etling refuses to accept that his county is fully Republican now.

In 2008, he saw how excited this community was about Obama. When Obama came to town, people packed a school gymnasium and screamed like he was a rock star. The county had from 1960 to 2004 voted within 3 percentage points of the national vote, but it broke that streak to vote overwhelmingly for Obama, who won this county by 16 percentage points. That margin narrowed considerably in 2012, when Obama won Vigo County by just a few hundred votes.

Then it swung wildly rightward, awarding Trump huge margins of victory, twice.

"And you would have to agree that those two gentlemen are about as diametrically opposed as anybody that you could think about. And yet people still did that," Etling said, and so he thinks they can turn it around again.

There was a bright spot for him in 2020. One of the few Democrats elected was Dr. Janie Myers, the new coroner and the first Black woman in history to win countywide office here.

So Etling is already starting to recruit Democratic candidates to run in local races in 2022, and he thinks it can reclaim its bellwether status.

But Tingley, at the county history museum, isn't sure this place or any place can be a bellwether these days.

"It is all politics of fear and passion. It's not about voting for who's right for you. It's about avoiding the candidate that scares you the most," she said. "If it gets back to what's best for the country, what's best for individuals, what's best for communities, I think that's when the bellwether counties all across the country can hit it again."

In the meantime, the city is trying rebrand itself.

The signs leading into town welcome visitors to the birthplace of the Coca-Cola bottle. A glass company here invented Coke's iconic contoured container in 1915.

There's a mural of the bottle painted on the side of the history museum, and around the town are 39 6-foot-tall brightly-painted bottle sculptures. The goal is to promote Terre Haute as a cultural destination, steeped in Americana history.

Tingley would be happy if the city became known for that. It probably would be more reliable than predicting the president every four years.

Associated Press writer Josh Boak and Associated Press data journalist Angeliki Kastanis contributed to this report.

US withdrawal rattles Afghan allies and adversaries alike

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — An accelerated U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, announced by Washington this week, has rattled both allies and adversaries. There are fears of worsening violence and regional chaos, which some say could embolden the local Islamic State affiliate to regroup and perhaps even try to build another "caliphate."

Under an earlier deal between the U.S. and the Taliban that outlined a gradual pullout, the remaining U.S. forces were to leave Afghanistan by April. The Pentagon now says some 2,500 troops will leave by January, just days before President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration, leaving another 2,000 or so U.S. forces in place. Biden has said he prefers a small, intelligence-driven, counterterrorism presence in Afghanistan.

A U.S. withdrawal would be welcome in most of rural Afghanistan where civilians are increasingly caught in the crossfire between Taliban and government forces, said Torek Farhadi, a former Afghan government adviser and political analyst.

"After a bombing by any side of the conflict, no one has gone back to rebuild any infrastructure. No one has really worked on healing hearts and minds," he said.

The U.S.-Taliban deal, signed in February, was largely propelled by Washington's fear of an expanding Islamic State affiliate in Afghanistan, said a U.S. Defense Department official who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the subject.

With terrorist plots that he said had links to Afghanistan, Washington sought a deal with the Taliban that would bring them into a coordinated fight — along with Afghan security forces — against the Islamic State militant group, which lost its self-proclaimed "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq.

A U.S.-led coalition toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan for harboring former al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. The Taliban has regained strength in recent years in the country, although the Islamic State and a degraded al-Qaida still carry out attacks in the region.

"Washington has looked at Afghanistan largely through a counterterrorism lens. And that will certainly be the case for the incoming Biden administration," said Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the Washington-based Wilson Center.

NATO has fewer than 12,000 troops helping to train and advise Afghan national security forces. The 30-nation alliance relies heavily on the U.S. armed forces for transport, logistics and other support.

Kugelman said President Donald Trump's approach to ending America's longest war was always a gamble.

"While the idea of the Taliban making peace with the Afghan government and then working together to target ISIS sounds great in theory, it's a very tall order, and especially anytime soon."

A Biden administration strategy of maintaining a residual force — even a narrowly focused one — would

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require a renegotiated deal with the Taliban, which the insurgent movement has already rejected. The Afghan government, which has complained bitterly about being sidelined in U.S. negotiations with the Taliban, wants the deal scrapped entirely.

With word this week of the accelerated U.S. troop withdrawal, Afghans also fear powerful warlords in Kabul with a long history of infighting could again turn their guns on each other once the current deterrence of an international troop presence is sharply reduced.

"One of the most critical roles of the U.S. in Afghanistan ... is to keep their own Afghan allies from fighting among themselves and bringing down the state," said Anatol Lieven, a New America Foundation Senior Fellow at Georgetown University's Qatar campus. "It seems unlikely, however, that the U.S. will be willing or able to do this indefinitely."

Analysts fear the accelerated withdrawal could significantly compromise the defense capabilities of Afghanistan's forces. Kugelman says even a small number of U.S. forces can have an impact on the direction of the war.

"The numbers (of troops being pulled out) may seem small, and they are, but the impacts of even small numbers of troops are considerable," he said. "U.S. air power has helped Afghan ground forces repel Taliban offensives. U.S. troops help strengthen much-needed capacity within Afghan security forces."

Yet Afghanistan's acting Defense Minister Asadullah Khalid told Parliament on Tuesday that the security forces were holding their own and only 4% of their operations need U.S. air assistance.

"There might be up and down in numbers of troops, but we are not concerned. We are ready to defend Afghanistan independently," Khalid told lawmakers.

Afghanistan remains desperately poor, even after 20 years and billions of dollars in investment. More than 25 million of its 36 million people survive on barely \$1.40 a day. For many, the presence of international forces brings little relief.

"There's certainly good reason to believe that the U.S. is wearing out its welcome in Afghanistan, given its inability to rein in rising insurgent and terrorist violence and given its own contribution to the violence through actions that maim and kill civilians," Kugelman said. "And that's aside from perceptions of U.S. complicity in Kabul's corruption."

Afghanistan's government is among the world's 10 most corrupt, according to Transparency International. Since 2002, Washington's own watchdog says the U.S. has lost \$19 billion of aid to Afghanistan to waste, abuse and fraud.

The U.S. spends \$4 billion a year on Afghanistan's National Security and Defense Forces, yet relentless violence in the country has been demoralizing and U.S. air power has been the key to the ability of Afghan forces to hold territory against Taliban onslaughts.

Afghanistan's security forces also have been degraded by corruption. According to an August report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, about half of all police in the Taliban strongholds of the southern provinces use drugs and up to 70% of police positions in those regions are "ghost" jobs — in which they are not actually filled but the salaries are diverted to officials on the take.

The U.S. troop withdrawal seems certain to feature prominently in the first visit to Afghanistan on Thursday of Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan. The neighbors have an uneasy relationship, with Kabul accusing Islamabad of strengthening the Taliban by harboring its leadership. Pakistan says Afghanistan has become the staging arena for Indian-sponsored attacks on its soil.

Pakistan has been critical in getting the Taliban to the table, and Khan has warned against a messy retreat by U.S. troops, fearing that the chaos in Afghanistan will spill into Pakistan, which still houses nearly 2 million Afghan refugees from four decades of war.

But Kabul worries about Pakistan might use proxy Taliban fighters to retaliate if Islamabad feels threatened by India-sponsored attacks from Afghan territory.

"In the end, the future of Afghanistan depends on the Afghans themselves and Afghanistan's neighbors. The USA is not going to be in this region forever," Lieven said.

"As for most other Afghans, it seems that they are just desperately anxious for an end to the war," he

added.

Associated Press writer Tameem Akhgar in Kabul, Afghanistan, contributed.

Acting Pentagon chief cites risks during troop reductions

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The coming period of U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq is “fraught with risk,” but the military will not hesitate to strike back if extremists attempt to undermine the transition to a smaller U.S. force in those countries, the newly installed acting secretary of defense said Wednesday.

Speaking at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, Christopher C. Miller, who served in both Afghanistan and Iraq as an Army Special Forces officer, said President Donald Trump’s order to cut the U.S. military presence to 2,500 troops in those countries by Jan. 15 was a step toward ending the wars responsibly.

Some members of Congress, including Republicans, have argued that the move is unwise or premature. “Headlines about ‘bringing the boys home’ sound good, but that’s not what’s happening,” said Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican and member of the Senate Intelligence Committee. “After this retreat, there will still be American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. The most important question is whether those remaining troops will be able to prevent al-Qaida, the Islamic State, Iranian proxies, and others from plotting attacks that can spill American blood, or if they will be exposed as jihadis gain ground.”

Chuck Hagel, a Republican who served as defense secretary in the Obama administration, said in an interview earlier this week that Trump should have left troop reduction decisions to President-elect Joe Biden, since the new administration will have to deal with the consequences of American troop withdrawals.

“It sends a clear signal to the Taliban” and strengthens their hand in negotiations with the Kabul government, said Hagel, who stressed that he favors finding a way to end U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan without sabotaging the government’s chances of achieving a viable peace deal. “This is not going to end well for the Afghan government.”

On Wednesday, two House members who are veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan — Democrat Seth Moulton of Massachusetts and Republican Adam Kinzinger of Illinois — sent a letter to Miller and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo requesting answers to numerous questions about the ramifications of Trump’s decision, including how the troop pullouts will affect stability in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“We believe that there is strong bipartisan support from Congress and the administration for both Iraq and Afghanistan,” they wrote. “Any premature drawdown without thoughtful consideration of the real-world conditions on the ground would be ill-advised. Additionally, we continue to be concerned by the growing ISIS activity in Afghanistan and Iran’s influence in Iraq.”

Although the State Department has not announced a pullout of diplomatic personnel from either country this week in conjunction with Trump’s announcement, there is concern in Congress that a substantial troop pullback could affect the security of the U.S. embassies in Baghdad and Kabul and the safety of embassy personnel.

Miller had announced Trump’s troop-cut decision Tuesday at the Pentagon, and he elaborated on the plan at Bragg. He said the reductions would be done in a way that “protects our fighting men and women and our hard-earned gains.”

“At the same time, should any malign actors underestimate our resolve or attempt to undermine our efforts, we will not hesitate to restore deterrence and defeat any and all threats,” he added, speaking at Bragg’s outdoor Special Operations Memorial Plaza.

“As we implement the president’s orders, we recognize that transitions and campaigns are fraught with risk and unexpected challenges and opportunities,” Miller said, adding that this is why he was signing an order directing the civilian head of special operations to report directly to the secretary of defense. That person, whose title is assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, currently reports to the defense secretary through the undersecretary of defense for policy.

This change in the administrative chain of command for special operations was required by the 2017

National Defense Authorization Act. There currently is no Senate-confirmed assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict; Ezra Cohen holds the job in an acting capacity.

AP Diplomatic writer Matthew Lee contributed to this report.

Judge orders US to stop expelling children who cross border

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday ordered the Trump administration to stop expelling immigrant children who cross the southern border alone, halting a policy that has resulted in thousands of rapid deportations of minors during the coronavirus pandemic.

U.S. District Judge Emmet Sullivan issued a preliminary injunction sought by legal groups suing on behalf of children whom the government sought to expel before they could request asylum or other protections under federal law.

The Trump administration has expelled at least 8,800 unaccompanied children since March, when it issued an emergency declaration citing the coronavirus as grounds for barring most people crossing the border from remaining in the United States.

Border agents have forced many people to return to Mexico right away, while detaining others in holding facilities or hotels, sometimes for days or weeks. Meanwhile, government-funded facilities meant to hold children while they are placed with sponsors have thousands of unused beds.

Sullivan's order bars only the expulsion of children who cross the border unaccompanied by a parent. The government has expelled nearly 200,000 people since March, including adults, and parents and children traveling together.

"This policy was sending thousands of young children back to danger without any hearing," said Lee Gelernt, a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union. "Like so many other Trump administration policies, it was gratuitously cruel and unlawful."

The Justice Department did not immediately say whether it would appeal. It has appealed another federal judge's order barring the use of hotels to detain children.

The incoming administration of President-elect Joe Biden has not directly said whether it will keep trying to expel immigrants under public-health authority. Biden is expected to roll back several Trump administration policies restricting asylum as part of a broader shift on immigration.

The Trump administration has argued in court that it must expel children who have recently crossed the border — whether they had authorization or not — to prevent the infection of border agents and others in immigration custody. The emergency declaration was made by Dr. Robert Redfield, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the Justice Department on Oct. 2 cited the judgment of "the nation's top public health official" in urging Sullivan not to stop the expulsion of children.

The Associated Press reported on Oct. 3 that top CDC officials resisted issuing the declaration because it lacked a public health basis, but that Vice President Mike Pence ordered Redfield to move forward anyway.

Opponents of the policy accuse the administration of using the pandemic as a pretext to restrict immigration and say agents can safely screen minors for COVID-19 without denying protections under federal anti-trafficking law and a court settlement that governs the treatment of children.

U.S. Magistrate Judge G. Michael Harvey recommended on Sept. 25 that Sullivan grant an injunction barring expulsions of children, saying the government was claiming power that was "breathtakingly broad."

Children and parents who have been expelled have reported believing they would be allowed to reunite with family in the U.S., only to instead be deported to their countries of origin.

One mother of 12- and 9-year-olds found out her children had been expelled when she received a call from an official in Honduras asking her to send a relative to collect them.

The father of a 1-year-old girl alleged that agents told him and his wife to feed the girl ice in case their temperatures were checked before boarding a flight. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has denied using ice as an artificial cooling measure.

Rape, abuses in palm oil fields linked to top beauty brands

By MARGIE MASON and ROBIN McDOWELL Associated Press

SUMATRA, Indonesia (AP) — With his hand clamped tightly over her mouth, she could not scream, the 16-year-old girl recalls — and no one was around to hear her anyway. She describes how her boss raped her amid the tall trees on an Indonesian palm oil plantation that feeds into some of the world's best-known cosmetic brands. He then put an ax to her throat and warned her: Do not tell.

At another plantation, a woman named Ola complains of fevers, coughing and nose bleeds after years of spraying dangerous pesticides with no protective gear. Making just \$2 a day, with no health benefits, she can't afford to see a doctor.

Hundreds of miles away, Ita, a young wife, mourns the two babies she lost in the third trimester. She regularly lugged loads several times her weight throughout both pregnancies, fearing she would be fired if she did not.

These are the invisible women of the palm oil industry, among the millions of daughters, mothers and grandmothers who toil on vast plantations across Indonesia and neighboring Malaysia, which together produce 85 percent of the world's most versatile vegetable oil.

Palm oil is found in everything from potato chips and pills to pet food, and also ends up in the supply chains of some of the biggest names in the \$530 billion beauty business, including L'Oréal, Unilever, Procter & Gamble, Avon and Johnson & Johnson, helping women around the world feel pampered and beautiful.

The Associated Press conducted the first comprehensive investigation focusing on the brutal treatment of women in the production of palm oil, including the hidden scourge of sexual abuse, ranging from verbal harassment and threats to rape. It's part of a larger in-depth look at the industry that exposed widespread abuses in the two countries, including human trafficking, child labor and outright slavery.

Women are burdened with some of the industry's most difficult and dangerous jobs, spending hours waist-deep in water tainted by chemical runoff and carrying loads so heavy that, over time, their wombs can collapse and protrude. Many are hired by subcontractors on a day-to-day basis without benefits, performing the same jobs for the same companies for years — even decades. They often work without pay to help their husbands meet otherwise impossible daily quotas.

"Almost every plantation has problems related to labor," said Hotler Parsaoran of the Indonesian nonprofit group Sawit Watch, which has conducted extensive investigations into abuses in the palm oil sector. "But the conditions of female workers are far worse than men."

Parsaoran said it's the responsibility of governments, growers, big multinational buyers and banks that help finance plantation expansion to tackle issues related to palm oil, which is listed under more than 200 ingredient names and contained in nearly three out of four personal-care products — everything from mascara and bubble bath to anti-wrinkle creams.

The AP interviewed more than three dozen women and girls from at least 12 companies across Indonesia and Malaysia. Because previous reports have resulted in retaliation against workers, they are being identified only by partial names or nicknames. They met with female AP reporters secretly within their barracks or at hotels, coffee shops or churches, sometimes late at night, usually with no men present so they could speak openly.

The Malaysian government said it had received no reports about rapes on plantations, but Indonesia acknowledged physical and sexual abuse appears to be a growing problem, with most victims afraid to speak out. Still, the AP was able to corroborate a number of the women's stories by reviewing police reports, legal documents, complaints filed with union representatives and local media accounts.

Reporters also interviewed nearly 200 other workers, activists, government officials and lawyers, including some who helped trapped girls and women escape, who confirmed that abuses regularly occur.

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Indonesia is the world's biggest palm oil producer, with an estimated 7.6 million women working in its fields, about half the total workforce, according to the female empowerment ministry. In much-smaller Malaysia, the figures are harder to nail down due to the large number of foreign migrants working off the books.

In both countries, the AP found generations of women from the same families who have served as part of the industry's backbone. Some started working as children alongside their parents, gathering loose kernels and clearing brush from the trees with machetes, never learning to read or write.

And others, like a woman who gave the name Indra, dropped out of school as teenagers. She took a job at Malaysia's Sime Darby Plantations, one of the world's biggest palm oil companies. Years later, she says her boss started harassing her, saying things like "Come sleep with me. I will give you a baby." He would lurk behind her in the fields, even when she went to the bathroom.

Now 27, Indra dreams of leaving, but it's hard to build another life with no education and no other skills. Women in her family have worked on the same Malaysian plantation since her great-grandmother left India as a baby in the early 1900s. Like many laborers in both countries, they can't afford to give up the company's basic subsidized housing, which often consists of rows of dilapidated shacks without running water.

That ensures the generational cycle endures, maintaining a cheap, built-in workforce.

"I feel it's already normal," Indra said. "From birth until now, I am still on a plantation."

Out of sight, hidden by a sea of palms, women have worked on plantations since European colonizers brought the first trees from West Africa more than a century ago. As punishment in Indonesia back then, some so-called female "coolies" were bound to posts outside the boss' house with finely ground chili pepper rubbed into their vaginas.

As the decades passed, palm oil became an essential ingredient for the food industry, which saw it as a substitute for unhealthy trans fats. And cosmetic companies, which were shifting away from animal- or petroleum-based ingredients, were captivated by its miracle properties: It foams in toothpaste and shaving gel, moisturizes soaps and lathers in shampoo.

New workers are constantly needed to meet the relentless demand, which has quadrupled in the last 20 years alone. Women in Indonesia are often "casual" workers – hired day to day, with their jobs and pay never guaranteed. Men receive nearly all the full-time permanent positions, harvesting the heavy, spiky fruit bunches and working in processing mills.

On almost every plantation, men also are the supervisors, opening the door for sexual harassment and abuse.

The 16-year-old girl who described being raped by her boss – a man old enough to be her grandfather – started working on the plantation at age 6 to help her family make ends meet.

The day she was attacked in 2017, she said the boss took her to a remote part of the estate, where her job was to ferry wheelbarrows laden with the bright orange palm oil fruits he hacked from the trees. Suddenly, she said, he grabbed her arm and started pawing her breasts, throwing her to the jungle floor. Afterward, she said, he held the ax to her throat.

"He threatened to kill me," she said softly. "He threatened to kill my whole family."

Then, she said, he stood up and spit on her.

Nine months later, after she says he raped her four more times, she sat by a wrinkled 2-week-old boy. She made no effort to comfort him when he cried, struggling to even look at his face.

The family filed a report with police, but the complaint was dropped, citing lack of evidence.

"I want him to be punished," the girl said after a long silence. "I want him to be arrested and punished because he didn't care about the baby ... he didn't take any responsibility."

The AP heard about similar incidents on plantations big and small in both countries. Union representatives, health workers, government officials and lawyers said some of the worst examples they encountered involved gang rapes and children as young as 12 being taken into the fields and sexually assaulted by plantation foremen.

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One example involved an Indonesian teen who was trafficked to Malaysia as a sex slave, where she was passed between drunk palm oil workers living under plastic tarps in the jungle, eventually escaping ravaged by chlamydia. And in a rare high-profile case that sparked outrage last year, a female preacher working at a Christian church inside an Indonesian estate was tied up among the trees, sexually assaulted by two workers and then strangled. The men were sentenced to life in prison.

While Indonesia has laws in place to protect women from abuse and discrimination, Rafail Walangitan of the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection said he was aware of many problems identified by the AP on palm oil plantations, including child labor and sexual harassment.

"We have to work hard on this," he said, noting the government still has a long way to go.

Malaysia's Ministry of Women, Family and Community Development said it hadn't received complaints about the treatment of women laborers so had no comment. And Nageeb Wahab, head of the Malaysian Palm Oil Association, said workers are covered by the country's labor laws, with the ability to file grievances.

Those familiar with the complexities of plantation life say the subject of sexual abuse has never drawn much attention and that female workers often believe little can be done about it.

"They are thinking it happens everywhere, so there's nothing to complain about," said Saurlin Siagan, an Indonesian activist and researcher.

Many families living on plantations struggle to earn enough to cover basic costs, like electricity and rice. Desperate women are sometimes coerced into using their bodies to pay back loans from supervisors or other workers. And younger females, especially those considered attractive, occasionally are given less demanding jobs like cleaning the boss' house, with sex expected in exchange.

In the few cases where victims do speak out, companies often don't take action or police charges are either dropped or not filed because it usually comes down to the accuser's word against the man's.

"The location of palm oil plantations makes them an ideal crime scene for rape," said Aini Fitri, an Indonesian official from the government's women and children's office in West Kalimantan province. "It could be dangerous in the darkness for people, especially for women, but also because it is so quiet and remote. So even in the middle of the day, the crime can happen."

Many beauty and personal goods companies have largely remained silent when it comes to the plight of female workers, but it's not due to lack of knowledge.

A powerful global industry group, the Consumer Goods Forum, published a 2018 report alerting the network's 400 CEOs that women on plantations were exposed to dangerous chemicals and "subject to the worst conditions among all palm oil workers." It also noted that a few local groups had cited examples of women being forced to provide sex to secure or keep jobs, but said few workers were willing to discuss the sensitive issue.

Even so, almost all of the pressure aimed at palm oil companies has focused on land grabs, the destruction of rainforests and the killing of endangered species such as orangutans.

Those concerns led to the 2004 formation of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil, an association that promotes and certifies ethical production, including provisions to safeguard laborers. Its members include growers, buyers, traders and environmental watchdogs. But of the nearly 100 grievances lodged in Indonesia and Malaysia in the last decade, most have not focused on labor until recently. And women are almost never mentioned.

The AP reached out to representatives affiliated with every cosmetic and personal goods maker mentioned in this story. Some didn't comment, but most defended their use of palm oil and its derivatives, with many attempting to show how little they use compared to the roughly 80 million tons produced annually worldwide. Others said they were working with local nonprofits, pointed to pledges on their websites about commitments to sustainability and human rights, or noted efforts to be transparent about the processing mills in their supply chains.

But the AP found that labor abuses regularly occur industrywide, even from mills that source from plantations bearing the RSPO's green palm stamp.

That includes Indonesian companies like London Sumatra, which withdrew from the RSPO last year after the association cited it for a series of labor abuses. London Sumatra told the AP that it adheres to labor

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laws and takes "the health of our workers very seriously."

In some cases, women working at various palm oil companies illegally said they were ordered to hide in the jungle when sustainability auditors arrived, while others were told to smile if they encountered any visitors.

The AP used U.S. Customs records, product ingredient lists and the most recently published data from producers, traders and buyers to link the laborers' palm oil and its derivatives from the mills that process it to the Western brands' supply chains – including some that source from mills fed by plantations where women said they were raped and young girls toiled in the fields.

Abuses also were linked to product lines sought out by conscientious consumers like Tom's of Maine and Kiehl's, through the supply chains of their giant parent companies Colgate-Palmolive and L'Oréal. And Bath & Body Works was connected through its main supplier, Cargill, one of the world's biggest palm oil traders.

Coty Inc., which owns global staples like CoverGirl and is tapping into partnerships with Gen Z newcomers like Kylie Cosmetics, did not respond to multiple AP calls and emails. And Estee Lauder Companies Inc., owner of Clinique and Aveda, acknowledged struggling with traceability issues in its RSPO filing. When asked by AP whether specific products used palm oil or its derivatives, there was no response.

Both companies, along with Shiseido and Clorox, which owns Burt's Bees Inc., keep the names of their mills and suppliers secret. Clorox said it would raise the allegations of abuses with its suppliers, calling AP's findings "incredibly disturbing."

Johnson & Johnson makes its mill list public, but refused to say whether its iconic baby lotion contains palm oil derivatives.

One case uncovered by the AP involved a widow named Maria who said her supervisor began sexually harassing her when she first started working at a Malaysian-owned company in Indonesia. She said she successfully fought off his advances until she returned home one night to find him inside, waiting for her.

"I tried to remind him about his wife and his children in the village, but he hugged me tighter while pulling my pants down. Then he raped me," she said. "After that, he left me. But almost two hours later, he came back and raped me a second time."

She said she stayed quiet at first because he threatened her life and her job. But the attacks continued, she said, including once when he jumped her while she was working in the field "crushing me so that I couldn't move."

That time, she said, she kept a semen-filled tissue as evidence. She later confronted the man and his wife and also complained to company and union officials. She attempted to file a police report, but instead was directed to seek compensation directly from the man, a union representative said. She was never paid and ended up moving to another plantation to get away from the boss, who has since quit.

Rosita Nengsih, the director of the Women, Children and Family Legal Aid Institution in the Indonesian province of West Kalimantan, said most victims are reluctant to report rapes to authorities, adding it's typical to settle complaints through so-called "peace solutions" in which the victim's family may be paid off. Sometimes parents force their daughter to marry her rapist to lessen the shame, often after pregnancy occurs.

The province where Nengsih works borders Malaysia on the island of Borneo, which is shared by the two countries. It is a porous corridor for Indonesian workers, including women and young girls hoping to earn enough in the wealthier neighboring country to pull themselves out of poverty. Many travel there illegally, sometimes falsifying documents or lying about their ages, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

Nengsih recalled a case involving two Indonesian girls as young as 13 who were working on a Malaysian plantation with their parents and said they were repeatedly raped by the same supervisor until both became pregnant four months apart.

"Nothing happened to the foreman," she said. "He's still free."

The conditions these workers endure stand in stark contrast to female empowerment messages promoted by industry leaders such as L'Oréal, one of the world's top cosmetic companies, and Unilever, one of the biggest palm oil buyers for consumer goods, which sources from more than 1,500 mills.

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As Unilever's popular soap brand proclaims: "Dove believes that beauty is for everyone." And L'Oréal says it is working to stamp out sexual harassment "because we are all worth it."

In a global industry expected to reach \$800 billion within the next five years, cosmetic legacy brands – together with fast-growing celebrity and niche startups – proudly tout \$300 anti-wrinkle creams or glittery eyeshadows as sustainable and free of labor abuses, with little or no evidence.

In response, L'Oréal said it "has put particular emphasis on supporting and empowering women, who are the first victims of many of the social and environmental challenges our world faces." Unilever said progress needs to be made more quickly, but that "the safety of women in global agricultural supply chains ... including in the palm oil industry, remains a key concern."

The women in Southeast Asia's rugged, steamy plantations are a world away. Some haul tanks of toxic chemicals on their backs weighing more than 13 kilograms (30 pounds), dispensing 80 gallons each day – enough to fill a bathtub.

"Our lives are so hard," said Ola, who has been employed as a day worker in Indonesia for 10 years and wakes each day aching from repeatedly lifting heavy loads. "After spraying, my nose bleeds occasionally. I think it's connected to the pesticide."

She doesn't wear a mask because it's too hot to breathe. She said the company doesn't provide medical care to casual workers, and she has no money for a doctor.

Paraquat, one of the chemicals Ola and others spray, has been banned by the European Union and many other countries over possible links to a wide range of health issues, including an increased chance of developing Parkinson's disease.

Glyphosate, the active ingredient in popular weedkiller Roundup, also is commonly used. Roundup's parent company, Bayer, agreed earlier this year to pay more than \$10 billion to end tens of thousands of lawsuits filed in the U.S. alleging the chemical caused serious illnesses, including cancer.

Some palm oil workers who use agrochemicals daily showed the AP raw webbing between their fingers and toes, along with destroyed nails. Others had milky or red eyes and complained of dizzy spells, trouble breathing and blurry vision. Activists reported that some totally lost their sight.

The workers said pesticides routinely blow back into their faces, splash onto their backs and seep into the sweaty skin on their stomachs.

"If the liquid shakes and spills out, it's also running into my private area. Almost all women are suffering the same itching and burning," said Marodot, whose five children also work to help their father meet his daily target. "I have to keep going until I finish working, and then clean it up with water. There's too many men around."

She said she has trouble seeing, and her face is dark and cracked from years in the sun.

When handed a \$20 lipstick by a journalist, a worker named Defrida was told it contained palm oil. She twisted the silver case and stared at the glistening pink stick – first with intrigue, then with disgust.

Noting she would have to spray pesticide on 30 acres of rough jungle terrain just to afford a single tube, she pleaded with women who buy products containing palm oil: "Oh, my God!" she said. "Please pay attention to our lives."

She, along with nearly all the women interviewed, complained of pelvic pain and explained how almost every phase of their reproductive health is affected.

Some women are forced to undergo humiliating checks to prove they are bleeding in order to take leave during their periods.

Others suffering from collapsed uteruses – caused by the weakening of the pelvic floor from repeatedly squatting and carrying overweight loads – create makeshift braces by tightly wrapping scarves or old motorbike tire tubes around their mid-sections. Some workers described the pain as so agonizing that they could find relief only by lying on their backs with their legs in the air.

Despite a national health care program launched by the Indonesian government, many palm oil workers still don't have access to medical services and, even when basic care is available, it typically is not extended to female day workers. The nearest clinics can be more than a day's drive by motorbike, so most workers

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just use aspirin, balms or home remedies when they're sick.

Still, they are better off in many ways than migrant women working without papers in Malaysia, mostly in the bordering states of Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo.

The AP confirmed a horrific story involving a pregnant Indonesian woman who escaped captivity on a Malaysian estate owned by state-run Felda, one of the world's biggest palm oil companies. She gave birth in the jungle and foraged for food before finally being rescued. In September, U.S. Customs and Border Protection banned all palm oil imports from FGV Holdings Berhad, which is closely affiliated with Felda, after finding indications of child and forced labor and other abuses on its plantations.

Even on a day-to-day basis in Malaysia, migrant women fear arrest and deportation. Many rarely leave their plantations, even to give birth, at times risking their own lives and their babies'. And those who do venture out during emergencies can be held for weeks at the hospital until family members can collect enough money to pay exorbitant rates.

At one government facility in a border town, a menu of maternity ward prices was posted on a blue bulletin board. A natural birth costs foreign migrants about \$630 – several times more than it would cost a Malaysian citizen, an amount that could take some women at least a year to pay back.

And that's if they're able to conceive and carry their babies to full term.

Groups of women interviewed by the AP in Indonesia wondered whether their arduous jobs, combined with the chemicals they handle and breathe, caused their infertility, miscarriages and stillbirths.

Ita was among those who said her work affected her ability to deliver healthy babies. She said she hid two pregnancies from her boss, knowing she likely wouldn't be called for daily work otherwise. With two children already at home to feed, she had no choice but to keep working for \$5 a day. In contrast, a permanent full-time female worker is entitled to three months of paid maternity leave.

Every day, as her belly grew, Ita said she continued to carry back-breaking loads over acres of fields, spreading 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of fertilizer – nearly a half-ton – over the course of a day. She lost both babies in her third trimester and, with no health insurance, was left with medical bills she couldn't pay.

"The first time I miscarried, and the doctor had to pull the baby out," said Ita, who has worked on the plantation alongside her mother since the age of 15. "The second time, I gave birth at seven months and it was in critical condition, and they put it in an incubator. It died after 30 hours.

"I kept working," she said. "I never stopped after the baby died."

Dolly Parton adds pandemic hero to list of accomplishments

BOSTON (AP) — Dolly Parton is being celebrated in song — a rewritten version of her own "Jolene" — for her contribution to an experimental coronavirus vaccine.

Northeastern University associate English professor Ryan Cordell posted a video on Twitter of himself performing a tweaked version of Parton's signature song, renamed "Vaccine," that has drawn tens of thousands of views.

The lyrics, "Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine / I'm begging of you, please go in my arm / Vaccine, vaccine, vaccine, vaccine / Please just keep me safe from COVID harm," were written by linguist and author Gretchen McCulloch, who posted them online and invited people to record them.

"I love that song. I love Dolly Parton. And I don't know — I was inspired," Cordell told The Boston Globe on Tuesday. "So I went and grabbed my guitar."

Parton's \$1 million gift to Nashville's Vanderbilt University Medical Center helped researchers develop Moderna's experimental coronavirus vaccine, announced this week.

Cordell grew up with Parton's music, thanks to his parents and grandparents, and he called Parton's appearance at the 2019 Newport Folk Festival as one of his "favorite musical memories."

"So I was just thrilled to see this news that she had contributed to COVID vaccine research — I thought that was amazing," he said.

The positive reaction to his video from doctors, nurses and other medical professionals is particularly gratifying, he said.

"And that's really amazing because those folks are under so much pressure and stress, and especially right now as hospitals are getting overwhelmed," Cordell said. "And so if they watched the video, and it made them happy for a minute, that's all I need."

This story has been corrected to show that Parton's donation was to Vanderbilt University Medical Center, not Vanderbilt University, a distinct entity.

Controversial Fed nominee Shelton stalls in Senate test vote

By ANDREW TAYLOR and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nomination of Judy Shelton, President Donald Trump's controversial pick for the Federal Reserve, is stalled in the Senate after Vice President-elect Kamala Harris returned to the chamber to cast a key vote in a tally Tuesday.

Two key Republicans were absent because of COVID-related concerns. The 47-50 vote came as the Republican-controlled Senate continues to focus its energies in the post-election lame-duck session on confirming Trump's appointees.

Shelton is an unusually caustic critic of the Fed and was opposed by two GOP senators, Susan Collins of Maine and Mitt Romney of Utah, in Tuesday's vote. Harris has been focused on the transition to the Biden administration but returned to the chamber for her first vote since winning the vice presidency.

Senator-elect Mark Kelly, D-Ariz., is likely to join the Senate when the chamber returns from its Thanksgiving break. That could leave Shelton short of support for confirmation even if Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., seeks a revote next month.

Another Republican opponent, Lamar Alexander of Tennessee, missed Tuesday's vote, and his return could cement Shelton's fate, even after Rick Scott, R-Fla., and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, return to the chamber after quarantining because of exposure to the coronavirus.

McConnell initially voted "aye" but changed his vote to reserve the option to call a second tally if he can line up the votes. All in all, accounting for absences and the arrival of Kelly, who defeated Martha McSally, R-Ariz., Shelton would appear to be one vote short, assuming there won't be a revote this week. The Senate is slated to be recessed next week for Thanksgiving.

Trump spokesman Judd Deere tweeted Tuesday that the White House remains "confident that Judy Shelton will be confirmed upon reconsideration."

Shelton's nomination has been sharply partisan for a nominee to the Federal Reserve's Board of Governors. The Fed seeks to maintain a degree of political independence, though it is often criticized by members of Congress and in recent years by Trump. The vice chair of the Fed's board, Richard Clarida, was approved by a vote of 69-26 in August 2018.

White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow is said to be a strong supporter of Shelton's. The Trump White House has at times struggled to get its nominees on the Fed board. Its previous two picks, economics commentator Stephen Moore and the late Herman Cain, a former GOP presidential candidate, both withdrew without a Senate vote in the face of strong opposition.

Shelton, also a conservative economics commentator, is opposed by Senate Democrats, most economists and many former Fed officials for her past support of the gold standard and for writings that questioned the Fed's political independence. Under the gold standard, the U.S. dollar's value is tied to gold. Under that approach, the Fed would have less leeway to adjust interest rates, even in a severe recession.

"I think her views are too extreme," said Richard Fisher, former president of the Dallas Federal Reserve, said Tuesday on CNBC after the Senate vote. "I just don't think it would send the right signal to have her as governor at this time."

Shelton was approved by the Senate Banking Committee on a 13-12 party-line vote in July. Senate Democrats criticized her for appearing to flip-flop on many positions, including near-zero interest rates. She opposed ultra-low rates during President Barack Obama's presidency but supported them after Trump took office and demanded that the Fed lower its short-term benchmark rate.

"Shelton has shown herself to be an economic weathervane, pointing whichever direction she believes the partisan winds are blowing," said Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

As a member of the Fed's powerful board of governors, Shelton would vote on the Fed's rate decisions and on banking regulation. The governors also vote on whether to institute emergency measures, such as the Fed's decisions in March to start buying corporate bonds for the first time and institute a raft of programs to bolster financial markets.

Still, on her own, it's unlikely that Shelton would have much effect on Fed policy, economists have pointed out. The central bank operates by consensus and Fed governors rarely dissent from interest rate decisions, though Fed bank presidents do. For now, the Fed has pegged its benchmark rate to nearly zero and Fed officials have said they expect it to remain there until at least 2023. Shelton has been picked to fill a term that expires in 2024.

This story has been updated to correct to delete a reference to Sen. Bill Cassidy missing the vote. He voted 'yes.'

People go hungry in Ethiopia's Tigray as conflict marches on

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — People are going hungry in Ethiopia's rebellious northern Tigray region as roads are blocked, airports are closed and the federal government marches on its capital in a final push to win a two-week war. But residents are afraid to leave for fear of being killed, an internal assessment says.

Trucks laden with food, fuel and medical supplies have been stuck outside the region's borders since the Nov. 4 announcement by Ethiopia's Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed that a military offensive had begun in response to an attack by Tigray regional forces on a military base.

"At this stage there is simply very little left, even if you have money," according to the internal assessment by one humanitarian group, seen by The Associated Press. Based on a colleague who managed to get out, it said people "will stay where they are, there is no place in Tigray where the situation is any different and they cannot cross over into the other regions of Ethiopia because of fear of what would be done to them."

Banks in Tigray were closed for days, cutting off humanitarian cash transfers to some 1 million people, or one-sixth of the Tigray population. And even before the fighting, a locust outbreak was destroying crops.

Close to 30,000 Ethiopians have fled into neighboring Sudan, burdening villages that have been praised for their generosity, though they have little to give.

But many inside Tigray can't or won't leave, frightened by the threat of ethnic violence. Abiy's office on Wednesday tried to ease those fears, saying its "law enforcement operation" against a Tigray regional leadership it regards as illegal is "primarily" targeting members of that ruling circle.

"The people of Tigray will be the first to benefit," the statement said, as senior government officials vow the fighting will end within days. Abiy's government accuses the Tigray government of damaging bridges and digging up roads leading to its capital, Mekele, to slow the march of federal forces.

Hundreds of wounded people have been treated so far, the International Committee of the Red Cross said after visiting a handful of health centers in the Tigray and Amhara regions. More than 400 have been treated in one hospital in the Amhara city of Gondar, including "large numbers of critically injured."

"At the beginning, most of the wounded were fighters. As days went ahead, we started seeing more wounded civilians exiting" the Tigray region, the ICRC's Daniel O'Malley said in an interview, adding that combatants still make up the majority. As federal forces move eastward along the front line, more wounded are coming from there.

"For the whole country, this is something terrible," he said.

Electricity is out in the Tigray capital, and there is limited water. Hospital beds, supplies for diabetic care and dialysis, even blankets, are urgently needed, the ICRC said.

"It is unclear why all basic services to Tigray need to be cut in order to arrest, if arrest is warranted, the leadership" of the region, the head of the Tigray Friendship Liaison Office, Wendimu Asamanew, said in

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a statement.

Ethiopia's federal government promised a rapid end to the fighting from nearly the start. Now humanitarian groups, experts and even the United States government are showing signs of desperation.

"We do not know if there will be additional U.N.-coordinated relocation efforts out of Tigray," the U.S. Embassy said in a brief statement Tuesday after the U.N. said some 200 foreigners had been evacuated. "U.S. citizens who cannot depart Tigray safely are advised to shelter in place."

Well over 1,000 citizens of the U.S. and other countries had been said to be trapped, along with the bulk of the Tigray region's residents. The Tigray regional government says more than 100,000 civilians have been displaced and seeks urgent humanitarian assistance.

"Humanitarian workers should be given safe passage to provide assistance to vulnerable groups," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement. "Communications services in the Tigray region should be restored immediately."

U.N. humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock said, "I call for full access to reach people in need wherever they are." Even before the conflict almost 1 million in the Tigray region needed humanitarian assistance, he said.

His office has set aside \$20 million for "anticipatory action to fight hunger in Ethiopia," citing threats including "civil unrest, growing insecurity, locust infestations, and the economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, which includes declining incomes and rising inflation."

Even famine is a possibility in Tigray, researchers warned in *The Conversation*, a website for researchers. Some 80% of people are subsistence farmers and the fighting affects the upcoming harvest, they wrote.

The locust outbreak, the region's worst in decades, has "destroyed vast areas of cropped land and numerous swarms remain active."

The locust outbreak is so serious that even neighboring Eritrea, which has been almost silent on the conflict despite the Tigray forces firing rockets at its capital, speaks relatively openly about the insect invasion.

The split between Ethiopia's federal government and Tigray's — each now regards the other as illegal — has led the federal government to divert funding from the regional government, affecting early-warning systems for hunger, the researchers wrote.

This time of year was already the "hunger gap" for many, they said: "We fear that the grain baskets will remain empty because of the conflict."

One of the researchers, Jan Nyssen, told the AP that "I know there are stores of the (U.N. World Food Program) inside Tigray, but they were there for a normal, quote-unquote, disaster."

Restocking such warehouses remains impossible, the U.N. said in an update.

Nyssen worries the locusts will pose the worse threat in the end. As of Nov. 3, the day before fighting erupted, swarms had reached as far as Mekele and were expected to move north, further into the region.

He also recalled the hunger that swept through Tigray in the 1980s as its leaders also fought the federal government. Back then, Ethiopia's regime tried to hide the suffering, he said. "Nowadays, you can't hide it that long."

AP Analysis: 'Who am I to judge?' might explain pope's view

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis' famous remark "Who am I to judge?" could go a long way toward explaining his initial attitude toward Theodore McCarrick, the defrocked and disgraced American cardinal who was the subject of a two-year Vatican investigation that was released last week.

Francis uttered the line on July 29, 2013, four months into his pontificate, when he was asked en route home from his first papal trip about reports of a sexually active gay priest whom he had just promoted. The priest was not alleged to have been a serial sexual predator.

But Francis' point was: If someone violated the church's teaching on sexual morals in the past but had sought forgiveness from God, who was he to pass judgment?

The comment won plaudits from the LGBT community and landed Francis on the cover of *The Advocate* magazine. But Francis' broader tendency to blindly trust his friends, disregard their private lives and resist

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judging them has created problems seven years later. A handful of priests, bishops and cardinals whom Francis has trusted over the years have turned out to be either accused of sexual misconduct or convicted of it, or of having covered it up.

In short, Francis' loyalty to them cost him credibility.

The Vatican report spared Francis blame for McCarrick's rise in the hierarchy, faulting instead his predecessors for having failed to recognize, investigate or effectively sanction McCarrick over consistent reports that he invited seminarians into his bed.

Francis ultimately defrocked McCarrick last year after a Vatican investigation determined he sexually abused children as well as adults. Francis commissioned the more in-depth probe after a former Vatican ambassador alleged in 2018 that some two dozen church officials were aware of McCarrick's sexual misconduct with adult seminarians but covered it up for two decades.

It's perhaps not surprising that an in-house investigation commissioned by Francis and ordered published by him would largely give him a pass. But it's also true that the most egregious failures related to the McCarrick scandal occurred well before Francis became pope.

But the report does point to problems that have come to haunt Francis during his papacy, exacerbating his initial blind spot on clergy sexual abuse that he only corrected in 2018 after he realized he had botched a serious case of abuse and cover-up in Chile.

In addition to the prelates he initially defended who have been accused of sexual misconduct or cover-up, Francis has also been betrayed by Catholic laymen: Some Italian businessmen who were "friends of Francis" and exploited that designation are now caught up in a spiraling Vatican corruption investigation involving the Holy See's \$350 million investment in a London real estate venture.

Like many leaders, Francis abhors gossip, distrusts the media and tends to follow his gut, finding it exceedingly difficult to shift gears once he has formed a positive personal opinion about someone, his collaborators say.

Francis knew McCarrick from before he was pope and probably knew that the charismatic and well-connected prelate had had a hand in his election as one of several "kingmakers" who supported him from the sidelines. (McCarrick himself didn't vote since he was over 80 and ineligible).

McCarrick told a conference at Villanova University in late 2013 that he considered the former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio a "friend" and had pressed for a Latin American pope during the closed-door meetings that preceded the conclave.

McCarrick twice visited Bergoglio in Argentina, in 2004 and 2011, when he traveled there to ordain priests from the Argentine-based religious community, the Institute of the Incarnate Word, that he called home in Washington.

McCarrick told the Villanova conference that he had been persuaded to spread the word to consider Bergoglio a possible papal candidate after an unidentified, "influential" Roman told him that Bergoglio could reform the church in five years and "put us back on target."

"Talk him up," McCarrick quoted the Roman man as telling him.

The report debunked the central thesis of Archbishop Carlo Maria Vigano, the former Vatican ambassador to the U.S., whose 2018 expose of the two-decade McCarrick cover-up sparked the Vatican report in the first place.

Vigano claimed that Francis had lifted "sanctions" imposed by Pope Benedict XVI on McCarrick even after Vigano told Francis in 2013 that the American had "corrupted generations of priests and seminarians."

The report said no such lifting occurred, and actually accused Vigano of being part of the cover-up. It also suggested that in 2013, Vigano was far more concerned about persuading Francis to bring him back to Rome from his exile in Washington to help with Francis' anti-corruption effort at the Vatican than in finally bringing McCarrick to justice.

While the report spares Francis in McCarrick's case, he doesn't get off so easily in other cases in which he had a direct decision-making role in how allegations of abuse of minors and adults were handled.

As archbishop of Buenos Aires, Francis is believed to have discounted rumors of sex abuse and cover-up in neighboring Chile surrounding the popular priest Fernando Karadima, because the bulk of the accus-

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ers were over 17, and therefore technically adults in the church's canon law system. As such, they were considered consenting adults engaging in sinful but not illegal behavior with Karadima.

While head of Argentina's bishops conference, Francis in 2010 commissioned a four-volume forensic study of the legal case against the Rev. Julio Grassi, a celebrity priest who ran homes for street children and had been criminally convicted of sexually abusing one of them.

Bergoglio's study, which purportedly ended up on the desks of some Argentine court justices who were ruling on Grassi's appeals, concluded he was innocent, that his victims were lying and that the case never should have gone to trial.

In the end, Argentina's Supreme Court in March 2017 upheld the conviction and 15-year prison sentence for Grassi. The status of Grassi's canonical investigation in Rome is unknown.

More recently, Bergoglio allowed one of his proteges in Argentina, Bishop Gustavo Zanchetta, to resign quietly for purported health reasons in 2017 after priests in the remote northern Argentine diocese of Oran complained about his authoritarian rule and diocesan officials provided reports to the Vatican alleging abuses of power, inappropriate behavior and sexual harassment of adult seminarians.

Francis gave Zanchetta a plum job in the Vatican's treasury office.

In the cases of Grassi and Zanchetta, Bergoglio was a confessor to both men, suggesting he may have been swayed in his judgment by his role as their spiritual father. In the case of Karadima, Francis was good friends with Karadima's chief protector, Santiago's archbishop, Cardinal Francisco Javier Errazuriz.

Francis' 2013 comment, "Who am I to judge?" didn't concern a priest accused of sexual misconduct with minors. Rather, the priest was alleged primarily to have arranged for a Swiss army captain to transfer with him from his diplomatic post in Bern, Switzerland, to Uruguay.

Asked about the priest en route home from Rio de Janeiro in July 2013, Francis said he had commissioned a preliminary investigation into the allegations that found nothing. He noted that many times in the church, such "sins from youth" crop up as priests advance through the ranks.

"Crimes are something different: the abuse of minors is a crime," he said. "But if a person, whether it be a lay person, a priest or a religious sister, commits a sin and then converts, the Lord forgives. And when the Lord forgives, the Lord forgets and this is very important for our lives."

Referring to reports that a homosexual network in the Vatican protected the priest, Francis said he had never heard of such a thing. But he added: "If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge?"

Nicole Winfield, chief Vatican correspondent for The Associated Press, has covered the Holy See since 2001, focusing in particular on clergy sexual abuse.

Tokyo Olympics: Many rules, no partying, no hanging around

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Athletes at the Tokyo Olympics won't have the luxury of hanging around once they've wrapped up their event.

No late-night parties in the Athletes Village. No nights — or early mornings — on the town.

Instead of getting to know their global neighbors, Olympic athletes will be encouraged to leave Japan a day or two after they've finished competing.

From the opening ceremony to life in the village on Tokyo Bay, the postponed 2020 Olympics will be like no other. There'll be stringent rules and guidelines — and maybe vaccines and rapid testing — to pull off the games in the middle of a pandemic that has been blamed for more than 1 million deaths worldwide.

"Staying longer in the village increases the potential for problems," John Coates, the IOC member in charge of overseeing Tokyo preparations, said Wednesday at a briefing for the Olympics and Paralympics.

Coates was asked if athletes would be discouraged from sightseeing, or looking around the city.

"Yes," he replied simply, a short answer suggesting these Olympics will be all business with few frills.

Coates accompanied International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach to Tokyo this week as he

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met Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and shored up support with key Japanese sponsors.

It was Bach's first visit to Japan since the Olympics were postponed in March.

Bach left Tokyo on Wednesday after two days of saying a vaccine was likely to be available and athletes would be strongly encouraged to take it.

Organizers and the IOC are growing confident they will have a vaccine and rapid testing. This will help, but dozens of other countermeasures will also be in place; social distancing, masks and bubbles in the venues and the Athletes Village.

Japan has controlled the virus reasonably well with about 1,900 deaths attributed to COVID-19. But almost 500 new cases were reported Wednesday in Tokyo, and more than 2,000 around Japan — both one-day records.

Cases are surging in the country just as optimism is also on the rise.

Christophe Dubi, the Olympic Games executive director, acknowledged much is still in the planning stages with many scenarios in play ahead of the scheduled opening on July 23, 2021.

"We don't know what the situation will be next year, but some decisions will have to be made already in December," Dubi said, speaking remotely.

Coates said the opening ceremony would be restricted to only athletes and a maximum of six team officials. In the past, dozens of officials — at times 50, Coates said — were allowed to march, filling in for athletes who may have skipped in order to compete the next day.

"We won't do that this time," Coates said. "That is just increasing the potential problem in the ceremony."

Coates said all 206 countries would be represented in the opening ceremony, and a full contingent of 11,000 athletes will compete in the games. But the opening ceremony parade is likely to look smaller.

Officials are also wrestling with how to keep the opening ceremony from becoming a mass-spreading event, even if athletes are tested when they enter Japan and when they leave their home country.

"We don't want to change the tradition of all athletes having the opportunity to parade in the opening ceremony," Coates said, suggesting athletes might be tested as they entered the stadium, or in the tunnel as they come on to the track.

There are sure to be lots of rules. And athletes will be asked to follow them, as will thousands of officials, judges, media, VIPs and broadcasters who will need to enter Japan.

"I am absolutely sure that people will play by the rules and respect whatever guidelines are put in place," said International Paralympic Committee president Andrew Parsons, who spoke remotely from Brazil. "Every stakeholder involved in the Olympics and Paralympics understands the importance."

Bach and Coates have both said they want to have fans from abroad, which has yet to be confirmed. Bach said he expected a "reasonable number" of fans in the venues. But how many, and from where, is unclear.

"We hope we can give the opportunity to as many people as possible, including foreign spectators," Coates said. "We want the families of the athletes who come from overseas to have an opportunity to see their children. That's what the Olympics is about, and I hope it's possible."

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Biden's DIY transition proceeds without Trump assistance

By STEVE PEOPLES, DEB RIECHMANN and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President Donald Trump's refusal to cooperate with his successor is forcing President-elect Joe Biden to seek unusual workarounds to prepare for the exploding public health threat and evolving national security challenges he will inherit in just nine weeks.

Blocked from the official intelligence briefing traditionally afforded to incoming presidents, Biden gathered virtually on Tuesday with a collection of intelligence, defense and diplomatic experts. None of the experts is currently affiliated with the U.S. government, raising questions about whether Biden is being provided the most up-to-date information about dangers facing the nation.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris received a more formal briefing Tuesday as a member of the Senate

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Intelligence Committee, though still has relatively limited information about the specific threats Biden will inherit.

And as the worst pandemic in a century bears down on the U.S. with renewed ferocity, the current administration is blocking Biden from collaborating with its response team. Biden's representatives instead plan to meet directly with pharmaceutical companies this week to determine how best to distribute at least two promising vaccines to hundreds of millions of Americans, the biggest logistical challenge to face a new president in generations.

The moves reflect how Biden is adjusting to a historically tense transition. With no sign that Trump is prepared to facilitate soon a peaceful transfer of power, Biden and his team are instead working through a series of backup options to do the best they can to prepare for the challenges he will face as soon as he takes office in January.

Declining to criticize Trump, Biden acknowledged Tuesday that he has "not been receiving briefings that would ordinarily come by now" as he opened his virtual meeting with the national security experts. The 12 participants, who appeared on video screens, included former Deputy CIA Director David Cohen, retired Gen. Stanley McChrystal and Avril Haines, a deputy national security adviser in the Obama administration, among others.

Biden said he was preparing to inherit "a divided country and a world in disarray."

"That's why I need you all," he said.

Weeks after the election, Trump continues to block Biden's access to the administration's pandemic and national security briefings, falsely claiming that Biden is not the legitimate president-elect because of non-existent voter fraud. The Democrat defeated the Republican president on Nov. 7, and Trump's flailing legal strategy to block certification of the election results is quickly fizzling out.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said Wednesday on Fox News Channel that the Trump administration "is doing everything statutorily required" for a transition. But she blamed the General Services Administration, an obscure government agency whose leader, Emily Murphy, has yet to certify Biden as the winner, for stalling the process of officially launching the transition.

Trump, who has publicly refused to accept defeat, selected Murphy to lead GSA.

A study released Tuesday by the Center for Presidential Transition at the nonpartisan Partnership for Public Service warned that an abbreviated transition could impair Biden's ability to fill the more than 1,200 administration jobs requiring Senate confirmation, including key Cabinet and sub-Cabinet posts on the front lines of addressing the pandemic.

A growing group of Republicans have begun to state publicly what Trump will not: Biden will become the next president on Jan. 20. Even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a staunch Trump ally, referred to Biden as the American "president-elect" for the first time Tuesday.

"He isn't getting the briefings that the president-elect should be getting, but that's not going to stop him from doing everything he can to prepare and execute during this transition period," said Biden transition spokesman T.J. Ducklo.

Trump's decision to block the transfer of power has forced Biden to navigate the life-and-death business of vaccine distribution with limited information.

Biden's team plans to meet with private pharmaceutical companies on its own in the coming days to learn more about the status of their vaccine production. While neither of the two most promising vaccines has yet earned U.S. government approval, they would almost certainly be distributed under Biden's watch if and when they are formally deemed safe.

Currently under the Trump administration, the Department of Health and Human Services and the Pentagon are working in conjunction with states on a vaccine distribution plan. But the Biden transition team and Democrats in Congress also have ideas. There could be conflicting expectations for state leaders and health care systems, which will be closest to the actual work of putting shots into the arms of Americans.

Biden warned on Monday that "more people may die" if Trump continues to block his access to vaccine distribution plans and pandemic data.

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The heads of the American Hospital Association, the American Medical Association and the American Nurses Association issued a joint statement Tuesday urging the Trump administration to share "all critical information related to COVID-19" with Biden.

"There are obvious limits to Biden's approach.

Some of Biden's current team of advisers on national security and foreign policy have held security clearances in their past jobs, but are not privy to real-time intelligence now. Others have security clearances in their current jobs, perhaps as employees of defense contractors. But right now, no member of the transition team can share classified intelligence with the Biden transition team, especially without being in a secured location.

Former Deputy CIA Director Michael Morell, in a recent interview with the Center for Presidential Transition, said it was imperative that Biden be briefed on the agency's highly classified covert actions undertaken by the Trump administration, "because on Inauguration Day, these covert actions will become the new president's."

Meanwhile, serious foreign conflicts loom.

Trump, for example, is expected to withdraw a significant number of troops from Afghanistan in the coming weeks. The NATO leader on Tuesday criticized the decision, warning such a move could give terrorist groups an opening to organize attacks against the West.

Reichmann and Miller reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Lisa Mascaro in Washington and Brian Witte in Annapolis, Maryland, contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Nov. 19, the 324th day of 2020. There are 42 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Nov. 19, 1863, President Abraham Lincoln dedicated a national cemetery at the site of the Civil War battlefield of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania.

On this date:

In 1600, King Charles I of England was born in Dunfermline, Fife, Scotland.

In 1850, Alfred Tennyson was invested as Britain's poet laureate.

In 1919, the Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles (vehr-SY') by a vote of 55 in favor, 39 against, short of the two-thirds majority needed for ratification.

In 1942, during World War II, Russian forces launched their winter offensive against the Germans along the Don front.

In 1959, Ford Motor Co. announced it was halting production of the unpopular Edsel.

In 1969, Apollo 12 astronauts Charles Conrad and Alan Bean made the second manned landing on the moon.

In 1977, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat became the first Arab leader to visit Israel.

In 1985, President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail S. Gorbachev met for the first time as they began their summit in Geneva.

In 1995, Polish President Lech Walesa (vah-WEN'-sah) was defeated in his bid for re-election.

In 1996, 14 people were killed when a commuter plane collided with a private plane at an airport in Quincy, Illinois. The United States vetoed U.N. Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's bid for a second term.

In 1997, Iowa seamstress Bobbi McCaughey (mihk-KOY') gave birth to the world's first set of surviving septuplets, four boys and three girls.

In 2017, Charles Manson, the hippie cult leader behind the gruesome murders of actor Sharon Tate and six others in Los Angeles in 1969, died in a California hospital at the age of 83 after nearly a half-century in prison.

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Ten years ago: President Barack Obama, attending a NATO summit in Lisbon, Portugal, won an agreement to build a missile shield over Europe, a victory that risked further aggravating Russia. Twenty-nine miners were killed by a methane explosion in a southern New Zealand coal mine.

Five years ago: A study by the Pew Research Center found that more Mexicans were leaving than moving into the United States, reversing the flow of a half-century of mass migration. Marcus Ray Johnson, convicted of killing Angela Sizemore, a woman he'd met at a Georgia nightclub, was put to death after losing a last-minute round of appeals. Bryce Harper, 23, became the youngest unanimous MVP winner in baseball history, capturing the NL award despite his Washington Nationals missing the playoffs; Josh Donaldson took the AL MVP, earning the honor after helping boost the Toronto Blue Jays back into the postseason for the first time since 1993.

One year ago: Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, a career Army officer on President Donald Trump's National Security Council, testified about what he said was a clearly "improper" phone call in which Trump sought Ukrainian investigations of U.S. Democrats; Republicans responded by questioning Vindman's loyalty to the United States. Two jail guards who were supposed to be monitoring Jeffrey Epstein the night he killed himself were indicted on charges of falsifying prison records; prosecutors said the guards had been sleeping and browsing the internet instead of watching Epstein. (The guards are awaiting trial.) GateHouse completed its \$1.1 billion takeover of Gannett, the publisher of USA Today. The Taliban freed American Kevin King and an Australian man, Timothy Weeks, who'd been held hostage since 2016, in exchange for three top Taliban figures.

Today's Birthdays: Talk show host Larry King is 87. Talk show host Dick Cavett is 84. Broadcasting and sports mogul Ted Turner is 82. Former Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, is 81. Former Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy G. Thompson is 79. Fashion designer Calvin Klein is 78. Sportscaster Ahmad Rashad is 71. Actor Robert Beltran is 67. Actor Kathleen Quinlan is 66. Actor Glynnis O'Connor is 65. Broadcast journalist Ann Curry is 64. Former NASA astronaut Eileen Collins is 64. Actor Allison Janney is 61. Rock musician Matt Sorum (Guns N' Roses, Velvet Revolver) is 60. Actor Meg Ryan is 59. Actor-director Jodie Foster is 58. Actor Terry Farrell is 57. TV chef Rocco DiSpirito is 54. Actor Jason Scott Lee is 54. Olympic gold medal runner Gail Devers is 54. Actor Erika Alexander is 51. Rock musician Travis McNabb is 51. Singer Tony Rich is 49. Actor Sandrine Holt is 48. Country singer Billy Currington is 47. Dancer-choreographer Savion Glover is 47. Rhythm-and-blues singer Tamika Scott (Xscape) is 45. Rhythm-and-blues singer Lil' Mo is 43. Olympic gold medal gymnast Kerri Strug is 43. Actor Reid Scott is 43. Movie director Barry Jenkins (Film: "Moonlight") is 41. Actor Katherine Kelly is 41. Actor Adam Driver is 37. Country singer Cam is 36. Actor Samantha Futerman is 33. NHL forward Patrick Kane is 32. Rapper Tyga is 31.