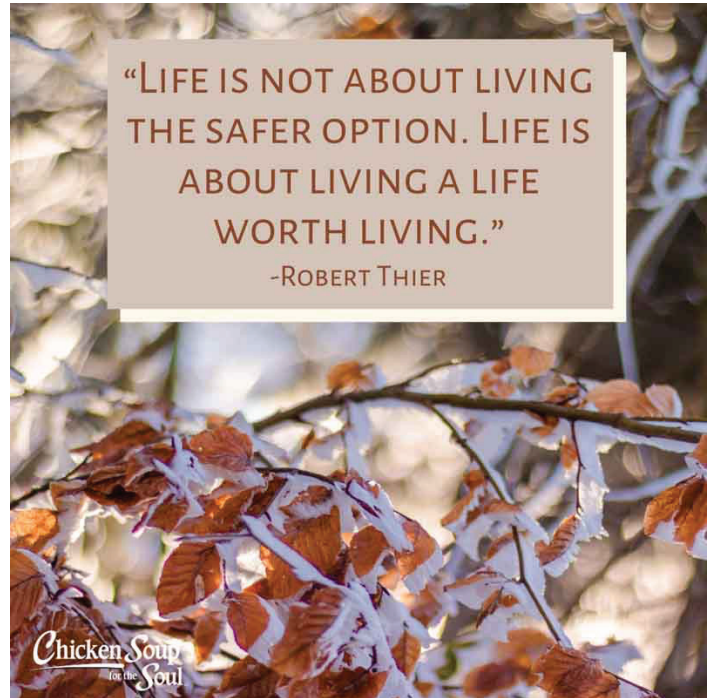


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## Friday, Dec. 11, 2020

Girls' basketball at Britton with JV game starting at 6 p.m.

## Saturday, Dec. 12, 2020

ACT Testing starting at 8 a.m.

Boys' Basketball hosts Britton-Hecla with JV game starting at 1:30 p.m.

## Council meeting date change

The Groton City Council meeting scheduled for Tuesday, Dec. 15, has been moved to Tuesday, Dec. 29, at the Groton Community Center.



**CLOSED:** 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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## Coming up on GDILIVE.COM



**JV GIRLS**

Groton Area at Britton-Hecla  
Friday, Dec. 11, 6:00 p.m.  
[GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

The graphic features a black background with a Native American headdress on the left, a tiger's face in the center, and a basketball hoop on the right. The text is in gold and white.



**GIRLS**

Groton Area at Britton-Hecla  
Friday, Dec. 11, 7:30 p.m.  
[GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)

The graphic features a black background with a Native American headdress on the left, a tiger's face in the center, and a basketball hoop on the right. The text is in gold and white.



**BOYS**

Britton-Hecla at Groton Area  
Saturday, Dec. 12, 3 p.m.  
[GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)  
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

The graphic features a black background with a Native American headdress on the left, a tiger's face in the center, and a basketball hoop on the right. The text is in gold and white.



**Elementary  
Christmas Concert**  
Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020  
10 a.m.  
Livestreamed Only  
[GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM)  
AND LOCALLY ON GDIRADIO AT 89.3 FM

The graphic features a dark blue background with a large, sparkling treble clef on the left. The text is in red, white, and green. There are small evergreen trees at the bottom right.

### Service Notice: Robert Groeblichhoff

A private Mass of Christian Burial for Robert Groeblichhoff, 87, of Groton, will be 10:30 a.m., Monday, December 14th at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church, Groton. Father Tom Hartman will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Services will be live streamed through SEAS & St. Joseph's Parish Family Facebook page.

Visitation will be held for one hour prior to the service.

Robert passed away December 9, 2020 at Avera St. Lukes Hospital, Aberdeen.

[www.paetznick-garness](http://www.paetznick-garness)

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Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated December 4, 2020; 11:49 AM

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

Updated December 7, 2020; 11:21 AM

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

Updated December 8, 2020; 1:38 PM

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

Updated December 9, 2020; 11:20 AM

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

Updated December 10, 2020; 1:46 PM

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



## COVID-19 vaccine distribution will be challenging in South Dakota

**Nick Lowrey, South Dakota News Watch**

Ensuring widespread distribution, usage and effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccine in South Dakota will be challenging, health experts say, due to the rural nature of the state, the difficulty in storing and distributing doses of the vaccine and concerns that some people will be reluctant to be vaccinated.

South Dakota will soon have thousands of the first round of new COVID-19 vaccines to distribute to front-line healthcare workers as part of what many see as the world's next steps toward an end to the deadly pandemic.

Two vaccines, one made by Pfizer and one made by Moderna, are currently on the cusp of approval for use in the U.S. Both vaccines require very cold storage before use, require two doses to achieve their full effect, and are based on a technology never before used to make a vaccine.

Medical experts estimate that between 60% and 90% of a population needs to be vaccinated or otherwise immunized against COVID-19 to effectively protect people from the virus.

The sooner a majority of South Dakotans are immunized against the coronavirus, the sooner the pandemic will end, said Dr. Jeremy Caulwels, senior vice president for quality at Sanford Health.

"That is really what it takes to prevent the spread of an illness within a population," he said. "That's very much our goal to generate that kind of immunity in our populations and in our kids and our health-care workers."



**Dana Darger**

The cold storage requirement may prove to be a big hurdle for COVID-19 vaccination in South Dakota. Few hospitals in the state have freezers capable of storing the Pfizer vaccine, which must be kept at roughly minus-158 degrees Fahrenheit, said Dana Darger, director of pharmacy for Monument Health Rapid City Hospital. Both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines also have relatively short shelf lives, he said.

"It's only good for five days in a refrigerator. And it's only good for six hours after you take it out of the refrigerator," Darger said. "There are five doses in a vial, so we're trying to figure out how we get vials where we need them and that we can use them in a reasonable amount of time to optimize those five doses. It's not undoable, but it does present some challenges."

Ensuring that South Dakotans get both doses of either the Moderna or Pfizer vaccine may also be challenging. Rural residents, in particular, may have trouble getting their second dose because they likely will have to travel significant distances.

"We need to make sure that we understand the flow and make sure that people understand this is a two-dose vaccine," said Caulwels. "The first dose doesn't quite cut the mustard. You have got to get two (doses) in order to be protected."

As South Dakota hospitals wrestle with how to get people vaccinated, the U.S. government will be struggling with how to get vaccines to hospitals. The COVID-19 vaccine distribution effort will be the most extensive such program in the nation's history. Throughout 2021, the federal government will be buying and distributing hundreds of millions of doses of multiple vaccines, each with separate dosage, storage and transportation requirements.

Nationwide, public health experts have started to warn that confusion, vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccine misinformation being spread on social media and elsewhere likely will hamper efforts to immunize large enough populations to slow the spread of COVID-19.

"There will absolutely be confusion. And it's going to be incredibly important that at the federal level, there is a single, clear message about what steps they are taking and what steps come next," said Alta Charo, a professor of law and bioethics at the University of Wisconsin who has worked extensively with public vaccination efforts.

Anti-vaccine sentiment in South Dakota and across the country is threatening to derail efforts to end the

## First South Dakota COVID-19 Vaccination shipments

Doses in first Pfizer/BioNTech shipment	7,800
Doses in first Moderna shipment	14,600
Total vaccine doses expected	22,400
Total health workers who qualify for first round of vaccination	19,000

Source: South Dakota Department of Health

pandemic through widespread immunization with vaccines.

The number of Americans who say they are willing to take a COVID-19 vaccine has been declining steadily since the spring. Polls conducted by the Pew Research Center and Gallup in late September found that only about half of Americans would be willing to take a COVID-19 vaccine, which was down from May when around two-thirds of people polled said they were likely to take a vaccine.

In the 2020 South Dakota legislative session, lawmakers debated a bill that would have eliminated vaccine requirements for children being enrolled at South Dakota public schools. In sometimes emotional testimony, the bill was backed in part by Health Freedom South Dakota, a non-profit organization created to advocate against vaccine mandates.

Ultimately, legislators killed the bill. Health

Freedom South Dakota did not respond to interview requests from News Watch.

Still, one piece of data suggests that South Dakotans have a better track record of taking recommended vaccinations than other states. Between 2013 and 2019, South Dakotans over the age of 65 had been consistently more likely to get a flu vaccine than Americans over 65 as a whole, according to data collected by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

### Vaccine distribution will be complicated

The U.S. government has signed contracts with several manufacturers to make hundreds of millions of vaccine doses before testing on them is complete. The idea is to have vaccine doses ready to distribute more quickly when they are approved for use. Because the federal government has already bought the vaccines, state governments will take charge of distribution.

As vaccine doses become available, federal officials will allocate them to states based on population. Once federal officials determine how many doses of each vaccine a state will get, the state government will decide who will be first in line for the injections.

South Dakota was slated to receive 7,800 doses of Pfizer's vaccine, the first COVID-19 vaccine to be given an emergency use authorization from the Food and Drug Administration, as soon as it gets FDA approval.

The first shipment of vaccines was expected to arrive in South Dakota within days of the FDA authorization, state Department of Health Secretary Kim Malsam-Rysdon said during a Dec. 9 news conference. Pfizer will send another set of 7,800 doses within about three weeks to provide second doses to people who got the first round of shots, she said.

Moderna is the maker of the second vaccine slated for Emergency Use Authorization. South Dakota is expected to receive 14,600 doses of that vaccine if it is authorized as anticipated on Dec. 17. Moderna would then send a second round of doses about three weeks after the first batch arrives to supply the second round of shots.

In all, the first couple of vaccine shipments from Pfizer and Moderna should give the state enough doses to immunize 22,400 people. There should be enough vaccines for the roughly 19,000 South Dakotans who qualify as frontline healthcare workers or long-term care workers, Malsam-Rysdon said.

According to the state Department of Health, the general public is not expected to have ready access to either Moderna's or Pfizer's vaccine until well into 2021.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has created a "playbook" for state health officials to fol-

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**Jeremy Caulwels**

low when distributing COVID-19 vaccines. South Dakota's vaccine distribution plan calls for a three-phased vaccine rollout.

The first phase of vaccine distribution could begin as early as Dec. 15. Vaccine use will be restricted to doctors and nurses who take care of hospitalized COVID-19 patients, staff at nursing homes and assisted-living centers and others most vulnerable to infection. The vaccines will only be available at larger healthcare facilities.

Nursing home and assisted-living center residents also will be able to receive immunizations during the first phase of the rollout as the supply of vaccines begins to increase, according to the state vaccination plan.

Phase two of the vaccine rollout will begin slowly as vaccine production ramps up. The supply of vaccines should be enough to accommodate anyone who wants to get the shot. Doses of COVID-19 vaccines will eventually be made available in smaller, more rural clinics and, potentially, at drive-through locations. Healthcare providers will be able to charge an administration fee for administering the vaccines but they won't be able to charge for the vaccines themselves, according to the Department of Health.

During phase three of the vaccine rollout, public health officials anticipate having plenty of vaccine doses and expect slower demand for them. The Department of Health plans to identify parts of the state that saw low rates

of vaccination and hold special vaccination clinics there.

To speed up the vaccination process in phases two and three, students and teachers in nursing and pharmacy programs at South Dakota universities and the Sanford USD School of Medicine have volunteered to be trained on how to administer COVID-19 vaccines, Caulwels said.

"It has been remarkable," Caulwels said. "Everybody is coming together very nicely to say, 'If you need help to get this vaccine to more people, we will be there to help out.'"

## **Public confidence critical to success**

The extended vaccine rollout will help healthcare providers determine how best to provide vaccines to those who need it, said Dr. David Basel, vice president for clinical quality at Avera Health. It will also give public health officials and healthcare providers some extra time to shore up declining public confidence in COVID-19 vaccines.

"We're hopeful that when the actual data gets released and can be peer-reviewed, that it will reassure the general public and turn that tide," Basel said.

Public polling on Americans' attitudes toward COVID-19 has revealed some troubling trends.

A recent survey conducted by the medical news website STAT and The Harris Poll found that as many as 78% of Americans felt that politics had played a bigger role than science in creating new COVID-19 vaccines. Concerns over vaccine safety also were bi-partisan. Nearly 85% of Democrats and roughly 80% of Republicans said they would be concerned about a vaccine's safety if it was approved too quickly.

The nature of both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines may make them safer than other vaccines, said Dr. Benjamin Aaker, an Avera emergency medicine doctor who is president of the South Dakota State Medical Association.

Unlike other vaccines, the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines do not use a live virus as part of their manufacturing process. Instead, both vaccines use a molecule called synthetic messenger RNA that was built in a lab using the COVID-19 virus' gene sequence as a blueprint. Chinese scientists published the SARS-CoV-II gene sequence on the internet on Jan. 10.

Messenger RNA is a naturally occurring substance used with the human body to tell individual cells what types of proteins to make. Proteins are one of the basic building blocks upon which all life is built and play an important role in the human immune system.

Proteins are also an essential piece of the SARS-CoV-II virus, which causes COVID-19. Proteins form the

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**Benjamin Aaker**

corona of spikes around the virus that gives the coronavirus its name. The spikes attach to healthy cells and allow the virus to hijack the cells and force them to make copies of the virus.

Both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines use a synthesized version of messenger RNA that, when injected into someone's upper arm, instructs nearby cells to temporarily produce a protein that is identical to a protein used by the coronavirus.

Once the fake coronavirus protein makes its way into the bloodstream, it activates the body's immune system. The immune system then goes to war against the harmless protein and, in the process, learns how to recognize and destroy the SARS-CoV-II virus without ever actually being at risk.

Both vaccines can provoke strong immune reactions, especially after the second dose. Documented reactions include fatigue, mild fever and muscle stiffness for about a day after the second injection.

"You see news about severe side effects, well, severe side effects in the study were that around 9% of people had fatigue. Fatigue is something that is a side effect, but I call that minor when you compare it to getting heart damage from the coronavirus," Aaker said.

**"We believe that the benefits of the vaccine in terms of your own health and in terms of the health of the population in general, and in terms of the economy, far outweigh the risk of taking it."**

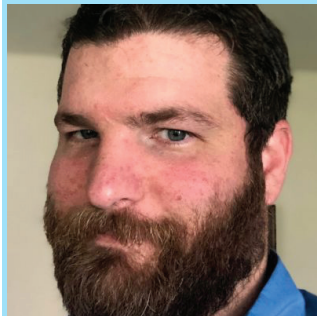
-- Benjamin Aaker, president of the South Dakota State Medical Association

Still, Aaker said, both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines have been shown to be safe for most people. Late-stage trials also showed that both vaccines were nearly 95% effective at preventing trial participants from developing severe COVID-19 symptoms, he said.

"The vaccine is safe to take but it is not without side effects, as we know from studies. And once it is administered to more people, we will know more," Aaker said. "But we believe that the benefits of the vaccine in terms of your own health and in terms of the health of the population in general, and in terms of the economy, far outweigh the risk of taking it."

## 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.



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## Grapplers start season at Madison

Groton's wrestling squad went to Madison on Thursday to take part in a round robin tournament. Easten Ekern placed second; Christian Ehresmann, Aiden Heathcote, Dylan McGannon and Evan Jacobson all placed third while Nick Morris placed fourth and Korbin Kucker placed fifth.

106: Third Place: Christian Ehresmann was decisioned by Isaac Henry, Madison, 9-7; he was decisioned by Porter Neugebauer, Parkston, 7-2; and he with a technical fall over Dawson Wallen, SF Lincoln, 17-2.

138: Fifth Place: Korbin Kucker was pinned by Matt Mork, Webster Area, 1:24; he pinned Kat Elrod, SF Lincoln, 0:56; he was pinned by Sam Olson, Madison, 0:41; and he won by default over Aaron Baumiller, Parkston.

MS 74-81: Lincoln Krause was pinned by Wyatt Pickard, Madison, 0:24; and he was pinned by Gavin Schneider, Madison, 0:22.

MS 115-124: Isiah Scapaniack was pinned by Brody Dossett, Madison, 0:08; he was pinned by Trace Shoemaker, Webster Area, 1:04; and he was pinned by Gage Jodozi, Parkston, 0:31.

MS 120-126: Third Place: Aiden Heathcote decisioned John Weber, Parkston, 8-4; he was pinned by Ryan Braskamp, Madison, 3:43; and he was pinned by Gage Baumgam, Webster Area, 0:41.

MS: 128-138: Fourth Place: Nick Morris was pinned by Zach Vanzee, Parkston, 0:53; Double Default in round 2 with Easten Ekern, Groton Area; and he was pinned by Kaden Drause, Madison, 0:28.

MS: 128-138: Second Place: Easten Ekern decisioned Kaden Drause, Madison, 8-6 double default with Nick Morris, Groton Area; and in the third round, he was pinned by Zach Vanzee, Parkston, 1:04.

MS: 135-144: Third Place: Dylan McGannon was pinned by Hunter Hanson, Madison, 1:25; he pinned Samir Hamed, SF Lincoln, 0:45; and he was pinned by Stetson Riggs, Hanson, 0:19.

MS: 182-233: Third Place: Evan Jacobson was decisioned by Sean Sichmeller, Webster Area, 3-2; and he was pinned by Tayt Gran, Madison, 0:26.

## Governor Noem Signs Executive Order

PIERRE, S.D. – Yesterday, Governor Kristi Noem signed an executive order to give flexibility as South Dakota continues to fight the spread of COVID-19.

Executive Order 2020-33 makes various statutory and regulatory suspensions affecting businesses and schools in the state. These suspensions will continue through the duration of the COVID-19 state of emergency. The suspensions include:

- \* Suspending in-person requirements to allow cooperatives, rural electric cooperatives, and nonprofits to meet electronically;

- \* Suspending performance evaluations for experienced teachers and principals;

- \* Suspending school evacuation drills and cardiopulmonary surveys;

- \* Suspending accreditation review for schools scheduled to be reviewed this year.

## Groton Prairie Mixed

**Team Standings:** Shih Tzus 16 ½, Cheetahs 13 ½, Jackelopes 13, Chipmunks 5

**Men's High Games:** Roger Spanier 218, Brad Waage 210, 204, Randy Stanley 199

**Women's High Games:** Nicole Kassube 171, Darci Spanier 166, Sue Stanley 163

**Men's High Series:** Roger Spanier 545, Brad Waage 541, Randy Stanley 529

**Women's High Series:** Nicole Kassube 454, Hayley Merkel 436, Brenda Waage 429

## Conde National League

**Team Standings:** Pirates 32 winners of first half, Tigers 28 ½, Cubs 28 ½, Braves 25, Giants 24, Mets 18

**Men's High Games:** Russ Bethke 246, 190; Butch Farmen 227, 223, 207; Ryan Bethke 175

**Men's High Series:** Butch Farmen 659, Russ Bethke 590, Ryan Bethke 175

**Women's High Games:** Tanah Messevou 206, 177; Joyce Walter 185; Mary Larson 171

**Women's High Series:** Tanah Messevou 529, Joyce Walter 450, Mary Larson 444



## HS Christmas Concert



**The Groton Area High School Christmas Concert was put on Thursday evening in the GHS Gym. The high school choir sang, "Run, Rudolph, Run," "White Winter Hymnal" and "Holy Night, Silent Night."** (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)



**The high school band performed, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," "Hallelujah" (Pentatonix version) and "Adventum." After that, the holiday sing-a-long was held with Deck the Halls, Jingle Bells, O Christmas Tree and We Wish You A Merry Christmas.** (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)

## Unemployment Claims Filed for Week Ending Dec. 5

PIERRE, S.D. – During the week of Nov. 29 through Dec. 5, a total of 818 initial weekly claims for state unemployment benefits were processed by the Department of Labor and Regulation. This is an increase of 382 claims from the prior week's total of 436.

A total of \$841,000 was paid out in state benefits, in addition to \$307,000 in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), \$287,000 in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and \$195,000 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) benefits.

The Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund balance was \$121.7 million on Dec. 6.

The latest number of continued state claims is 3,847 for the week ending Nov. 28, an increase of 832 from the prior week's total of 3,015. This indicates the number of unemployed workers eligible for and receiving benefits after their initial claim.

Benefits paid since March 16:

Regular State = \$90.3 million

FPUC = \$210.0 million

PUA = \$17.7 million

PEUC = \$3.5 million

Total = Approximately \$321.5 million

## Regents Review State Budget Recommendations

PIERRE, S.D. – A recommended state budget for the coming year includes important resources for South Dakota's public university system, including more money for employee salaries and for critical maintenance and repair of buildings.

The South Dakota Board of Regents today reviewed Gov. Kristi Noem's budget recommendations for the fiscal year that begins next July 1. The governor presented her budget plan to legislators earlier this week. When state lawmakers convene Jan. 11, they will consider her recommendations as they create a final budget for state operations.

"We are glad to see the governor identify essential 'meat and potatoes' issues like salary policy and upkeep of state facilities in her budget," said Brian L. Maher, the regents' executive director and CEO. "We are ready to work closely with Gov. Noem and legislators to address budget priorities."

The governor recommended a 2.4 percent market adjustment for state employees' salaries next year, which includes employees of the regents' system. She also requested an increase in state general funds for building maintenance and repair of Board of Regents' facilities of more than \$3.6 million. Overall, the regents' base budget would increase by \$3,518,686 in the proposed FY22 budget.

Gov. Noem also seeks one-time funding for several public university priorities in the current budget year. Those include:

- \$453,200 to integrate technology and position South Dakota State University's Cottonwood Field Station as a hub for precision ranching research. The field station, located near Wall in western South Dakota, is part of the SDSU Agricultural Experiment Station.
- \$355,000 to upgrade equipment and software at a University of South Dakota research center engaged in studies of candidate compounds and production of vaccines.
- \$90,000 for the West River Health Sciences Center at Black Hills State University-Rapid City, a one-stop center to attract more students in the Black Hills area to nursing and other health-care careers. The funds would improve facility and technology infrastructure and support student recruitment and tutoring.

## Governor Noem Files Brief at U.S. Supreme Court in Important Election Integrity Case

PIERRE, S.D. – This week, Governor Kristi Noem submitted an amicus brief to the Supreme Court of the United States in support of the petitioners in the case of Brnovich v. Democratic National Committee and in defense of fair, neutrally-applicable election laws that work to prevent voter fraud. This brief could not be timelier in light of the ongoing national election dispute.

"The 2020 election has shaken the American people's faith in the integrity of the electoral process," said Governor Kristi Noem. "Fortunately, the Brnovich case presents the Supreme Court with a fantastic opportunity to restore public trust in American elections. In South Dakota, our election system is fair and transparent, and all states should be held to the same standard. Our hope is the Supreme Court will set a clear precedent that upholds the powers of states to enforce neutral, non-discriminatory voting rules that apply fairly to all by supporting the petitioners."

The amicus brief argues that the Voting Rights Act does not prevent states from enacting neutral election laws like Arizona's ban on ballot-harvesting and in-precinct voting requirements. Arizona's laws are not identical to South Dakota's election laws, but all states should be allowed to design rules that promote the order and integrity of their elections. States should be able to enact and revise laws designed to ensure that every legal vote counts, and they shouldn't have to fear being taken to court for pursuing electoral fairness.

The amicus brief is available on the Supreme Court docket at [this link](#).

## #291 in a series

### **Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller**

We're up to 15,674,100 cases reported in the US, 1.4% more than yesterday. We should be at 16 million on Saturday. There were 211,600 new cases reported today, our fifth-worst day so far in this pandemic. We are regularly topping 200,000 new cases per day; in fact, we've done it seven of the past eight days and for four consecutive days in the current streak. Our seven-day average is at a record-setting 206,152.

Looks like California hospitals in particular are in some trouble. The state as a whole has only about 1500 ICU beds available. Dr. Rais Vohra, Fresno County's Interim Public Health Officer and a specialist in emergency medicine, says, "I know that those who aren't in the medical field may not understand or quite grasp just how dire the situation with our ICUs is—it's absolutely true. And that really is the reason that we want everyone to stay home as much as possible." The state has more than a few counties whose ICUs are full-up—three in the San Joachin Valley alone; the entire Valley's down to 5.6% availability. Southern California is down around 10%. Santa Clara County has just 31 ICU beds available, less than 10% of the total, and Fresno County is at zero.

San Francisco is projected to run out of ICU beds a couple of days after Christmas, just 17 days from now. The city's health director, Dr. Grant Colfax, said, "And that's if things don't even get worse, but they very well may. The number is climbing, and climbing rapidly. Now, not only by the day, but by the hour." He warns citizens, "Even lower-risk activities now carry substantial risk because there's more virus out there than ever before." Of course, any of these figures is a snapshot in time; patients are constantly moving in and out of intensive care as their needs change. But when your resources are that low, you're in constant danger of running out. No one thinks they've peaked; the Thanksgiving surge isn't even through the system yet.

New Mexico's having trouble too; they had just 33 ICU beds available in the entire state and so have instituted "crisis care" standards, which opens up the potential for a system of rationing care. Elective surgeries are banned until January 4. If things get much worse, doctors will determine who receives care based on who is most likely to survive. This move was made due to the "unsustainable strain on health care providers and hospitals," and also allows physicians and other providers to treat Covid-19 patients, even if it is outside their practice specialty. The number of Covid-19 patients hospitalized in the state is triple the number at the beginning of November. The governor said, "We are serving every New Mexican who needs us, but we are getting to a place where it's really dire, and we have to do better." With some luck, this crisis will pass: The governor put some drastic measures in place two weeks ago to curb transmission. Those efforts have borne fruit: Cases have dropped by a third since then, and the state's positivity rate has decreased significantly. A decline in hospitalizations should be following soon there. The state is among those with the fewest hospital beds in the nation, as well having an unusually old and poor population, so they're not going to be out of the woods. They do, however, appear to have things going in the right direction, at least for the moment; we'll see if it holds.

Reno, Nevada, is also under pressure. A hospital there has opened a Covid-19 unit in a parking garage. Washoe County, Reno's home, now has 10 times the number of cases it did a couple of months ago, and the health care system is under enormous strain. Oklahoma has just 34 available ICU beds. Other states with record hospitalizations are Pennsylvania, West Virginia, and North Carolina.

It is important to remember that ICUs aren't just about bed space or even about fancy equipment; although both of those are important to care at this level, the critical element in an ICU is the specially trained personnel who care for the patients. They are particularly important to severely ill Covid-19 patients whose care requires very high-level skills, and you can't just order up another dozen respiratory therapists or ICU nurses from the warehouse. California's Health and Human Services secretary explained a couple of days ago at a press conference that it has been getting more difficult to secure additional staffing. "We're fulfilling what we can. But it is getting harder. We know that staff is our main scarce resource. Our requests, both across the state and the nation, are hard to fulfill because of what's happening across America with COVID."

There were 2744 deaths reported today, exactly two weeks after Thanksgiving, which means this num-



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ber has not seen its Thanksgiving surge yet; it will take a couple more weeks before we see the deaths associated with the holiday—just about Christmas time. We're at 292,216, 0.9% over yesterday's total. I'd guess we could be looking at 300,000 deaths before the weekend's over, early next week at the latest. Our seven-day average is at 2230, which is approaching our record set on April 24 of 2241. The CDC's modeling, which run conservative, now projects from 332,000 to 362,000 deaths by January 2. Considering we're only just over three weeks away from that date, we have to conclude things are about to get a whole lot uglier. That's a lot of funerals, a lot of grieving families, a lot of loss. California and Nevada reported record deaths today, and in 37 states, deaths over the past week rose from the prior week. We also set a record for seven-day average deaths at 2360, but this is not holiday horror, not yet, just ordinary, everyday, garden-variety horror. I don't feel better knowing that.

So the Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee for the FDA did meet today, adjourning shortly before 6:00 pm ET. In response to the question, do the benefits of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine outweigh its risks for use in people age 16 and older, their answer, by a vote of 17-4 with one abstention was "Yes." That's pretty definite. Dr. Paul Offit, director of the Vaccine Education Center at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and a committee member, said after the vote, "The question is never when you know everything. It's when you know enough and I think we know enough now to say that this appears to be our way out of this awful, awful mess. That's why I voted yes."

A temporary voting member, Dr. James Hildreth, president and chief executive officer of Meharry Medical College, said he was hoping more minorities had been enrolled in the clinical trials, adding, "I just feel that we need this vaccine and the benefits outweigh the risks."

There were concerns expressed about the reports of allergic reactions in those two people in Britain. FDA staff told them that, as with any vaccines, there would be paperwork accompanying the vaccine warning against administering it to anyone with a history of severe allergic reactions to vaccines or to any of the components of the vaccine. I'm not sure exactly how to interpret this, but although it is possible they will recommend issuing advisories similar to the UK in regard to people with allergies, it looks to me as though they may not be recommending excluding them, only those with severe allergies to vaccines or these ingredients specifically. Dr. Stephen Hahn, FDA Commissioner, said, "We're working with our UK partners now to understand exactly what happened with respect to those reactions. We take this seriously." My understanding is that no allergic reactions at all were noted in the 30,000-participant clinical trials. I've had questions from folks with allergies wondering whether they'll be able to access the vaccine, and this is the best I've got for them at the moment. I'll continue to watch for more information as it becomes available.

If you were wondering just who is on this committee, I had a look at the roster, and it's a pretty distinguished bunch: folks from major research universities, NIH, and research hospitals. I saw an epidemiologist, a bunch of infectious disease experts, vaccinologists, microbiologists and immunologists, a biostatistician, a couple of other physicians, an industry representative (not from Pfizer or BioNTech), and an attorney who was the consumer representative. I don't think we need to worry that a bunch of unqualified hacks was making this recommendation; we're good there.

The FDA is expected to issue its decision on an emergency use authorization (EUA) quickly, likely within days, given the recommendation and the fact that there do not appear to be any specific safety concerns which would preclude emergency use. Hahn said, "We intend to act quickly." While it is not required, it is usual for the agency to follow the recommendations of its advisory committees. It appears the expectation is that they're going to issue the authorization. Understand that this is not full approval, or licensure; that requires a separate application and is expected to come later after more data become available on safety and efficacy. The decision will come from career officials at the FDA, not from political appointees, so those worrying about political influence on the decision are likely worrying about the wrong things.

The next step comes from the CDC. Their Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices, which is scheduled to meet tomorrow and Sunday. The plan is to discuss tomorrow and vote Sunday. Once that happens, vaccine can ship, and Pfizer says it's ready to ship within 24 hours of this decision. Remember that we're going to do this whole thing again next week for the Moderna vaccine candidate. We're getting closer.

One thing to note is that pregnant people were excluded from the clinical trials for this vaccine, which



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means it is not yet clear whether pregnant women or women of childbearing age who may become pregnant will have access to the vaccine. There is legitimate concern because pregnancy alters the body immunologically to protect the developing fetus from the mother's immune system; so it is possible a pregnant person will have an unexpected response to vaccine. It was pointed out at today's advisory committee meeting that a study of developmental and reproductive toxicity in animals will be available later this month, which might help to answer questions about use during pregnancy. At present there are no real data on either side of the question, but there is evidence pregnant people are at risk for severe disease and preterm birth as a result of infection, so some degree of vaccine risk may be acceptable when you consider this. A committee member said it may ultimately be up to women and their doctors to decide what to do about vaccination during pregnancy. This is relevant, considering 70% of health care workers, who will be the first to be vaccinated, are women, some fair proportion of whom are of childbearing age. It's probably well past time to make a point of including this group of people in vaccine trials going forward. The UK is excluding pregnant and breastfeeding women from its vaccination program at present, so we'll see what the US decides on that point.

Moderna has started its phase 2/3 clinical trials for its vaccine in adolescents, ages 12 to 18. They intend to enroll 3000 participants in the trial. They should have data by spring so that, if the vaccine candidate proves to be safe and effective in this age group, kids could be vaccinated in time for the 2021-22 school year. This would be a blessing.

Tina and Donald Welty opened Welty's Deli in New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in response to a call for businesses to rebuild the city. Donald had worked his way through a number of restaurants, and Tina's family had been in the business for generations. They opted to reinvest in the city in the early recovery period and started their business in 2005, taking over the former Sweet Olive Café. They have some gigantic sandwiches and hefty salads and have built a loyal customer base. Their problem recently has been that few of their regulars are working downtown right now as so many are working remotely. Pair this with the loss of tourism, and you have a business on the brink.

What's keeping them going these days is a program for feeding the hungry that pays restaurants to prepare meals for distribution. So every few days, they cook up a big batch of pasta Bolognese and pack it up in individual meals. Tina says, "I never wanted to ask for help, never wanted to do a GoFundMe or anything, because I'm usually the one that does for other people. That's why I like this. This way we're working, it's not just someone handing out money, they're paying us to cook for other people who are really in need right now."

Without this revenue, they'd have closed months ago; even so, they've racked up debt to stay afloat—and they've fallen behind on the rent. Tina says, "I've curled up in a ball and cried, but we have to keep fighting. We love what we do, we love what we have here. We don't want to lose it." But that could still happen.

They've recently gotten a boost from CNBC's reality show, "The Profit," who has named their efforts Tina's BadA\$\$ Meal Program. They worked up a program for the Weltys to expand the community meals with direct support from customers and the public. The show contributed \$20,000 for 2000 meals and challenged them to scale up. There is now a link on the restaurant's website where people can buy meals for \$10 each for donation to local charitable groups. They're feeding all sorts of people in need, including musicians, artists, and hospitality workers suffering from the fall-off in tourism and other business. It's no sure thing, but it appears the business may get enough from this program to keep the lights on until the pandemic passes. Tina says of the donations, "Some are from our regulars, some are from people I don't know from Adam. It's been incredible." I like a program that does double duty—helping the provider and helping the recipients. I wish them well.

We all need to look for ways to leverage our contributions to provide the most good for the dollar or the effort. Whatever you can do to make our corner of the universe a little happier place, this is a good time to get started. We'll come out of this thing whole only if we all pitch in toward that end. And the need is great.

Be well. We'll talk again.

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## Area COVID-19 Cases

	Dec. 3	Dec. 4	Dec. 5	Dec. 6	Dec. 7	Dec. 8	Dec. 9
Minnesota	327,477	333,626	338,973	345,281	350,862	356,152	359,203
Nebraska	132,530	134,710	136,325	138,568	139,834	141,127	142,603
Montana	64,340	65,122	66,436	67,069	67,875	68,591	69,346
Colorado	241,172	247,209	252,222	257,347	260,581	264,618	268,589
Wyoming	29,966	30,518	31,047	31,250	31,561	32,196	32,555
North Dakota	80,135	81,105	81,949	82,504	82,981	83,342	No Update
South Dakota	82,203	83,348	84,398	85,304	85,991	86,500	87,038
United States	13,925,350	14,147,754	14,373,720	14,584,706	14,761,576	14,955,025	14,823,129*
US Deaths	273,847	276,401	279,008	281,206	282,323	283,746	282,785*
Minnesota	+5165	+6,149	+5,347	+ 6308	+5,581	+5,290	+3,051
Nebraska	+2,336	+2,180	+1,615	+ 2243	+1,266	+1,293	+1,476
Montana	+1135	+780	+1,314	+ 633	+806	+716	+755
Colorado	+3862	+6,037	+5,013	+ 5125	+3,234	+4,037	+3,971
Wyoming	+577	+552	+529	+ 203	+311	+635	+359
North Dakota	+480	+970	+844	+ 555	+477	+361	NA
South Dakota	+1291	+1,145	+1,050	+ 906	+687	+509	+538
United States	+199,044	+222,404	+225,966	+ 210986	+176,870	+193,449	NA
US Deaths	+3,156	+2,554	+2,607	+ 2198	+1,117	+1,423	NA
	Dec. 10	Dec. 11					
Minnesota	363,719	367,218					
Nebraska	143,924	145,774					
Montana	70,133	70,892					
Colorado	272,346	276,995					
Wyoming	32,889	33,203					
North Dakota	86,149	86,707					
South Dakota	88,023	88,727					
United States	15,821,363	16,039,393					
US Deaths	296,715	299,692					
Minnesota	+4,516	+3,499					
Nebraska	+1,321	+1,850					
Montana	+787	+759					
Colorado	+3,757	+4,649					
Wyoming	+334	+314					
North Dakota	+473	+558					
South Dakota	+985	+704					
United States	+226,762	+217,779					
US Deaths	+3,260	+2,974					

\*These numbers are from the CDC which may be delayed. The previous source of where we acquired the numbers is not operational.

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## December 10th COVID-19 UPDATE

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from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota:

Positive: +704 (88727 total) Positivity Rate: 11.0%

Total Tests: 6418 (666,037 total)

Hospitalized: +51 (5025 total). 491 currently hospitalized -10)

Deaths: +30 (1177 total)

Males: 17, Females: 13

Ages: 60s=2, 70s=6, 80+=22

Counties: Brookings-2, Brown-2, Davison-1, Deuel-1, Dewey-1, Grant-3, Hamlin-5, McCook-1, Minnehaha-7, Pennington-3, Roberts-1, Spink-1, Yankton-2.

Recovered: +86 (71,316 total)

Active Cases: +86 (16,234)

Percent Recovered: 80.4%

Beadle (32) +8 positive, +6 recovered (373 active cases)

Brookings (23) +17 positive, +14 recovered (413 active cases)

Brown (34): +31 positive, +24 recovered (689 active cases)

Clark (1): +1 positive, +1 recovered (66 active cases)

Clay (11): +13 positive, +8 recovered (260 active cases)

Codington (57): +43 positive, +25 recovered (546 active cases)

Davison (48): +8 positive, +9 recovered (428 active cases)

Day (12): +7 positive, +4 recovered (130 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +4 positive, +5 recovered (55 active cases)

Faulk (10): +5 positive, +0 recovered (28 active cases)

Grant (18): +12 positive, +4 recovered (196 active cases)

Hanson (3): +0 positive, +3 recovered (67 active cases)

Hughes (22): +19 positive, +10 recovered (325 active cases)

Lawrence (25): +15 positive, +13 recovered (407 active cases)

Lincoln (54): +39 positive, +47 recovered (2021 active cases)

Marshall (3): +1 positive, +4 recovered (57 active cases)

McCook (20): +3 positive, +1 recovered (99 active cases)

McPherson (1): +2 positive, +1 recovery (44 active case)

Minnehaha (215): +160 positive, +133 recovered (3806 active cases)

Pennington (98): +95 positive, +69 recovered (1865 active cases)

Potter (2): +1 positive, +5 recovered (57 active cases)

Roberts (23): +13 positive, +8 recovered (175 active cases)

Spink (20): +11 positive, +4 recovered (142 active cases)

Walworth (13): +5 positive, +3 recovered (146 active cases)

### NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 10:

- 8.9% rolling 14-day positivity
- 575 new positives
- 8,301 susceptible test encounters
- 302 currently hospitalized (+18)
- 4,596 active cases (+42)
- 1,103 total deaths (+23)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	387	308	737	7	Substantial	30.77%
Beadle	2404	1999	4839	32	Substantial	18.98%
Bennett	335	287	1053	5	Substantial	16.22%
Bon Homme	1414	1280	1794	21	Substantial	28.04%
Brookings	2659	2223	9182	23	Substantial	19.73%
Brown	3993	3272	10552	34	Substantial	19.87%
Brule	605	511	1623	5	Substantial	20.45%
Buffalo	397	355	833	10	Substantial	25.00%
Butte	791	655	2700	15	Substantial	17.73%
Campbell	107	95	198	1	Minimal	12.50%
Charles Mix	998	730	3415	7	Substantial	24.12%
Clark	285	218	805	1	Substantial	12.12%
Clay	1481	1210	4283	11	Substantial	17.47%
Codington	3031	2428	7791	57	Substantial	31.98%
Corson	425	370	863	5	Substantial	38.46%
Custer	620	484	2251	7	Substantial	23.68%
Davison	2538	2063	5433	48	Substantial	23.42%
Day	448	306	1438	12	Substantial	24.55%
Deuel	365	268	920	5	Substantial	38.03%
Dewey	1125	701	3327	7	Substantial	23.81%
Douglas	329	260	781	5	Substantial	32.14%
Edmunds	288	230	870	3	Substantial	14.29%
Fall River	383	320	2168	10	Substantial	13.04%
Faulk	294	256	571	10	Moderate	13.64%
Grant	751	537	1813	18	Substantial	33.33%
Gregory	455	378	1034	23	Substantial	9.73%
Haakon	183	135	454	3	Substantial	4.94%
Hamlin	541	398	1423	26	Substantial	25.50%
Hand	298	249	676	1	Substantial	11.76%
Hanson	286	216	554	3	Substantial	39.13%
Harding	86	66	138	0	Moderate	63.64%
Hughes	1805	1458	5188	22	Substantial	8.29%
Hutchinson	632	465	1906	13	Substantial	29.13%



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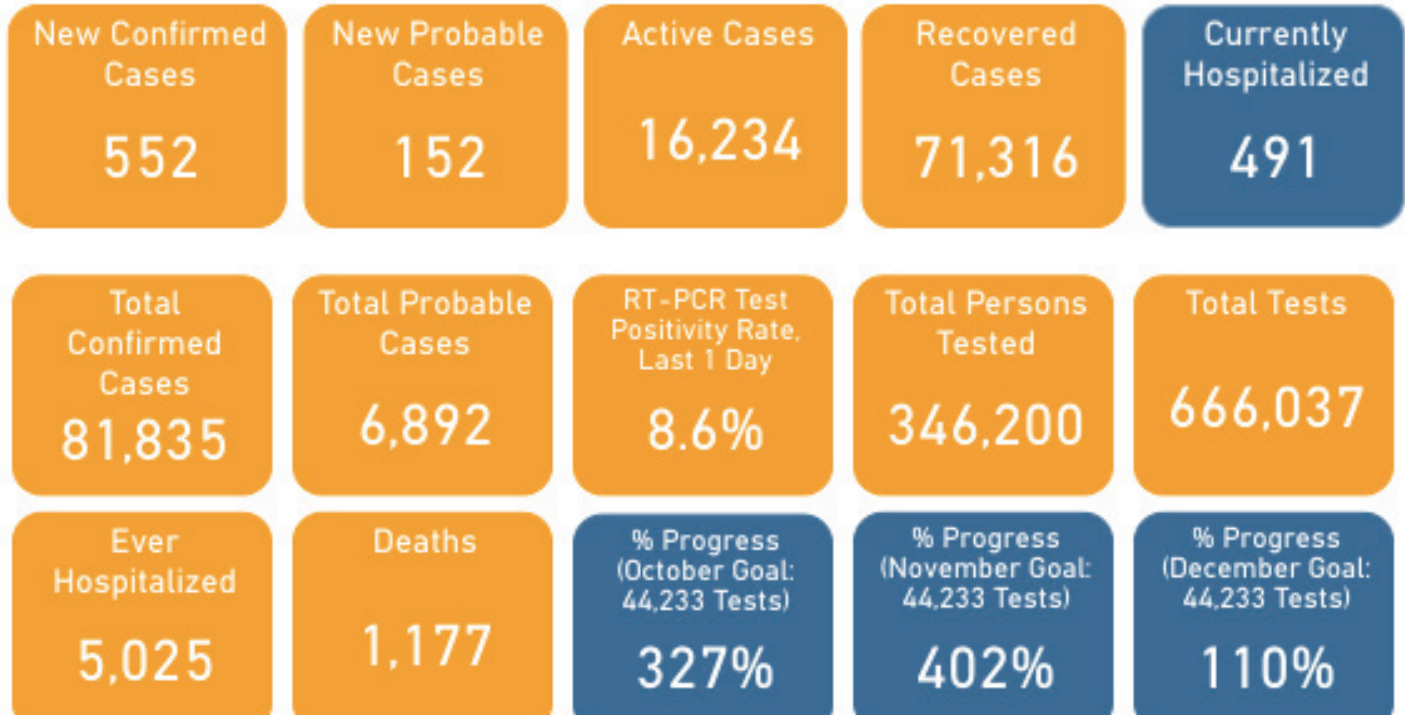
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Hyde	128	103	343	0	Moderate	8.33%
Jackson	232	180	842	8	Substantial	24.56%
Jerauld	248	204	468	15	Moderate	12.50%
Jones	63	55	170	0	Moderate	11.11%
Kingsbury	473	378	1324	13	Substantial	13.54%
Lake	924	757	2607	12	Substantial	29.01%
Lawrence	2275	1843	7223	25	Substantial	21.71%
Lincoln	5925	4866	16196	54	Substantial	25.35%
Lyman	487	415	1629	9	Substantial	18.39%
Marshall	220	160	940	3	Substantial	32.94%
McCook	621	502	1329	20	Substantial	26.58%
McPherson	159	114	478	1	Substantial	4.13%
Meade	1967	1555	6337	17	Substantial	19.60%
Mellette	205	164	631	1	Substantial	21.05%
Miner	211	170	475	5	Substantial	36.36%
Minnehaha	22451	18430	63276	215	Substantial	23.46%
Moody	472	357	1517	13	Substantial	30.30%
Oglala Lakota	1763	1434	6057	29	Substantial	20.18%
Pennington	9703	7740	31821	98	Substantial	22.91%
Perkins	230	151	601	2	Substantial	36.21%
Potter	289	233	675	2	Substantial	12.90%
Roberts	821	623	3652	23	Substantial	27.24%
Sanborn	294	214	573	3	Substantial	15.15%
Spink	637	475	1794	20	Substantial	17.18%
Stanley	245	206	718	2	Substantial	9.52%
Sully	100	86	223	3	Moderate	17.65%
Todd	1053	899	3679	15	Substantial	26.10%
Tripp	578	442	1274	10	Substantial	23.29%
Turner	876	706	2236	47	Substantial	25.66%
Union	1375	1100	5017	25	Substantial	21.75%
Walworth	558	399	1563	13	Substantial	24.90%
Yankton	2149	1468	7771	17	Substantial	27.84%
Ziebach	256	156	600	7	Substantial	36.84%
Unassigned	0	0	1821	0		

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## South Dakota



### AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range	# of Cases	# of Deaths
0-9 years	3180	0
10-19 years	9686	0
20-29 years	16540	3
30-39 years	14753	12
40-49 years	12648	20
50-59 years	12632	61
60-69 years	9965	154
70-79 years	5218	247
80+ years	4105	680

### SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	46391	576
Male	42336	601

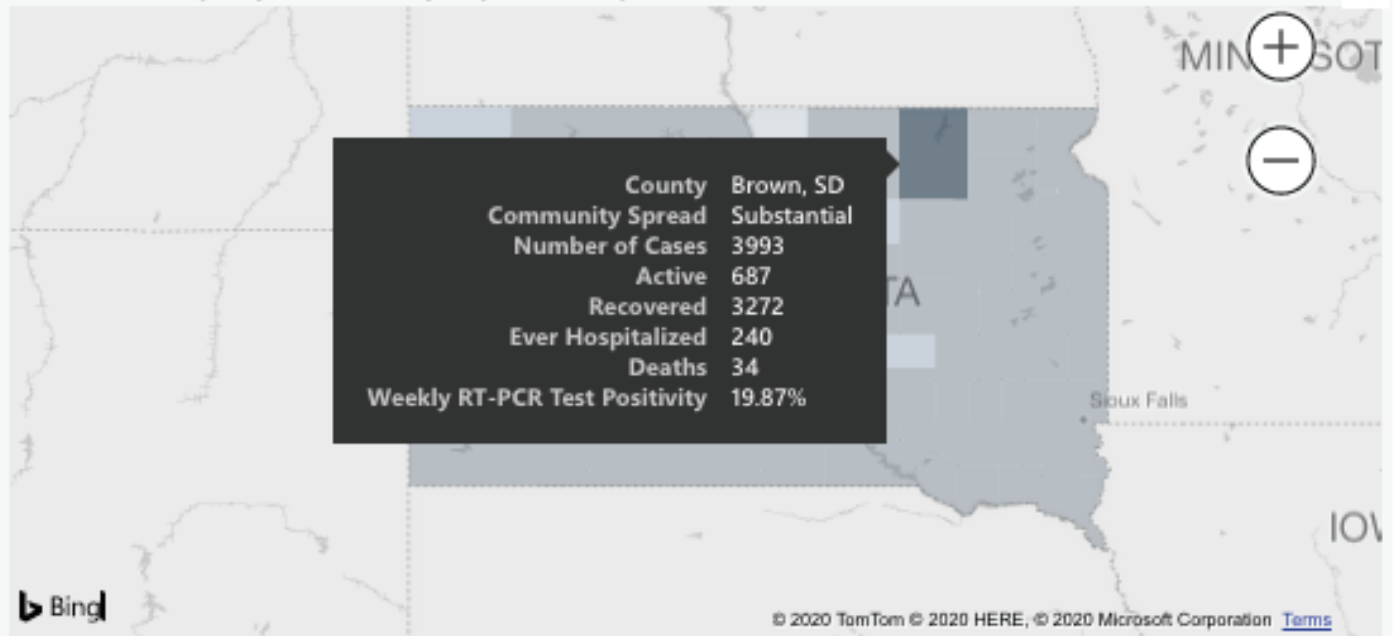
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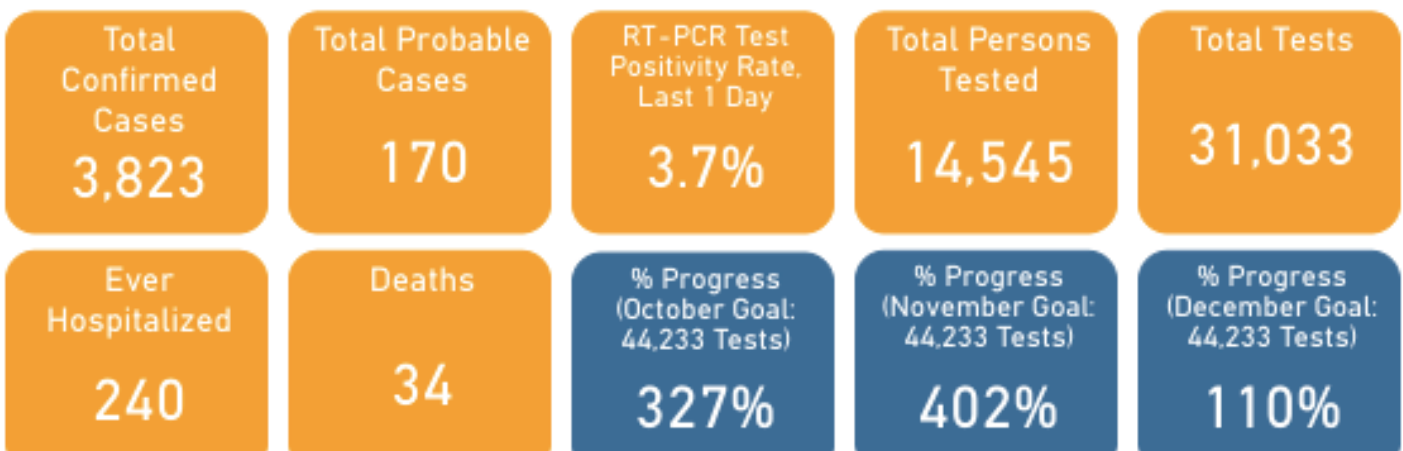
## Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



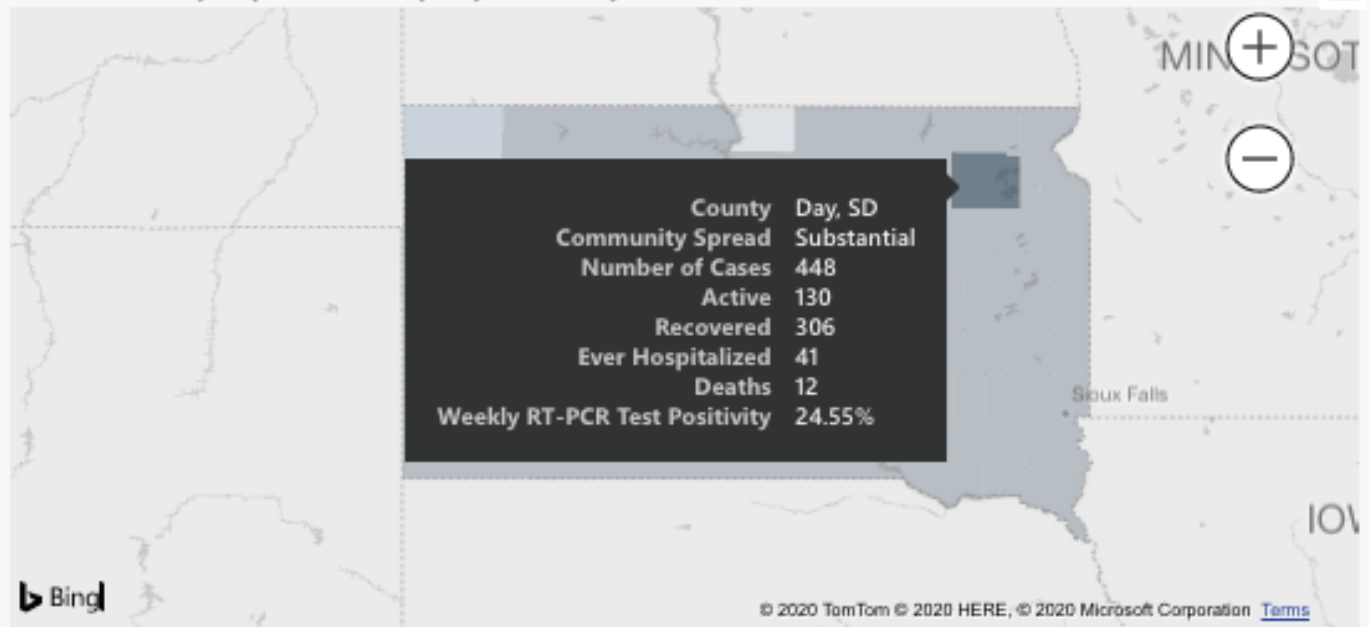
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## Day County

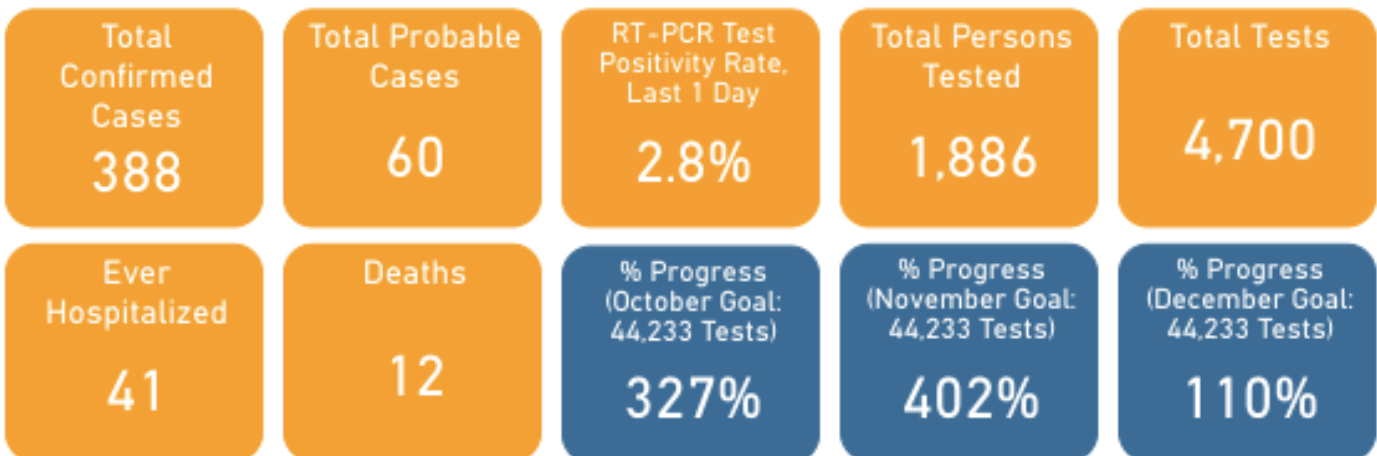


### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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

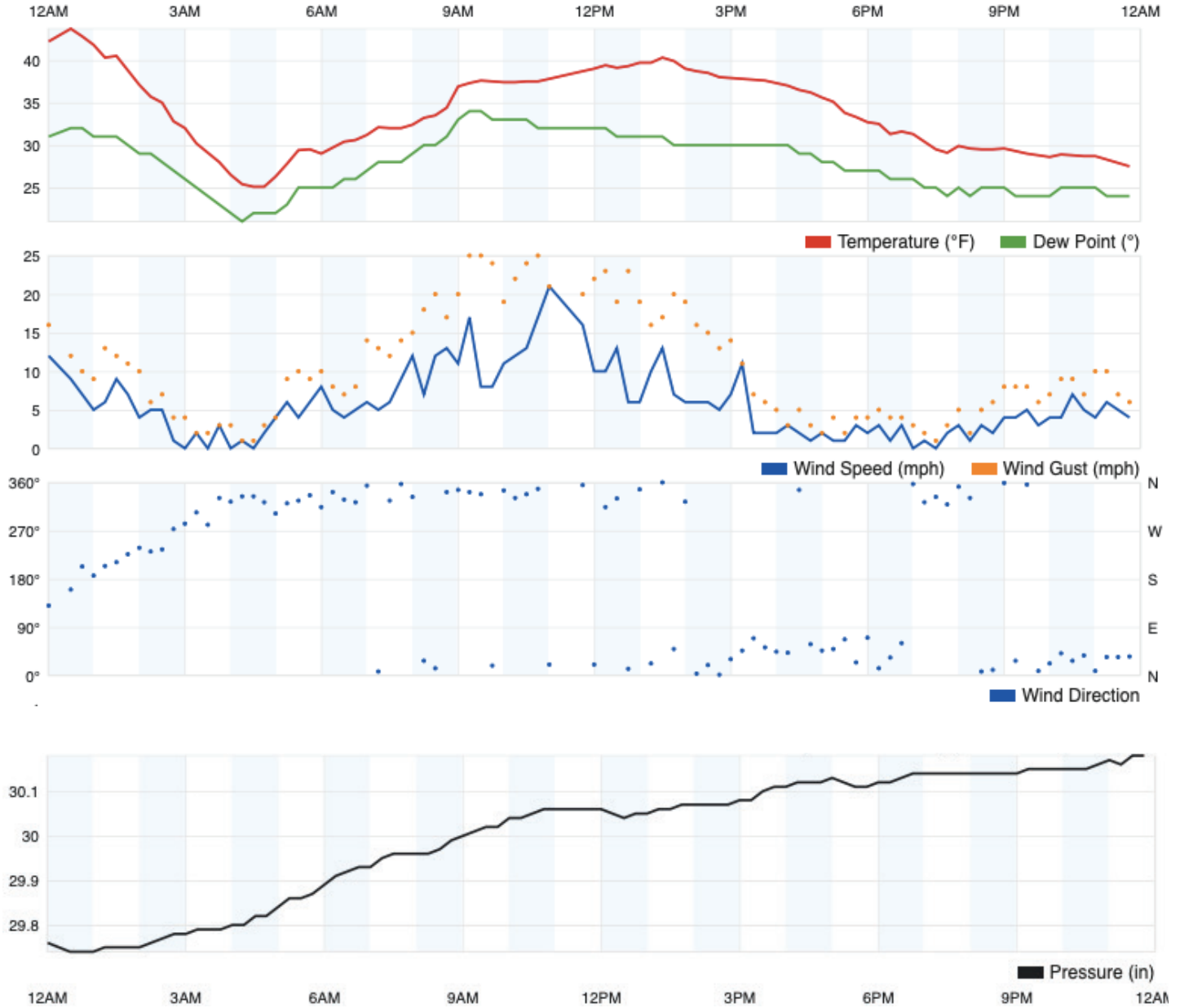




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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Cloudy

High: 29 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 17 °F

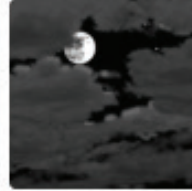
Saturday



Mostly Cloudy

High: 31 °F

Saturday  
Night



Mostly Cloudy

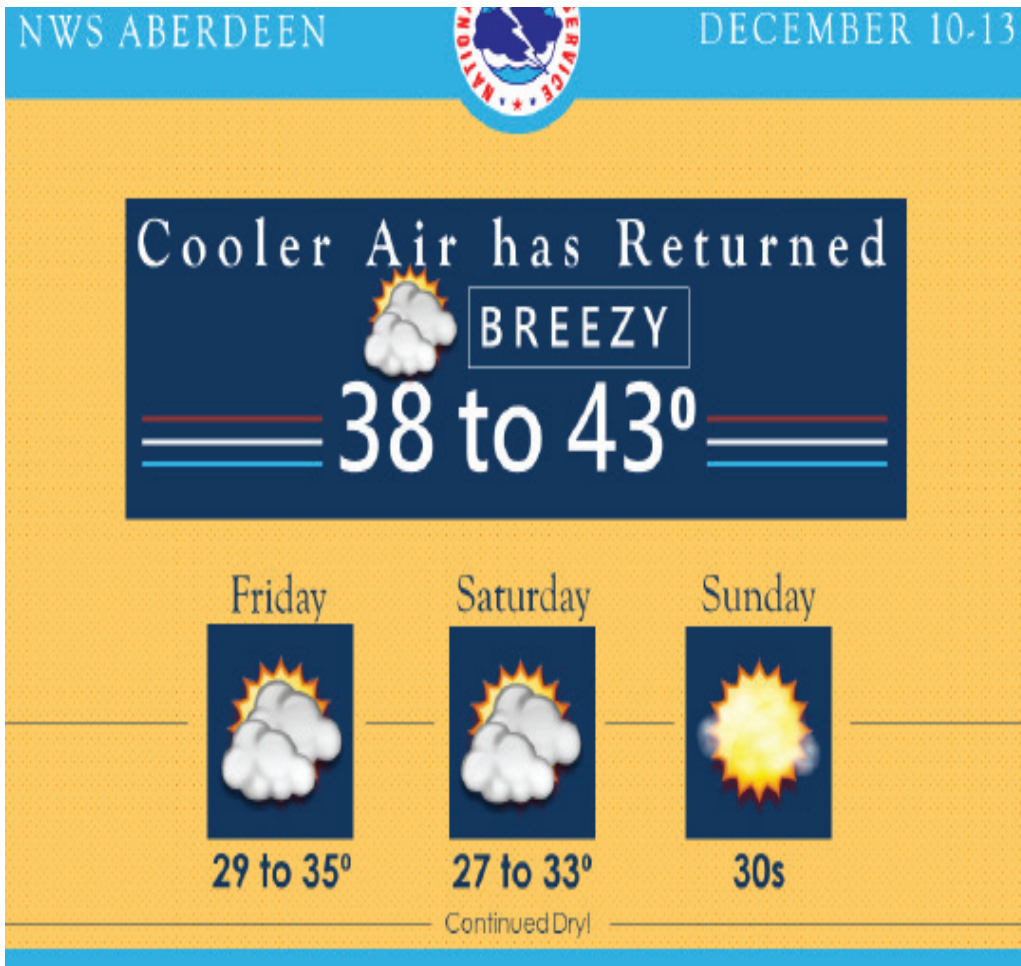
Low: 15 °F

Sunday



Mostly Sunny

High: 35 °F



Morning fog will be possible over portions of central South Dakota, as well as the Sisseton Hills of eastern South Dakota. If you encounter fog while driving slow down, use low beam headlights, avoid using cruise control, and use extra caution at intersections and railroad crossings. Expect highs in the 30s over the next few days, and in the 20s to near 30 degrees on Monday. The dry forecast continues.

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## Today in Weather History

December 11, 1965: Ice, up to 3 inches thick, with even more in some locations, accumulated from freezing rain on utility lines and trees in northern South Dakota, causing extensive damage. The damage was estimated at \$1 million each to telephone lines and power lines, with the highest losses in the northeast quarter of the state. The first accumulation of the glaze began as a thick rime due to dense fog and freezing temperatures before the 11th. Freezing rain, which started the afternoon of the 11th and continued into the 12th, formed a coating of ice over the heavy rime accumulation. The glaze remained for a week or more in most areas. In west central Minnesota, freezing drizzle and freezing rain at night on the 11th caused ice accumulations of 1/2 to 1 inch thick on roads, telephone, and electric wires, as well as tree limbs. Power and other services were disrupted over a broad area. Some services were out for up to four days.

December 11, 2004: High winds gusting to around 60 mph caused some spotty damage in northeast South Dakota. In Watertown, some trees were downed. One tree fell onto a house, causing some minor damage. In Milbank, two rail cars were blown down a railroad track and derailed.

December 11, 1905: The highest temperature ever recorded in South America was recorded at Rivadavia, Argentina with a temperature of 120 degrees.

December 11, 1992: A complex storm system moved eastward from the Gulf Coast of Texas to eastern Georgia on December 9 and 10th. In the next 24 hours, the low-pressure system moved to the Chesapeake Bay and rapidly intensified. This system produced gale force winds with gusts exceeding hurricane force affected not only the Mid-Atlantic coastline but also as far southwest as the southern Appalachians where trees were downed and roofs damaged. This storm also produced 20 to 30-foot waves in Massachusetts on December 12 and 13th. Precipitation amounts varied considerably. Rainfall amounts of 8 inches occurred in southeastern Massachusetts, while several areas in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Maryland recorded more than 30 inches of snow. Precipitation ended during the evening hours on the 12th. Ten deaths resulted from the storm with insured losses totaling near \$850 million and non-insured losses near \$2 billion.

1932 - Very cold weather prevailed along the West Coast. San Francisco received 0.8 inch of snow, and at the airport the temperature dipped to 20 degrees. At Sacramento CA, the mercury dipped to 17 degrees to establish an all-time record low for that location. Morning lows were below freezing from the 9th to the 15th at Sacramento, and the high on the 11th was just 34 degrees. The cold wave dealt severe damage to truck crops and orange groves in the Sacramento Valley. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Low pressure over southwestern Ontario, Canada, brought snow and gusty winds to the North Central U.S. Winds gusted to 62 mph at Riverton WY. Snow and high winds in eastern North Dakota reduced visibilities to less than one hundred feet at times. Warm weather prevailed across the Southern Plains Region. Half a dozen cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Del Rio TX with a reading of 89 degrees. Laredo TX and Kingsville TX tied for honors as hot spot in the nation with afternoon highs of 92 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the central and eastern U.S. Sault Ste Marie MI reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero, and International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 25 degrees below zero. Temperatures remained below zero all day over parts of eastern Upper Michigan and northern New England. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong Santa Ana winds developed across southern California and parts of central California. Winds in Kern County of central California gusted to 100 mph near Grapevine. The high winds reduced visibilities to near zero in the desert areas, closing major interstate highways east of Ontario CA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

2008 - A rare snowstorm swept across parts of south Louisiana and Mississippi, blanketing the area with snow. Nearly 8 inches of snow fell over parts of Louisiana. These conditions caused schools and bridges to close and left thousands of residents without power (Associated Press). (NCDC)







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## WHERE'S JESUS' PRESENT?

It was Christmas Eve. The tree was brightly decorated, the presents were wrapped with beautiful paper and colorful bows, the meal was over, and the family gathered together to read the Story of the Birth of Jesus, followed by a time of prayer. It was a family tradition.

"Now," said Dad, "let each one of us say a prayer and I will end our prayer-time before we go to bed."

After praying, Susie went to the tree and began to look at each present. She looked at the name on each of them very carefully. The family was curious but quiet.

Finally, Susie, looked at each member of the family and asked, "Where's the present for Jesus? What are we giving Him this year?"

Stunned, the family sat in silence. No one had thought about a gift for Jesus.

Paul has a suggestion for the best gift we could give Christ this Christmas. Writing to the Romans he said, "And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies – your entire self – to God... be a living and holy sacrifice to Him – the kind He will accept."

When we think of giving gifts this Christmas each of us would do well to think first of the gift God wants from us. We need to take Paul's words seriously, and give the most valuable gift – the gift of ourselves – to God!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, trouble our hearts with the words of Paul this season, and carefully and prayerfully consider the gift You want most – surrendered lives! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Romans 12:1I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

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News from the  Associated Press

## Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Bridgewater-Emery 59, Colome 26

Canton 73, Elk Point-Jefferson 65

Wessington Springs 51, Faulkton 48

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Canton 45, Elk Point-Jefferson 39

Flandreau 80, Chester 43

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

### South Dakota State edges North Dakota State 77-75

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Noah Freidel scored 17 points, Alex Arians added 16 and South Dakota State edged North Dakota State 77-75 on Thursday night in a Summit League opener.

Sam Griesel scored a career-high 20 points for North Dakota State (0-5, 0-1). He made a layup with 11 seconds remaining to pull the Bison within one.

Baylor Scheierman added 14 points for South Dakota State (4-2, 1-0). Luke Appel had 11 points.

Maleeck Harden-Hayes added 18 points for the Bison. Rocky Kreuser had 17 points.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and [http://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](http://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

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### K-State dominates No. 22 South Dakota women in 62-53 win

MANHATTAN, Kan. (AP) — Ayoka Lee scored 18 points with nine rebounds and Kansas State took control early in a 62-53 win over No. 22 South Dakota State on Thursday night.

Lee's layup with 7:13 left in the first quarter broke a 6-all tie and the Wildcats (3-2) took control from there. Kansas State went on to outscore the Jackrabbits 12-1 and led 20-7 after the first.

South Dakota State shot 2 of 13 — including 2 of 10 from 3-point range in the first quarter — and Kansas State led by double figures until Myah Selland's 3-pointer with 1:58 remaining reduced the Jackrabbits' deficit to 60-51.

Lee finished 7-for-10 shooting. Christianna Carr scored 12 points and Rachel Ranke 10 for Kansas State. The Jayhawks had a 45-29 rebounding advantage.

Selland led South Dakota State (3-1) with 15 points and Paiton Burckhard had 12. Lindsey Theuninck collected five of the Jackrabbits' 15 steals.

Kansas State moved its record to 6-0 all-time against the Jackrabbits and 43-5 against Summit League members.

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25)

### Rebraca leads North Dakota over South Dakota 75-71

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STIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Filip Rebraca had a career-high 26 points as North Dakota edged past South Dakota 75-71 on Thursday night in a Summit League opener for both teams.

Tyree Ihenacho had 12 points and nine rebounds for North Dakota (1-3). Mitchell Sueker added 11 points and Caleb Nero had 10 points.

Stanley Umude had 30 points for the Coyotes (0-4). Xavier Fuller added 15 points and A.J. Plitzuweit had eight assists.

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## One-day US deaths top 3,000, more than D-Day or 9/11

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and MARION RENAULT Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Just when the U.S. appears on the verge of rolling out a COVID-19 vaccine, the numbers have become gloomier than ever: Over 3,000 American deaths in a single day, more than on D-Day or 9/11. One million new cases in the span of five days. More than 106,000 people in the hospital.

The crisis across the country is pushing medical centers to the breaking point and leaving staff members and public health officials burned out and plagued by tears and nightmares.

All told, the crisis has left more than 290,000 people dead nationwide, with more than 15.5 million confirmed infections.

The U.S. recorded 3,124 deaths Wednesday, the highest one-day total yet, according to Johns Hopkins University. Up until last week, the peak was 2,603 deaths on April 15, when New York City was the epicenter of the nation's outbreak. The latest number is subject to revision up or down.

Wednesday's toll eclipsed American deaths on the opening day of the Normandy invasion during World War II: 2,500, out of some 4,400 Allied dead. And it topped the toll on Sept. 11, 2001: 2,977.

New cases per day are running at all-time highs of over 209,000 on average. And the number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 is setting records nearly every day.

A U.S. government advisory panel on Thursday endorsed widespread use of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to help conquer the outbreak. Depending on how fast the FDA signs off on the panel's recommendation, shots could begin within days, inaugurating the biggest vaccination campaign in U.S. history.

In St. Louis, respiratory therapist Joe Kowalczyk said he has seen entire floors of his hospital fill up with COVID-19 patients, some of them two to a room. He said the supply of ventilators is dwindling, and the inventory is so thin that colleagues on one shift had to ventilate one patient by using a BiPAP machine, similar to the devices used to treat sleep apnea.

When he goes home to sleep during the day at the end of his grueling overnight shifts, he sometimes has nightmares.

"I would be sleeping and I would be working in a unit and things would go completely wrong and I would shock myself awake. They would be very visceral and very vivid," he said. "It would just really spook me."

In South Dakota, Dr. Clay Smith has treated hundreds of COVID-19 patients while working at Monument Health Spearfish Hospital and at Sheridan Memorial Hospital in neighboring Wyoming.

He said patients are becoming stranded in the emergency room for hours while they await beds on the main floor or transfers to larger hospitals. And those transfers are becoming more challenging, with some patients sent as far away as Denver, 400 miles (644 kilometers) from the two hospitals.

"That is a huge burden for families and EMS systems as well when you take an ambulance and send it 400 miles one way, that ambulance is out of the community for essentially a whole day," he said.

Smith added that some patients have gone from thinking "I thought this was a hoax" to "Wow, this is real and I feel terrible." But he also has seen people with COVID-19 who "continue to be disbelievers. It

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is hard to see that.”

“At the end of the day the virus doesn’t care whether you believe in it or not,” he said.

New Orleans’ health director, Dr. Jennifer Avegno, described a recent visit to a hospital where she watched doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists and others risk exposure to the disease in a long, futile attempt to save a dying COVID-19 patient. Some broke down in tears afterward, she said.

“These are seasoned emergency and critical care personnel,” she said. “We do not cry very often — and especially not a number of us all at once.”

In Illinois, where authorities recorded an additional 196 deaths Thursday, Dr. Meeta Shah at Rush University in Chicago said medical workers are already beleaguered and waiting for the “other shoe to drop” from holiday gatherings.

“Every day you think, ‘Today is going to be awful,’” Shah said.

In Virginia, Gov. Ralph Northam, a doctor by training, announced a midnight curfew and expanded mask rules to require face coverings be worn outdoors, not just inside.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf temporarily halted school sports and other extracurricular activities, ordered gyms, theaters and casinos to close and banned indoor dining at restaurants.

In Idaho, Gov. Brad Little didn’t order a statewide mask mandate or enact additional restrictions despite the public health agency announcing that COVID-19 is now the leading cause of death in the state. But the Republican governor warned that if hospitals continue to fill and the state has to initiate “crisis standards of care” — when life-saving treatment would be reserved for patients most likely to survive — car crash victims could be treated in hospital conference rooms and diabetics with infections could be denied beds.

Little was among the first governors to publicly wear a mask in the spring and has encouraged others to do so, but anti-mask sentiment is intense in the conservative state.

In New York City, which was ravaged by the virus in the spring, one doctor sounded a note of relative optimism, saying that at least physicians are more capable of managing the virus now.

“Early in the spring we did not know enough,” said Dr. Jolion McGreevy, who directs Mount Sinai Hospital’s emergency department. “We really are operating from a place of knowledge, now — which is a big leap from where we were in the spring.”

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Associated Press National Writer Jocelyn Noveck in New York contributed to this report. Associated Press journalists from around the globe contributed to this report.

## **Noem nods Arizona’s U.S. Supreme Court election law appeal**

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem on Thursday announced she was supporting an appeal by the Arizona Attorney General before the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn a federal court’s ruling that found some Arizona voting laws disadvantaged minority voters.

The governor’s move allows her to wade into the national hot-button issue of election security. She has courted a national profile among conservatives this year and is considered by some to be a potential GOP presidential nominee in 2024.

The case stems from a 2016 lawsuit brought by the Democratic National Committee against Arizona, stating that two of its election laws violated the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits racial discrimination in the election process. A federal court eventually struck down the Arizona laws, which required election officials to throw out ballots cast at the wrong precinct and made it illegal for campaigns or community groups to collect ballots for delivery to polling places, a practice that critics call “ballot-harvesting.”

A federal court ruled in January that those laws had a disproportionate impact on minority voters, but Republican Attorney General Mark Brnovich appealed that ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court. He argues the laws are reasonable and protect against election fraud.

“The 2020 election has shaken the American people’s faith in the integrity of the electoral process,” Noem said in a statement.



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She explained that even though Arizona's laws are different than her state's, the case protects the ability for states to shape election laws. Both Arizona and South Dakota have long-faced complaints from Native American groups that their election processes make it more difficult for tribal members to vote.

Noem appeared to acknowledge Democrat Joe Biden as the winner of the presidential election in a budget address earlier this week, saying that she has concerns about his administration.

Her spokesman, Ian Fury, said she was discussing the potential of Biden becoming president and has not accepted that Trump lost the election.

This story has been corrected to show that the name of the organization that sued Arizona was the Democratic National Committee, not the Democratic National Convention.

## South Dakota lawmaker contracts COVID-19 after Pierre trip

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota state lawmaker has tested positive for the coronavirus days after visiting Gov. Kristi Noem's mansion and attending the governor's budget speech at the Legislature.

Sen. Helene Duhamel, a Republican from Rapid City, became ill and tested positive on Wednesday, the day after she was in Pierre meeting with lawmakers, the Argus Leader reported. Duhamel also attended a dinner on Monday night at the governor's residence and posed in a photo with Noem and other female lawmakers at the Capitol. None wore masks in the photo, which Noem posted on social media.

Ian Fury, the governor's spokesman, declined to provide when Noem was last tested for the coronavirus but said she was not in close contact with Duhamel.

"She's self-monitoring for symptoms, as she does every day, and she feels great," Fury said.

Duhamel, 58, did not immediately return a request for comment. She is also the public information officer for the Pennington County Sheriff's Department.

The Legislature is scheduled to convene on Jan. 12. Several lawmakers have reported bouts with the coronavirus, including Rep. Bob Glanzer, who was among the first in the state to die from the virus in April.

Health officials reported 30 more deaths from the virus on Thursday, bringing the overall death toll to 1,177 since the start of the pandemic. The state has recorded the nation's ninth-highest rate of COVID-19 deaths per capita, according to Johns Hopkins researchers.

The number of new cases and hospitalizations has declined in recent weeks, but the state still had the nation's fourth-highest number of new cases per capita over the last two weeks, according to Johns Hopkins. Roughly one out of every 74 people tested positive in that time. The Department of Health reported 704 new cases Thursday.

Meanwhile, one of the state's largest health care systems announced plans for a \$28 million hospital wing devoted to mental health care in Sioux Falls. Avera Health said it was making the expansion in part to prepare for mental health issues stemming from the pandemic, though there was already a shortage of psychiatric resources in the region. It will also have facilities for youth and psychiatric urgent care.

"The next big wave of stress will be to mental health," said Walter Panziner, a trustee with the Helmsley Charitable Trust, which is donating \$13 million to the project.

## Proposal includes \$12 million for fair livestock complex

HURON, S.D. (AP) — Tucked in Gov. Kristi Noem's proposed state budget is \$12 million for a new livestock building on the South Dakota state fairgrounds in Huron.

The new livestock complex would be 200,000 square feet (1.86 hectares), which is double the amount of space of the previous facility that caught fire in October.

Noem says the space could attract regional and national events to Huron.

"We're going to use this as an opportunity to rebuild for the future," Noem said. "It's time to imagine the opportunities that we can have, and all the new memories that can be made in this spot"

The \$19 million livestock facility would have enough space for two rodeo areas and enough space for

both open class and 4-H beef cattle, the Argus Leader reported.

Besides \$12 million in state funding, \$3 million would come from insurance proceeds and \$4 million is to be raised in corporate and individual donations.

Noem said the building could also be used for other types of events, including gun and sports shows. Hunter Roberts, South Dakota's agriculture secretary, said the project could be ready for the State Fair in 2022.

## Argentina's lower house approves draft legalizing abortion

By ALMUDENA CALATRAVA Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES (AP) — Lawmakers in Argentina's lower house on Friday passed a bill that would legalize abortion in most cases, a proposal from President Alberto Fernández in response to long-sought demands from women's rights activists.

The bill, which needs approval from the country's Senate in a debate expected before the end of the year, allows for voluntary abortions to be carried out up to the 14th week of pregnancy.

The proposed law was approved in a 131-117 vote with six abstentions after a marathon debate that extended from Thursday into the early hours of Friday morning.

Demonstrators in favor of decriminalizing abortion, who had spent the night outside the congress building in Buenos Aires, erupted with joy and embraced each other as they listened to the parliamentary speaker reading the vote's results on screens. Many of them wore face masks in the green color that has become a symbol for their movement.

Hundreds of meters (yards) away, not far from the parliament building, hundreds of opponents dressed in light blue and carrying the national flag deplored the result, with some shedding tears.

Latin America has some of the world's most restrictive abortion laws. Mexico City, Cuba and Uruguay are among the few places in the region where women can undergo abortions during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy regardless of the circumstances.

Currently, many women who have an abortion in Argentina, as well as people who assist them with the procedure, can face prosecution. Exemptions are only considered in cases of rape or if pregnancy poses a risk to the mother's health.

While the bill passed the lower house, the outlook is less clear in the country's Senate. Two years ago, during the administration of more conservative President Mauricio Macri, the upper house voted against a similar bill to legalize abortion after it was narrowly approved by the lower house.

Ahead of Thursday's debate, the Roman Catholic Church had appealed to legislators for "a second of reflection on what respect for life means," echoing the position of Pope Francis, an Argentine, that abortion is part of today's "throwaway culture" that doesn't respect the dignity of the unborn, the weak or elderly.

Before getting elected one year ago, Fernández had promised to push for making abortion voluntary and cost-free.

Several thousand women seeking abortions have died during unsafe, clandestine procedures in Argentina since 1983, and about 38,000 women are hospitalized every year because of botched procedures conducted in secret, according to the government.

## Aid groups say staffers killed in Ethiopia's Tigray conflict

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — International aid groups said Friday that at least four staff members have been killed in the conflict in Ethiopia's Tigray region, while Ethiopia and a frustrated United Nations aired differing views on a growing humanitarian crisis as food and other supplies run out for millions of people.

The Danish Refugee Council said its three staffers killed last month had worked as guards at a project site. "Sadly, due to the lack of communications and ongoing insecurity in the region, it has not yet been possible to reach their families," it said.

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Separately, the International Rescue Committee said it was still working to confirm the events "that led to the death of our colleague" in the Hitsats refugee camp in Shire.

The Tigray region remains largely sealed off from the outside world as worried humanitarian organizations warn of growing hunger, attacks on refugees and dwindling medicine and other supplies more than a month after fighting erupted between Ethiopia's government and the now-fugitive Tigray one after a months-long struggle over power.

"We have hundreds of colleagues on the ground and urgently call on all parties to the conflict to protect all civilians in Tigray," U.N. humanitarian spokesman Saviano Abreu tweeted after the deaths were announced.

Ethiopia's government has made clear it intends to manage the process of delivering aid to Tigray, and it has rejected "interference" as fighting is reported to be continuing despite its declaration of victory. On Friday it said it had begun delivering aid to areas in Tigray under its control, including Shire and the Tigray capital, Mekele, a city of a half-million people.

"Suggestions that humanitarian assistance is impeded due to active military combat in several cities and surrounding areas within the Tigray region is untrue and undermines the critical work undertaken by the National Defense Forces to stabilize the region from the attacks waged by the belligerent clique," Abiy's office said. Sporadic gunfire, it said, "need not be misconstrued as active conflict."

The Ethiopian and Tigray governments each regard the other as illegitimate, the result of months of growing friction since Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018 and sidelined the once-dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front.

Thousands of people, including civilians, are thought to have been killed in the fighting, which began Nov. 4 and has threatened to destabilize the Horn of Africa. Some 6 million people live in Tigray, and about 1 million are now thought to be displaced.

The impact on civilians has been "appalling," the U.N. human rights chief said this week.

The International Rescue Committee called for an immediate cease-fire by all parties after "an intense bout of conflict."

The aid group works to assist 96,000 refugees from Eritrea who shelter in camps near the border with that reclusive country. Food in those camps reportedly ran out days ago, and thousands of the refugees have left in search of help.

Frustration among humanitarian groups is widespread as supply-laden trucks have waited for weeks at the Tigray borders. Ethiopia's government says it is responsible for ensuring the security of humanitarian efforts — though the conflict and related ethnic tensions have left many ethnic Tigrayans wary of government forces.

The United Nations has stressed the need for neutral, unfettered access to a region where fears of ethnic tensions remain high.

"Food rations for displaced people in Tigray have run out," the U.N. humanitarian office tweeted Friday. "We reiterate our urgent call for unconditional and safe humanitarian access to the affected regions. People in need are still not able to access any assistance."

This week, Ethiopia's government said its forces shot at and briefly detained U.N. staffers conducting their first security assessment in Tigray, a crucial step in delivering aid. Ethiopia said the staffers had broken through checkpoints in an attempt to go where it wasn't allowed.

Meanwhile, nearly 50,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan as refugees and now live in strained conditions in a remote region with few resources.

## EU leaders agree to reduce emissions after all-night talks

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders reached a hard-fought deal Friday to cut the bloc's net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by the end of the decade compared with 1990 levels, avoiding a hugely embarrassing deadlock ahead of a U.N. climate meeting this weekend.

Following night-long discussions at their two-day summit in Brussels, the 27 member states approved

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the EU executive commission's proposal to toughen the bloc's intermediate target on the way to climate neutrality by mid-century, after a group of reluctant, coal-reliant countries finally agreed to support the improved goal.

"Europe is the leader in the fight against climate change," tweeted EU Council president Charles Michel as daylight broke over the EU capital city. "We decided to cut our greenhouse gas emissions of at least 55% by 2030."

Five years after the Paris agreement, the EU wants to be a leader in the fight against global warming. Yet the bloc's heads of state and government were unable to agree on the new target the last time they met in October, mainly because of financial concerns by eastern nations seeking more clarity about how to fund and handle the green transition.

But the long-awaited deal on a massive long-term budget and coronavirus recovery clinched Thursday by EU leaders swung the momentum.

Large swaths of the record-high 1.82 trillion-euro package are set to pour into programs and investments designed to help the member states, regions and sectors particularly affected by the green transition, which are in need of a deep economic and social transformation. EU leaders have agreed that 30% of the package should be used to support the transition.

Still, agreeing on common language was not an easy task. Negotiations were punctuated throughout the night by intense discussions in the plenary session and multiple chats in smaller groups on the sidelines.

Another delay in revising the EU's current 40% emission cuts objective for 2030 would have been particularly embarrassing before the virtual Climate Ambition Summit marking five years since the Paris deal, and leaders worked to the wire to seal a deal.

The event on Saturday will be co-hosted by the U.K. with the United Nations and France. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced last week he wants the U.K. to cut greenhouse gas emissions by at least 68% from 1990 levels by 2030 — a more ambitious goal than the EU's.

Poland, which last year didn't commit to the EU's 2050 climate neutrality goal, and other eastern countries, including the Czech Republic and Hungary, largely depend on coal for their energy needs. They considered it unfair that all member states should be submitted to the same ambition without considering their respective energy mixes.

To win their approval, member states agreed that the new target should be delivered collectively. According to the Belgian Prime minister's office, "leaders agreed that the cuts will be first achieved in sectors and countries where there is still plenty of room for improvement."

In addition, the European Commission will take into account specific national situations when drawing up the measures. A progress report will be submitted to the European Council in the spring.

The accord also left the door open to member states to use gas or nuclear power as they drop fossil fuels. EU leaders agreed last year that nuclear energy would be part of the bloc's solution to making its economy carbon neutral, and they reiterated Friday that they would respect member states' rights to decide on their energy mix and to choose the most appropriate technologies to reach the goal.

According to a French official who was not authorized to speak publicly about the meeting, Poland also obtained guarantees that the EU's Emissions Trading System — a cap-and-trade scheme for industries to buy carbon credits covering about 40% of the EU's greenhouse gas emissions — would be revamped. Poland wants the reform of the system to redirect more revenues to the poorer EU countries.

World leaders agreed five years ago in Paris to keep the global warming increase to below 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit), and ideally no more than 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F) by the end of the century. Under the Paris accord, countries are required to submit updated climate targets by the end of this year.

Greenpeace and other environmental groups have said the improved EU target is insufficient to properly tackle climate change.

"To increase the chances of limiting global heating to 1.5°C and avoid the worst effects of climate breakdown, Greenpeace is calling for at least a 65% cut in EU emissions from polluting sectors by 2030," the



NGO said.

Climate Action Network Europe regretted that the revised “net” target includes carbon sinks like reforestation, meaning that emitting sectors will need to decarbonize less to reach the new goal.

“As the Commission indicates itself in its 2030 Climate Target Plan, if the EU is successful in implementing the Commission’s biodiversity, carbon removals could represent up to 5% of emissions. In this case the real emissions reduction target would be as low as 50%,” the NGO said.

EU leaders also encouraged the commission to propose a carbon tax at the bloc’s borders for countries that did not regulate CO2 emissions as strictly as the EU does.

Follow AP’s climate coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/climate>

## **AP Interview: India vaccine maker sees virus as wake-up call**

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic is a “wake up call” for governments to invest more in health care, says Adar Poonawalla, CEO of the Serum Institute of India, the world’s largest manufacturer of vaccines.

The Serum Institute has taken on a vital role as the largest company licensed to manufacture the Oxford University-AstraZeneca coronavirus vaccine. It is increasing its production capacity by the end of 2021 to over 2.5 billion doses a year to cope with future disease outbreaks, Poonawalla said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press.

Poonawalla’s company now has an annual capacity of 1.5 billion doses. That is more than the billion doses that China, home to the most vaccine makers in the world, says it manufactures in a year.

Looking beyond the pandemic, he said he anticipates more diseases jumping from animal to human hosts, driving huge demand for vaccines, so the extra capacity is likely to be useful in coming decades.

“I think (the demand) is going to keep growing even more exponentially, compared to the last five or ten years,” Poonawalla said Wednesday.

Loss of forests and human incursions into wild habitats create more opportunities for such pathogens to make the jump. That was true of COVID-19 and other illnesses such as SARS, MERS and HIV-AIDS.

Existing research indicates that India, with its high population density and biodiverse forests, is among the most likely places for the emergence of such new diseases.

For now, the Serum Institute is focused on the coronavirus. It has committed to supplying the Oxford University-AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to developing nations through COVAX, an ambitious global initiative to distribute COVID-19 vaccines to countries worldwide.

Most of the vaccines that will be manufactured in the coming year have been reserved by richer nations, so Serum Institute’s role will be “pivotal”, said Anna Marriott, a health policy adviser at Oxfam UK. “Where else might the vaccine supply come from?” she asked.

So far, the company has made 50 million doses of the Oxford University-AstraZeneca vaccine. It plans to make up to 100 million doses each month, starting next year, Poonawalla said. The company also has a deal with U.S.-based Novavax for their experimental COVID-19 vaccine but has not yet begun making it. India has indicated that it wants 300 million doses by July. After that, Serum Institute will be distributing vaccines to the world.

“It’ll still take two months (after it is licensed) before large volumes roll out,” he said.

In April, before it was known whether any vaccine could work against the coronavirus, Serum bet on several vaccine candidates and invested in building its capacity.

Like many Indian companies, it is family-run, founded in 1966 by Poonawalla’s father and its current chairman, Cyrus Poonawalla, and so had leeway to take that kind of risk.

The younger Poonawalla said the company faced a “moral dilemma” over waiting to be sure a vaccine might succeed and risking millions of lives.

But the pandemic has highlighted the “power of vaccines” since they generally are affordable and can

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help prevent expensive hospitalization, he said. "It's a cheap and good solution to health care."

Countries spend too little on health care infrastructure, mistakenly viewing it as less important for the economy and political optics than investing in defense or space programs that highlight their growing might. That is particularly true, Poonawalla said, of developing nations like India, "Whether it's hospitals, drug discovery (or) vaccines."

The pandemic should lead to greater support for research and health systems,. "I hope at least," he added

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Associated Press writer Maria Cheng in Toronto contributed to this report.

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The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## 'Such is life': In virus wards, death is a foe but a fact

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — During their daily morning round of the intensive care unit, hospital staffers and medical students pause outside room No. 10, abruptly emptied of the patient who lost his nearly month-long battle against COVID-19 the previous evening.

The man died at 6:12 p.m., the medic leading the briefing tells the group. There is a short hush. And then they walk on.

Even for ICU workers for whom death is a constant — and never more so than this year — witnessing the loss of a fellow human being to the virus can be a churn of emotions.

For their own good and for their patients, they try to remain detached. They have coping mechanisms. Meditation or talking helps for some. For others, tending the body of a patient who could not be saved is part of moving on. Because the living require their attention, and there will always be other deaths to deal with, simply functioning requires not becoming overwhelmed.

But calibrating their relationship with death isn't easy. Some worry they could be seen as callous if they're too matter-of-fact or, conversely, that emotions could hurt them if they get too involved. Some days they manage better than others. Sometimes they feel the need to confide to the ICU's in-house psychologist, in a rage, in tears, in need of her hot tea and understanding.

This is what it is to encounter death, over and over, in the COVID-poisoned days of the 2020 pandemic.

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"Seeing people dying one after the other after you've spent hours and hours in a room, doing everything you can, really, to get them out of there is very, very tough," says Melanie Serra, a paramedic at the ICU ward in the Bichat Hospital in Paris. It was the first hospital outside Asia to report a COVID-19 death, back in February.

It was also where the ICU patient in room No. 10 died on Dec. 1. His was one of 775 virus deaths in France that day, adding to a national death toll now topping 56,000 and the worldwide count of more than 1.5 million dead.

The man was alive on the first of two days that Associated Press journalists spent immersed with the ICU staff. But by the time the overnight shift handed back to the day crew on the second morning, room No. 10 was empty and had been disinfected twice. The vacated bed had fresh linen. The TV monitor that had displayed the patient's vital signs was black and blank.

He was, quite simply, gone. But not from the thoughts of those who worked hard to heal him. That morning, during his meditation that helps him process emotions from the ICU, paramedic Bertrand Bris-saud set aside time to think about the patient, "a little positive thought."

As one of the man's carers, Brissaud had been more physically intimate with him than many people are with their friends. The former fire officer was among the last staff members who had suited up in protective gear and tended the man in his final hours, rolling him onto his side and massaging his back,

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shoulders, buttocks and heels to slow the buildup of bed sores.

But because the patient had been maintained for weeks in a coma, they never exchanged words.

Brissaud knew the man was originally from Egypt, lived in France, was a father. His admission details attached on the door of room No. 10 with a sticker marked "COVID+" showed that he would have celebrated his 64th birthday in December. Beyond that, the patient remained somewhat of an unknown to the carers who became so intimately acquainted with his body.

"These deaths are so quick, happening in front of you. You get a little spasm of heartache, a 'Oh, he's gone,'" Brissaud says. "There is all this work you have to do in yourself to understand that we do our best but that we are not God."

In the man's final hours, the ICU staff sensed the end was close. But nurses and paramedics still tended to him as if it wasn't. They rolled him onto his front to aid breathing and later rolled him onto his back. They checked and readjusted tubes going in and out of his body, hooked to machines that kept him alive but which, ultimately, could not arrest his inexorable decline.

"He is not doing well," nurse Hyad Boina said after treating the patient on what proved his final morning. Boina, 35, said that if the man's family called for an update, he would feel obliged to say that "it's very serious and that the patient is between life and death."

Making her rounds, the unit's psychologist, Emmanuelle Busch, sought out one of the staffers who worked for weeks with the man and was reassured to find that she was doing fine. The man's age and the fact that his death wasn't unexpected made it easier for his carers, Busch determined.

Some other deaths during the pandemic hit harder. She says the virus death of a young lung-transplant recipient made one ICU paramedic "very angry." Another came to her "in tears, saying, 'They are all dying. What we are doing is useless.'"

But as well as being a foe, death is also accepted. "It's never pleasant," Busch says, "but nor is it necessarily experienced as a failure."

Serra, the 32-year-old paramedic who also treated the man in room No. 10, says that seeing patients "slowly go downhill without being able to do anything is very, very complicated" emotionally. She tries to protect herself by not dwelling on her experiences but also says: "The hardest thing is losing a patient. That's the truth. Even if you distance yourself."

"We can't allow ourselves to be affected by all the deaths because, otherwise, how do you cope? We'd fall into depression and stop working," she says. "With this gentleman, because of how his condition evolved, we'd been expecting it for several days. It is very hard and very cold but we have no choice but to say to ourselves, 'So be it. Such is life.'"

But in saying so out loud, she also frets that "I will come across as a monster."

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At the end, the monitors that show vital signs of all ICU patients — the markers of existence, rendered in colored numbers and graphs of peaks and troughs — signaled that the man in Room No. 10 had lost his battle.

"His heart just stopped beating. We saw the flatlines, like in the movies," says Brissaud. He put on a mask, went into the room, and switched off all the machines, the ventilator, the mechanized syringes and the alarms.

He says he then made way for other colleagues, including Boina, the nurse, who prepared the body for its onward journey to the morgue. They got rid of the tubes, catheters and dressings, and they washed and dried the body.

"They had spent a lot of time caring for him, so they wanted to bathe the body to help him on his way," Brissaud says. "It's our way of being involved in the final process. It's very important in the ICU ward. We often work with people who have died. Through the funeral washing, we finish the job."

"It permits us to mourn — to say, 'It's over. He is dead.'"

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## **Hong Kong media tycoon Jimmy Lai charged under security law**

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong pro-democracy activist and media tycoon Jimmy Lai has been charged under the city's national security law, amid a widening crackdown on dissent, according to local media reports.

Lai, who founded the Apple Daily tabloid, was charged on suspicion of colluding with foreign forces and endangering national security, local broadcaster TVB reported Friday. He is the most high-profile person out of more than two dozen charged under the law since it was implemented in June.

He is scheduled to appear in court on Dec. 12, and could face a maximum punishment of life imprisonment.

Police said in a statement that they arrested a 73-year-old man under the national security law, but did not name him.

Lai was arrested under the national security law in August. He and two executives of Next Digital, the company that operates the Apple Daily newspaper, were later charged with fraud over accusations that they violated lease terms on office space the company. He was denied bail earlier this month.

Beijing imposed the national security law in response to protests in Hong Kong that began in June 2019 over a proposed extradition law and expanded to include demands for greater democracy in the former British colony.

The legislation outlaws secession, subversion, terrorism, and collusion with foreign forces to intervene in Hong Kong's internal affairs. In certain cases, those charged under the national security law could also face trial in mainland China, where the legal system is highly opaque.

The sweeping legislation prompted more public protests and led to complaints that Beijing is violating the autonomy promised to Hong Kong when was handed over to China from Britain in 1997. Critics have said the law is also damaging Hong Kong's status as a business center.

Apple Daily criticized the law on its front page on July 1, calling it the "final nail in the coffin" of the territory's autonomy.

Lai has advocated for other countries to take a harsher stance on China, and last year he traveled to the U.S. to meet with Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to discuss the proposed extradition bill.

He was also arrested in February and April on charges of taking part in unauthorized protests. He also faces charges of joining an unauthorized vigil marking the anniversary of the June 4, 1989, crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

## **Obama reunion? Biden fills Cabinet with former WH leaders**

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden is getting the old gang back together.

Increasingly deep into the process of selecting Cabinet members and other senior staff, the incoming Biden administration has a distinctly Obama feel.

There's Denis McDonough, former President Barack Obama's chief of staff who Biden announced on Thursday would be nominated as the secretary of veterans affairs. Susan Rice, Obama's former national security adviser, was named the director of Biden's White House Domestic Policy Council.

That's on top of Biden already tapping Obama's agriculture secretary, Tom Vilsack, to head the department once again, former Secretary of State John Kerry to serve as special envoy on climate and Kerry's Obama-era deputy Antony Blinken to lead the State Department. Jeff Zients, who did stints as acting Office of Management and Budget director and a top economic adviser in the Obama White House, will return as Biden's coronavirus response coordinator.

With the exception of President Donald Trump, a political outsider when he was elected in 2016, recent new presidents have relied heavily on pools of talent that had cut their teeth in their parties' previous ad-



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ministrations to fill out their own government. But Biden, who is assuming the presidency in the midst of the worst public health crisis in a century and a flagging economy, is putting a greater premium on past experience and, as a result, has gone frequently back to the Obama well as he fills out his government.

"Many of the folks who are returning are returning because they believe in public service and know that after four turbulent and destructive years and a brutal pandemic, this is a particularly important time to serve," said David Axelrod, who served as a senior adviser to Obama. "Their experience is valuable. Their values and outlooks are consonant with (Biden's). The challenge is to look forward and not back and innovate beyond what's simply been broken."

The swelling ranks of Obama officials in Biden's orbit seem to have some limits.

Former Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, a three-term former congressman who served as Obama's first White House chief of staff, seems increasingly unlikely to win a Cabinet post. He had lobbied for the yet-to-be-filled transportation secretary slot but has faced criticism for his handling as mayor of the 2014 deadly police shooting of Laquan McDonald, a Black teen shot 16 times by a white officer.

Still, the reliance on Obama veterans carries risks. For one, some of the nominees represent the Washington establishment that Trump dubbed the "swamp" during his 2016 campaign and are still distrusted by some Republicans.

Progressive Democrats, meanwhile, view the Obama era with frustration, believing that those in power acted too cautiously at a time that called for bold change. They're pressing Biden to focus in particular on the diversity of his Cabinet after several early picks were white men.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a New York Democrat, questioned earlier this week "the overall message" that Biden is aiming to send with his Cabinet picks. And the left-leaning climate group Sunrise Movement on Thursday called the pick of Vilsack for agriculture secretary over Rep. Marcia Fudge, an Ohio Democrat who was looking to become the agency's first Black secretary, as a "slap in the face to Black Americans."

Biden did nominate Fudge to serve as housing and urban development secretary and retired four-star Army general Lloyd Austin to serve as defense secretary. If confirmed, he would be the first Black Pentagon chief.

The president-elect's allies say he's making good on his pledge to fill out a Cabinet that reflects the diversity of the nation while putting a premium on the ability of his picks to hit the ground running.

"Each of these nominees are forward-thinking, crisis-tested and experienced, and they are ready to quickly use the levers of government to make meaningful differences in the lives of Americans and help govern on day one," the Biden transition team said in a statement.

Former aides to Vilsack said he felt the need to return to duty, in part out of loyalty to Biden and to attempt to repair a bedraggled agency gutted with career staff departures and program cuts during the Trump administration.

Rice, a longtime Democratic foreign policy expert who was in the running to serve as Biden's vice president, will switch gears in her domestic policy role to help shape the administration's approach on immigration, health care and racial inequality. The appointment of Rice is expected to lift the prominence of the role.

McDonough, who served through most of Obama's eight years as National Security Council chief of staff, deputy national security adviser and finally as White House chief of staff, was plucked to lead the sprawling Department of Veterans Affairs.

With a thinned majority in the House and a closely divided Senate, leaning on former Obama world aides to fill senior White House positions will be a necessity for Biden world for at least the first two years of his term, said University of Chicago political scientist William Howell.

"If you're a liberal looking for sweeping change, you're going to be disappointed, both in terms of its politics and the ambition of his agenda," Howell said. "The Cabinet he's putting together is consistent of both the hand he's been dealt and moderate position that delivered him the nomination."

Mara Rudman, a senior adviser on national security affairs in the Obama and Clinton administrations, said the tug back to government of her former colleagues reflects an acknowledgement of the enormity

of the public health and economic crises. But, she added, there's also a desire to repair the breach in public trust caused by Trump's norm-shattering four-year term.

"This is a moment," said Rudman, who is now executive vice president for policy at the liberal Center for American Progress. "Obviously, there is getting the vaccine distribution and pandemic relief out to the public. But there's also an urgency on a whole host of fronts showing that American institutions can deliver for the American people."

Josh Earnest, who served as Obama's White House press secretary, said Biden's picks reflect the immediacy of now.

"The problems that each of these agencies is faced with solving are so significant and consequential," Earnest said. "There needs to be a focus on what we can do now."

Associated Press writers Michael Balsamo in Washington and Thomas Beaumont in Des Moines, Iowa, contributed to this report.

## US carries out rare execution during presidential transition

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (AP) — The Trump administration Thursday carried out its ninth federal execution of the year in what has been a first series of executions during a presidential lame-duck period in 130 years, putting to death a Texas street-gang member in the slayings of a religious couple from Iowa more than two decades ago.

Four more federal executions, including one Friday, are planned in the weeks before President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration. One was carried out in late November.

The case of Brandon Bernard, who received a lethal injection of phenobarbital at a U.S. prison in Terre Haute, Indiana, was a rare execution of a person who was in his teens when his crime was committed.

Several high-profile figures, including reality TV star Kim Kardashian West, had appealed to President Donald Trump to commute Bernard's sentence to life in prison.

With witnesses looking on from behind a glass barrier separating them from a pale-green death chamber, the 40-year-old Bernard was pronounced dead at 9:27 p.m. Eastern time.

He directed his last words to the family of the couple he played a role in killing, speaking with striking calm for someone who knew he was about to die.

"I'm sorry," he said, lifting his head and looking at witness-room windows. "That's the only words that I can say that completely capture how I feel now and how I felt that day."

As he spoke, he showed no outward signs of fear or distress, speaking lucidly and naturally. He spoke for more than three minutes, saying he had been waiting for this chance to say he was sorry — not only to the victims' family, but also for the pain he caused his own family.

Referring to his part in the killing, he said: "I wish I could take it all back, but I can't."

Bernard was 18 when he and four other teenagers abducted and robbed Todd and Stacie Bagley on their way from a Sunday service in Killeen, Texas, during which Bernard doused their car with lighter fluid and set it on fire with their bodies in the back trunk.

Federal executions were resumed by Trump in July after a 17-year hiatus despite coronavirus outbreak in U.S. prisons.

Todd Bagley's mother, Georgia, spoke to reporters within 30 minutes of the execution, saying she wanted to thank Trump, Attorney General William Barr and others at the Justice Department.

"Without this process," she said, reading from a statement, "my family would not have the closure needed to move on in life." She called the killings a "senseless act of unnecessary evil."

But she stopped reading from the prepared text and became emotional when she spoke about the apologies from Bernard before he died Friday and from an accomplice, Christopher Vialva, the ringleader of the group who shot the Bagley's in the head before the car was burned. He was executed in September.

"The apology and remorse ... helped very much heal my heart," she said, beginning to cry and then

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recomposing herself. "I can very much say: I forgive them."

Earlier inside the death chamber, Bernard lay on a cross-shaped gurney with IV lines running into both arms. He looked back when a U.S. marshal picked up a phone and asked if there were any reasons not to proceed. Bernard reacted calmly as the marshall put down the phone and said the execution could proceed.

Bernard didn't exhibit the labored breathing and constant twitching of others executed previously had. A minute after the lethal injection, his eyes slowly closed and he barely moved again.

About 20 minutes later, faint white blotches appeared on his skin and someone entered from a chamber door, listened to his heart, felt for a pulse, then walked out. Seconds later, an official said Bernard was dead.

Alfred Bourgeois, a 56-year-old Louisiana truck driver, is set to die Friday for killing his 2-year-old daughter by repeatedly slamming her head into a truck's windows and dashboard. Bourgeois' lawyers alleged he was intellectually disabled and therefore ineligible for the death penalty, but several courts said evidence didn't support that claim.

Before Bernard's execution, Kardashian West tweeted that she'd spoken to him earlier: "Hardest call I've ever had. Brandon, selfless as always, was focused on his family and making sure they are ok. He told me not to cry because our fight isn't over."

Just before the execution was scheduled, Bernard's lawyers filed papers with the Supreme Court seeking to halt the execution, but the high court denied the request, clearing the way for the execution to proceed.

Bernard had been crocheting in prison and even launched a death-row crocheting group in which inmates have shared patterns for making sweaters, blankets and hats, said Ashley Kincaid Eve, an anti-death penalty activist.

Federal executions during a presidential transfer of power also are rare, especially during a transition from a death-penalty proponent to a president-elect like Biden opposed to capital punishment. The last time executions occurred in a lame-duck period was when Grover Cleveland was president in the 1890s.

Defense attorneys have argued in court and in a petition for clemency from Trump that Bernard was a low-ranking member of the group. They say both Bagleys were likely dead before Bernard set the car on fire, a claim that conflicts with government testimony at trial.

The case prompted calls for Trump to intervene, including from one prosecutor at his 2000 trial who now says racial bias may have influenced the nearly all-white jury's imposition of a death sentence against Bernard, who is Black. Several jurors have also since said publicly that they regret not opting for life in prison instead.

The teenagers approached the Bagleys in the afternoon on June 21, 1999, and asked them for a lift after they stopped at a convenience store — planning all along to rob the couple. After the Bagleys agreed, Vialva, the oldest of the group at 19, pulled a gun and forced them into the trunk.

The Bagleys, both of whom were in their 20s, spoke through an opening in the back seat and urged their kidnapers to accept Jesus as they drove around for hours trying to use the Bagleys' ATM cards. After the teens pulled to the side of the road, Vialva walked to the back and shot the Bagleys in the head.

The central question in the decision to sentence Bernard to death was whether Vialva's gunshots or the fire set by Bernard killed the Bagleys.

Trial evidence showed Todd Bagley likely died instantly. But a government expert said Stacie Bagley had soot in her airway, indicating smoke inhalation and not the gunshot killed her. Defense attorneys have said that assertion wasn't proven. They've also said Bernard believed both Bagleys were dead and that he feared the consequences of refusing the order of the higher ranking Vialva to burn the car to destroy evidence.

The first series of federal executions over the summer were of white men. Four of the five inmates set to die before Biden's Jan. 20 inauguration are Black men. The fifth is a white woman who would be the first female inmate executed by the federal government in nearly six decades.

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Follow Michael Tarm on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/mtarm>

**California's health order falling on many deaf ears**

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By AMY TAXIN, DAMIAN DOVARGANES and OLGA R. RODRIGUEZ Associated Press  
MANHATTAN BEACH, Calif. (AP) — In the Southern California oceanside city of Manhattan Beach, one arm of government is urging residents to stay home except for essential needs while another is encouraging them to get out and shop and even providing places where they can sit down to relax, eat takeout and watch the sun set on the Pacific.

It's one example of confusing messages from governments as most of California is under a broad shutdown order that includes an overnight curfew to try to stem record-breaking coronavirus cases that threaten to overwhelm the hospital system.

While state and county health officials are pleading with residents to stay home and only mingle with those in their household, the order allows all retailers to remain open with 20% capacity and encourages people to get outside to exercise.

Manhattan Beach Mayor Suzanne Hadley said her community saw an opportunity to aid local businesses while meeting the stipulations of the order. The solution: repurposing city-owned patio areas set up to allow restaurants to serve diners outdoors -- which no longer is allowed -- into "public seating areas" where downtown shoppers can relax.

"Shopping for a Christmas gift, buying a to-go meal, watching a sunset are allowed, and even the outdoor activities are encouraged by the state," she said.

Manhattan Beach is in Los Angeles County, the state's largest with 10 million residents and disproportionately large numbers of California's coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

On Thursday, when the state set a one-day record of 220 deaths, county Health Director Barbara Ferrer said if people don't follow orders to stay home except for essential needs and not mingle with people outside their households "we are running a risk that could have catastrophic consequences, with hospitals becoming overwhelmed and severely ill patients not able to get the care they need."

"We need to get back to what we did in the spring, at the beginning of the pandemic, when few people went out and we took seriously our responsibility to care for each other," she said.

The shutdown order by Gov. Gavin Newsom took effect last weekend, but it seems to be having a minimal effect on daily life. It allows many more activities than the March shutdown that made the state a model on how to respond to the pandemic.

Marissa Englund was among about two dozen hair stylists who protested Thursday outside the office of Dr. Matt Willis, Marin County's public health officer. Hair salons are among the businesses shuttered by the latest health order.

"They're basically contradicting themselves because they're telling everybody to shelter in place and stay at home as much as you can but go ahead and go Christmas shopping," Englund said.

Back in March, all retail in California was closed. The normally clogged streets of San Francisco were so desolate that for weeks birds could be heard singing at all times of day.

But their tweets have long been replaced by the din of cars and delivery trucks racing down major thoroughfares. The parking lot of a Target store in the city was almost full one afternoon this week with shoppers going in and out and no one verifying the store was operating at the required 20% capacity.

In Southern California's Huntington Beach, people were lifting weights at a fitness center that is supposed to be closed under the order.

Dr. Scott Morrow, public health officer for San Mateo County, said in a letter to residents he decided against joining other San Francisco Bay Area counties in a voluntary shutdown because he doesn't think the new order "will do much good" if no one enforces the rules.

He also said he had no knowledge of data that suggests business activities restricted by the state have had a major impact on transmission of the virus.

"What I believe now is the power and authority to control this pandemic lies primarily in your hands, not mine," Morrow wrote.

Susan Snycerski, a psychology professor at San Jose State University, said pandemic fatigue is setting in and may be contributing to less people heeding health orders. But conflicting messages at the federal,



state, and local levels also are having an impact.

"We've been asked to do something that we've never had to do in our entire lives and to do that we need to have a clear message, we need to have models in terms of watching people engage in the right behaviors — and we haven't had that for the most part," she said.

Englund said it has been frustrating to see small shops near her salon remain open when she spent \$7,000 to set up her salon and buy all the personal protective equipment needed to make it safe for her clients. She only has one chair and is the only one who works there. Masks are required and never taken off, and she takes 15 minutes in between clients to sanitize, she said.

"People are walking into these stores, and you know that they're not sanitizing everything that somebody touches. How is that OK?" she asked.

"The unfortunate thing is that they're going to force everybody underground, and it's so much more unsanitary to go to somebody else's house (for a haircut). Whereas we can control our environment and our space where we work," she said.

Ignacio Castro, a 46-year-old mechanical engineer from Los Angeles, said the new order has him rethinking how often he goes out for groceries. He's now planning to go once a week. But Castro, who cares for his elderly parents, said he thinks he's one of few really heeding the plea to stay home.

"I'm seeing even more traffic," he said. "In March, the streets were empty. People were genuinely scared to go out."

Paz Jackson, a registered nurse, said she and her husband took the half-hour drive from Los Angeles to Manhattan Beach to eat lunch outdoors — something they can no longer do near their home.

She said she felt safe grabbing a burger and taking it to the public patio as there were few people and no crowds. But she said she understands why Newsom issued the order, especially in larger cities where the virus is surging.

"We love to eat outside," she said. "A lot of people would like to go out and not be staying at home all the time. It's an individual decision."

Taxin reported from Orange County, California, and Rodriguez from San Francisco.

## Akers runs wild, Newton benched as Rams rout Patriots 24-3

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

INGLEWOOD, Calif. (AP) — With rookie Cam Akers running wild for the Rams and his defensive teammates thoroughly stifling the Patriots, Los Angeles got a tiny measure of payback for its Super Bowl embarrassment two years ago.

These Rams even looked good enough to contend for a chance at some actual Super Bowl redemption later this season.

Akers rushed for 171 yards in a breakout performance, Kenny Young returned an interception 79 yards for a touchdown and the Rams clinched their fourth straight winning season with a 24-3 victory over the New England Patriots on Thursday night.

Jared Goff rushed for a touchdown and threw a TD pass to Cooper Kupp as the NFC West-leading Rams (9-4) rolled to a one-sided victory in a rematch of their 13-3 Super Bowl loss in February 2019.

"We've got a lot of respect for them, but it's a totally different year," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "It doesn't have anything to do with what occurred a couple of years ago."

While the Rams' offense looked sharp, their defense pushed the Patriots (6-7) perilously close to disarray. New England managed only 220 total yards — just 62 in the second half with a series of misbegotten drives.

Cam Newton went 9 of 16 for 119 yards and got sacked four times before the 2015 NFL MVP was replaced by Jarrett Stidham for the final three series in the fourth quarter.

"We knew exactly what they were going to do," Newton said. "We have to be better, and it starts with me personally. I have to make more plays."

Five days after the Patriots scored 45 points at SoFi Stadium against the Chargers, New England endan-

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gered its push for a 12th straight playoff berth with only its second loss in six games.

When asked if he expected to start next week, Newton replied: "That's not my call."

Bill Belichick doused the understandable speculation moments later: "Cam is our quarterback."

The Rams got a superb game from Akers, the second-round draft pick out of Florida State who has seized a major role in their offense over the last three weeks. Akers' yards mostly came in big chunks during the biggest rushing game by an NFL rookie this season and just the ninth 150-yard game against a Belichick-coached defense since 2000.

"It's just (great) watching that guy really assert himself as a big-time player for us," McVay said. "You can just see this guy is going to be a really special player for us, and this was a great night for him."

Aaron Donald had 1 1/2 sacks to move into the overall NFL lead with 12 1/2 this season while leading another strong game from Los Angeles' elite defense, which recorded six sacks and also scored a touchdown in its third consecutive game. The Pats' third-ranked rushing offense managed just 3.7 yards per carry.

"We knew they had a great running game, that they outphysical-ed people, and we took that personally," said Rams defensive tackle Michael Brockers, who had two sacks. "If they were going to come in here and run the ball, we were going to stop them."

New England again struggled to move the ball through the air, and Newton threw his first pick-six of the season to Young, who also had a sack and led the Rams with eight tackles. Stidham went 5 of 7 and got sacked twice after taking over early in the fourth quarter.

Despite their strong recent play, the Patriots have seven losses for the first time since 2002, officially ending their NFL-record streak of 17 straight seasons with at least 10 victories.

The Rams' opening 75-yard TD drive at SoFi Stadium looked better than anything it did in the Super Bowl. Tyler Higbee and Akers had long gains before Goff leaned over the line on fourth-and-goal for his career-high fourth rushing touchdown of the season.

An intentional grounding penalty on Goff and a poorly thrown pass intercepted by New England's Myles Bryant kept the Pats' deficit manageable early. But Young opened the second quarter with an interception by Donald's disruption up front, taking it all the way back for the third-year linebacker's first NFL touchdown.

Kupp's 2-yard TD catch late in the third quarter capped a dominant 16-play, 90-yard drive by the Rams that included two fourth-down conversions.

"It didn't really matter anything else that happened," Patriots safety Devin McCourty said. "They were able to continuously run it and get first downs. It takes you out of the play-calling. We were able to do well on third downs, but it didn't matter because of how well they did in the run game. They took the whole third quarter with the long drive, and we can't play that way."

## HISTORIC NIGHT

The Rams will have four consecutive winning records under McVay, something the franchise hadn't done since 1983-86 with Eric Dickerson and coach John Robinson. Los Angeles still hasn't clinched McVay's third playoff spot, but his team will sit atop the division with three games to play.

Los Angeles also improved to 33-0 with a halftime lead under McVay.

## INJURED

Patriots: S Adrian Phillips injured his hand at some point near halftime, but he returned in the second half. ... RB Damien Harris left the field gingerly in the fourth quarter.

Rams: K Matt Gay played and didn't miss a kick despite a shoulder injury.

## UP NEXT

Patriots: Visit the Miami Dolphins on Sunday, Dec. 20.

Rams: Stay home to host the New York Jets on Sunday, Dec. 20.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_NFL](https://twitter.com/AP_NFL)

## Hundreds of GOP members sign onto Texas-led election lawsuit

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

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HOUSTON (AP) — The Texas lawsuit asking the U.S. Supreme Court to invalidate President-elect Joe Biden's victory has quickly become a conservative litmus test, as 106 members of Congress and multiple state attorneys general signed onto the case even as some have predicted it will fail.

The last-gasp bid to subvert the results of the Nov. 3 election is demonstrating President Donald Trump's enduring political power even as his term is set to end. And even though most of the signatories are far-right conservatives who come from deep red districts, the filing meant that roughly one-quarter of the U.S. House believes the Supreme Court should set aside election results.

Seventeen Republican attorneys general are backing the unprecedented case that Trump is calling "the big one" despite the fact that the president and his allies have lost dozens of times in courts across the country and have no evidence of widespread fraud. And in a filing Thursday, the Congressional Republicans claimed "unconstitutional irregularities" have "cast doubt" on the 2020 outcome and "the integrity of the American system of elections."

To be clear, there has been no evidence of widespread fraud and Trump has been seeking to subvert the will of the voters. Election law experts think the lawsuit will never last.

"The Supreme Court is not going to overturn the election in the Texas case, as the President has told them to do," tweeted Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine. "But we are in bad shape as a country that 17 states could support this shameful, anti-American filing" by Texas and its attorney general, Ken Paxton, he said.

The lawsuit filed against Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin repeats false, disproven, and unsubstantiated accusations about the voting in four states that went for Trump's Democratic challenger. The case demands that the high court invalidate the states' 62 total Electoral College votes. That's an unprecedented remedy in American history: setting aside the votes of tens of millions of people, under the baseless claim the Republican incumbent lost a chance at a second term due to widespread fraud.

Two days after Paxton sued, 17 states filed a motion supporting the lawsuit, and on Thursday six of those states asked to join the case themselves. Trump has acted to join the case, tweeting Thursday that "the Supreme Court has a chance to save our Country from the greatest Election abuse in the history of the United States." Hours later, Trump held a meeting at the White House, scheduled before the suit was filed, with a dozen Republican attorneys general, including Paxton and several others who are backing the effort.

Still, some of the top state Republican prosecutors urging the Supreme Court to hear the case have acknowledged that the effort is a long shot and are seeking to distance themselves from Trump's baseless allegations of fraud. North Dakota's Wayne Stenehjem, among the 17 attorneys general supporting the case, said North Dakota is not alleging voter fraud in the four states at issue.

"We're careful on that," said Stenehjem, who noted that his office has received thousands of calls and emails from constituents asking the state to support the suit. "But it's worth it for the Supreme Court to weigh in and settle it once and for all," he said.

Montana Attorney General Tim Fox called the lawsuit "belated" and said its chances "are slim at best." But Fox supported Texas because he said the case raised "important constitutional questions about the separation of powers and the integrity of mail-in ballots in those defendant states."

Suits brought by Trump and his allies have failed repeatedly across the country, and the Supreme Court this week rejected a Republican bid to reverse Pennsylvania's certification of Biden's victory.

Trump looked straight past the high court loss, claiming it didn't matter because his campaign wasn't involved in the case, though it would have benefited if the case had continued. He has spent the week relentlessly tweeting about the Texas case with the hashtag "overturn" and claiming, falsely, that he had won the election but was robbed.

Many of the attorneys general supporting the case have shown greater political ambitions.

In Kansas, Republican Attorney General Derek Schmidt, who is considering a bid for governor in 2022, said the Texas case presented "important and potentially recurring constitutional questions." Schmidt's announcement that Kansas would back the effort came only hours after former Republican Gov. Jeff Colyer — another potential candidate for governor — tweeted that Schmidt's office should join the Texas litigation.

The case has stirred Republican infighting in Utah, where GOP Gov. Gary Herbert and Lt. Gov. Spencer

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Cox, who will become governor in January, blasted Attorney General Sean Reyes for deciding to join the suit.

"The Attorney General did not consult us before signing on to this brief, so we don't know what his motivation is," they said in a joint statement. "Just as we would not want other states challenging Utah's election results, we do not think we should intervene in other states' elections."

Officials in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Wisconsin say the suit is a publicity stunt. More than 20 other attorneys general from states including California and Virginia also filed a brief Thursday urging the court to reject the case.

"Since Election Day, State and Federal courts throughout the country have been flooded with frivolous lawsuits aimed at disenfranchising large swaths of voters and undermining the legitimacy of the election. The State of Texas has now added its voice to the cacophony of bogus claims," Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, wrote in the state's brief.

Despite the political pressure, Idaho's Republican attorney general chose not to join the Texas suit. Lawrence Wasden said he has concerns about "supporting a legal argument that could result in other states litigating against legal decisions made by Idaho's legislature and governor." Idaho's two congressmen, Republicans Mike Simpson and Russ Fulcher, joined the legal brief from GOP House members supporting Paxton's effort.

"As is sometimes the case, the legally correct decision may not be the politically convenient decision," Wasden said in a statement. "But my responsibility is to the state of Idaho and the rule of law."

Richer reported from Boston. Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers David Pitt in Des Moines, Iowa; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Amy Beth Hanson in Helena, Montana; James MacPherson in Bismarck, North Dakota, Keith Ridler in Boise, Idaho; and Sophia Eppolito and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City.

## **Australia won't rush Pfizer after homegrown vaccine canned**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Friday that his government won't rush approval of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine because he wants people to have confidence in the product

His comments come as Australian researchers said they were abandoning their own potential vaccine because it produced false positive results to HIV tests.

Morrison said Australia was in a different position to Britain, which has given emergency approval to the Pfizer roll out, and the United States, where a government advisory panel has endorsed the Pfizer vaccine.

"We want to ensure that Australians — and I think all of us feel very strongly this way — have ... absolute full confidence that when it gets the tick, they can get the jab," Morrison said.

"They can make that decision for themselves and for their families confidently," he added.

Australia has 47 active COVID-19 cases, with 36 of those people in hospitals. The pandemic has claimed 908 lives in Australia.

Australia "has a front-row seat" observing the roll out in Britain and the United States and would learn from the overseas experiences, particularly through a data-sharing agreement with London, Morrison said.

The government expects the Australian regulator to approve the vaccine produced jointly by Pfizer and BioNTech by late January. The Australian roll out was expected to be underway by March.

Australia has an agreement for 10 million Pfizer doses and will have an option to buy more for its 26 million people if supplies allow.

Australian researchers announced Friday they had abandoned development of a potential vaccine because the false positive results to HIV tests undermined public confidence.

The University of Queensland state vaccine that was to be manufactured at Australian biopharmaceutical company CSL's Melbourne headquarters had proven safe and produced a "robust response" to COVID-19 during Phase One trials, researchers said in a statement



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But the researchers and the government had agreed not to proceed further because of the false positive HIV result due to a protein contained in the potential vaccine.

"All the evidence suggested it would be an effective vaccine, but we cannot risk public confidence. We just can't," Health Department secretary Brendan Murphy told reporters.

Under an agreement with the Australian government, 51 million University of Queensland vaccine doses manufactured by CSL were to be available to Australians from the middle of 2021.

It was one of five potential vaccines on which the Australian government had signed contracts with developers in deals worth 3.3 billion Australian dollars (\$2.4 billion).

Its failure was a major blow to Australian vaccination plans to become self-sufficient.

Only one other, the University of Oxford vaccine, would be manufactured in Australia. It would be produced by CSL in partnership with British-Swedish multinational biopharmaceutical company AstraZeneca.

As a result of the Queensland candidate's failure, Australia plans to increase its planned production and purchase of AstraZeneca vaccine from 33.8 million to 53.8 million doses and its order for Maryland-based Novavax's vaccine from 40 million to 51 million doses, Morrison said.

Murphy said the increase in government's order for the potential AstraZeneca vaccine would mean that Australia could manufacture enough doses for its entire population.

"Onshore manufacturing is a very precious thing in terms of getting good access over the course of next year," Murphy said.

Morrison was speaking after his first face-to-face meeting with Australian state leaders since the pandemic began.

The so-called National Cabinet has been meeting at least once a month since March via video because of the infection risk and pandemic bans on travel across some state borders.

But the risk and pandemic restrictions have been largely relaxed across the country with the dwindling number of cases.

Only Western Australia state Premier Mark McGowan did not attend the National Cabinet meeting in the national capital Canberra in person to avoid contact with his South Australian counterpart Steven Marshall.

South Australians are banned from Western Australia and McGowan would have had to go into quarantine for two weeks on his return home if he had been in the same room as someone who had recently visited South Australia.

The Western Australia-South Australia border will open on Saturday to travelers who are willing to undergo 14 days of hotel quarantine in the western state, which last recorded a case of community transmission of the virus on April 11.

## **Biden's transition contends with probe into son's finances**

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, ERIC TUCKER and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden's historically challenging transition to power is suddenly becoming even more complicated.

A federal investigation into the finances of Biden's son Hunter threatens to embolden congressional Republicans, who have already shown little willingness to work with the incoming president or even acknowledge his clear victory in last month's election. For sure, it will complicate Senate confirmation hearings for Biden's yet-to-be-named attorney general, who could ultimately have oversight of the investigation into the new president's son.

It all raises the prospect of even deeper dysfunction in a capital that is already struggling to address the nation's most pressing crises, including a surging pandemic whose daily death tolls are beginning to surpass the devastation of the Sept. 11 attacks. Republicans, particularly those eyeing presidential runs in 2024, are making clear they will press Biden on the issue.

"Joe Biden needs to pledge today that he will cooperate with the federal investigation and answer any questions under oath," Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said Thursday, "and that if he is sworn in as president, no federal investigator or attorney working on the Hunter Biden criminal case will be removed."

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Hunter Biden has long been a source of worry for his father's campaign and was the subject of repeated unsupported accusations by President Donald Trump and his allies. But news of the probe, which was revealed on Wednesday and scrutinizes some of Hunter Biden's Chinese business dealings and other transactions, caught most of his father's staffers by surprise.

The president-elect had no public appearance Thursday as he moved forward with filling out his administration. But the investigation threatens to destabilize a transition that has prioritized a methodical rollout of Cabinet selections, White House hires and policy goals — all meant to guarantee momentum when Biden takes office and immediately has to grapple with a surging pandemic and shaky economy.

Most notably, the probe casts a spotlight on one of Biden's most important choices: his attorney general. Alabama Sen. Doug Jones and federal appeals court judge Merrick Garland have emerged as the leading contenders, three people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press this week. But dynamics could shift, as any Biden choice now will be scrutinized for any perceived loyalty to the president-elect and bias in any probe of his son.

Both Garland and especially Jones have longtime ties to Biden.

The president-elect himself is not a subject of the investigation. And Biden aides believe that because other Hunter Biden stories have blown over, this will, too. They note that a tax fraud investigation pales in comparison to Trump's refusal to concede the election or to the pandemic that has killed more than 290,000 Americans.

Biden is expected to announce more Cabinet picks, but not attorney general, on Friday.

Trump's initial public response was surprisingly muted, just a pair of tweets about a Fox News segment on the story Wednesday night. But privately, he demanded to know why the investigation was not revealed ahead of Election Day, accusing officials of deliberately stalling in order to help Biden's chances, according to two Republicans familiar with the conversations but not authorized to discuss them publicly.

Other Republicans, including possible presidential contenders, were anything but shy in piling on.

"If there were ever circumstances that created a conflict of interest and called for a special counsel, I think those circumstances are present here," Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas said Thursday. "The Biden family has been trading on Joe Biden's public office for 50 years. Do we really think that that will change if Joe Biden becomes president, the highest office in the land?"

Some of Trump's children have also faced some legal questions.

Donald Trump Jr. was scrutinized in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe for the 2016 meeting he had with a Kremlin-connected lawyer. And Ivanka Trump was recently deposed by investigators from the District of Columbia attorney general's office as part of its lawsuit alleging the misuse of inaugural funds.

The Hunter Biden investigation is the latest in a series of politically charged inquiries that the Justice Department has grappled with in the past five years, following probes into Hillary Clinton's email use and the Trump campaign's ties to Russia.

Regardless of the facts of the investigation, a new Justice Department will likely feel compelled to assert its independence from the White House following allegations that its actions were overly politicized during the Trump administration. Biden has said he will play no role in department investigative decisions.

"There are plenty of people that are going to have their hands in this one, but I think it's really going to be driven by the new administration's push to have total independence on any investigation," said former Justice Department prosecutor Michael Weinstein, a New Jersey defense lawyer.

"I think that's going to be paramount," he added. "They are going to bend over backwards to make sure that they do the contrary to the current administration — which is independence, let the investigation take its course."

In this case, though, there is no perfect outcome for Biden.

A protracted criminal investigation that results in an indictment would be a major distraction and then some as the new president tries to implement his agenda. But if the Justice Department decides against bringing charges, officials will feel pressure to explain their steps and reassure the American public the inquiry was done in a competent and thorough way.

Federal investigators served a round of subpoenas on Tuesday, including to Hunter Biden, according to a

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person familiar with the investigation who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing probe. The federal investigation, centering on potential tax crimes, had been going on at least a year before Biden announced his candidacy. Investigators did not reach out in the weeks prior to voting because of a department policy surrounding elections that prohibits overt investigative acts.

Biden, fiercely protective of his own family, was said to be, in a statement released by his transition, "deeply proud of his son, who has fought through difficult challenges, including the vicious personal attacks of recent months, only to emerge stronger."

Biden struck a similarly defiant tone throughout the campaign whenever questions emerged about his son, which they frequently did. When Trump assailed Hunter Biden as a drug user during the first presidential debate in Cleveland, his father acknowledged that Hunter had had past substance abuse issues but added, "He's worked on it. I'm proud of him. I'm proud of my son."

The spotlight on Hunter Biden intensified in the election's final weeks, after Trump and his attorney Rudy Giuliani pushed unsubstantiated claims about his foreign business dealings. Those were based in part on New York Post reporting on a laptop that supposedly once belonged to Hunter Biden and was abandoned at a Delaware repair shop.

Hunter Biden had joined the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma in 2014, around the time his father, then the vice president, was helping conduct Obama administration foreign policy with Ukraine. But, in a subsequent report, Senate Republicans did not produce any evidence that the hiring influenced U.S. policies.

Joe Biden largely refused to even acknowledge the laptop controversy. His son, meanwhile, kept almost completely out of the public eye during the nearly 18 months his father was running for president.

One of the few times he was seen was on stage outside the convention center in Wilmington, Delaware, as his father was surrounded by joyous family members following his speech declaring victory in the presidential election. Hunter Biden, and his baby son, were right in the middle.

Tucker and Weissert reported from Washington. Additional reporting by Associated Press writer Mike Balsamo in Washington.

## **Congress stuck, McConnell resists state aid in COVID-19 deal**

By LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An emerging \$900 billion COVID-19 aid package from a bipartisan group of lawmakers has all but collapsed after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said Republican senators won't support \$160 billion in state and local funds as part of a potential trade-off in the deal.

McConnell's staff conveyed to top negotiators Thursday that the GOP leader sees no path to an agreement on a key aspect of the lawmakers' existing proposal — a slimmed-down version of the liability shield he is seeking for companies and organizations facing potential COVID-19 lawsuits — in exchange for the state and local funds that Democrats want.

The GOP leader criticized "controversial state bailouts" during a speech in the Senate, as he insists on a more targeted aid package.

The hardened stance from McConnell, who does not appear to have enough votes from his Republican majority for a far-reaching compromise, creates a new stalemate over the \$900-billion-plus package, despite days of toiling by a bipartisan group of lawmakers to strike compromise.

Other legislative pile-ups now threaten Friday's related business — a must-pass government funding bill. If it doesn't clear Congress, that would trigger a federal government shutdown on Saturday.

McConnell's staff conveyed to other negotiators it's "unlikely" the trade-off proposed by the bipartisan group would be acceptable, as COVID aid talks continue, according to a person granted anonymity to discuss the talks. A senior Democrat first shared the Republican leader's views after being granted anonymity to discuss the private conversations, which were first reported by Politico.

Deadlines, real and perceived, haven't been sufficient to drive Washington's factions to an agreement, despite the U.S. breaking a record-high 3,000 daily COVID fatalities, and hospitals straining at capacity

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from soaring caseloads nationwide.

The House recessed for a few days, with leaders warning members to be prepared to return to Washington to vote on the year-end deals, while the Senate was planning a rare Friday session.

The breakdown over the COVID aid package, after days of behind-the-scenes talks by a group of lawmakers fed up with inaction, comes as President Donald Trump has taken the talks in another direction — insisting on a fresh round of \$600 stimulus checks for Americans.

Sending direct cash payments to households was not included in the bipartisan proposal, but has been embraced by some of the president's fiercest critics — including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont Independent who introduced an amendment to include the checks with Trump ally Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo.

Sanders said the unprecedented moment facing the nation with the pandemic and its economic fallout requires Congress to "take unprecedented action."

Trump's top negotiator on COVID-19 financial aid, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin reported headway Thursday, before the package from the bipartisan senators' group fell apart.

"I think we're making a lot of progress," Mnuchin said.

A one-week stop-gap measure to prevent a federal shutdown appears to have sapped some urgency from the talks. The short-term government-wide funding bill, approved by the House on Wednesday, needs to clear the Senate before Friday at midnight to avert a partial closure.

The next deadline would be Dec. 18, but both House and Senate leaders say they won't adjourn without passing an aid measure.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said Congress would keep working up to or even after Christmas to get an agreement. The new Congress is being sworn in on Jan. 3.

"Now if we need more time then we take more time, but we have to have a bill and we cannot go home without it," Pelosi said. She also gave an upbeat assessment on the talks.

The bipartisan lawmakers held another virtual "dinner group" meeting late Thursday to try to prop up the deal. They have been working furiously to try to bridge the stalemate over COVID aid.

The \$900 billion-plus proposal provides sweeping new funds for vaccines, small businesses, health care providers, schools and families suffering from the virus crisis and the economic shutdowns.

A key hold up has been the standoff over more money for the states, that Democrats - and some Republicans - want and the liability shield that is McConnell's top GOP priority but that most Democrats oppose.

The partisan group tried to marry those two provisions as a compromise.

McConnell had initially proposed a five-year liability shield from virus lawsuits, retroactive to December 2019, but the bipartisan group was eyeing a scaled-back shield of six months to a year. Labor and civil rights groups oppose any shield, which they say strips essential workers of potential legal recourse as they take risks during the pandemic.

Democratic leaders had wanted far more in state and local aid, but were accepting of the lower \$160 billion.

But many Republicans have long viewed the state and local aid as a bailout they would have trouble supporting, despite the pleas for funds coming from governors and mayors nationwide.

Late Thursday, Sen. Dick Durbin and other Democrats pitched another liability proposal to the bipartisan group, but it was rejected by Republicans, according to a Senate aide granted anonymity to discuss the private session.

The Trump administration is back in the middle of the negotiations with a \$916 billion plan. It would send a \$600 direct payment to most Americans but eliminate a \$300-per-week employment benefit favored by the bipartisan group of Senate negotiators.

The White House offer has the endorsement of the top House Republican and apparent backing from McConnell, who had previously favored a \$519 billion GOP plan that has already failed twice. But Democrats immediately blasted the plan over the administration's refusal to back the partial restoration, to \$300 per week, of bonus pandemic jobless benefits that lapsed in August.



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President-elect Joe Biden is pressing for as much pandemic relief as possible, though he's not directly involved in the talks. McConnell, like Pelosi, says Congress will not adjourn without providing the long-overdue COVID-19 relief.

Republicans say the right people to handle final negotiations are the four leaders of Congress and the Trump administration, with the focus on the streamlined proposal from McConnell, R-Ky.

The bipartisan negotiating group — led by Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and GOP Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, among others — was seeking to rally lawmakers behind the \$908 billion framework that includes the \$300-per-week pandemic jobless benefit and \$160 billion for states and local governments.

It also includes a four-month extension of jobless benefits set to expire at the end of the month, \$300 billion for "paycheck protection" subsidies for struggling businesses, funding for vaccines and testing, and a host of smaller items such as aid to transit systems, the U.S. Postal Service and health care providers.

## **Biden, Harris named Time magazine's 'Person of the Year'**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Time magazine has named President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris its "Person of the Year."

Time's editor-in-chief Edward Felsenthal says Biden and Harris won the honor for "changing the American story, for showing that the forces of empathy are greater than the furies of division, for sharing a vision of healing in a grieving world."

Felsenthal notes, "Every elected President since FDR has at some point during his term been a Person of the Year, nearly a dozen of those in a presidential election year. This is the first time we have included a Vice President."

Time's other Person of the Year candidates were President Donald Trump; frontline health care workers and Dr. Anthony Fauci; and the movement for racial justice.

Also Thursday, Time named the Korean boy band BTS its Entertainer of the Year and named Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James its Athlete of the Year.

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By LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

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## Disney unveils plans to stream a galaxy of new series, films

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Walt Disney Co.’s streaming plans shifted into hyper speed Thursday, as the studio unveiled a galaxy’s worth of new streaming offerings including plans for 10 “Star Wars” series spinoffs and 10 Marvel series that will debut on Disney+.

In a virtual presentation for investors, Disney chief executive Bob Chapek laid out super-sized ambitions for its direct-to-consumer efforts, leaning heavily on some of the company’s biggest brands. Over the next few years, Disney is planning to premiere directly on Disney+ not just an armada of “Star Wars” and Marvel series but 15 live-action, Pixar and animated series, and 15 live-action, Pixar and animated movies.

Chapek said Disney+ subscribers worldwide have reached 86.8 million, up from 74 million last month. The service has easily exceeded most forecasts, reaching that number 13 months since its launch in November 2019. Disney will increase the monthly price by \$1 to \$8 a month in March. The company forecasts 230-260 million subscribers by 2024.

To keep subscriber numbers climbing, Disney presented a blizzard of remakes, sequels and spinoffs of various shapes and sizes on Thursday — 100 new titles in all — including a “Beauty and the Beast” prequel series, a “Moana” animated series, a “Three Men and a Cradle” reboot with Zac Efron, a “Swiss Family Robinson” series and, yes, even the Kardashians.

But Disney also kept its biggest films — including Marvel’s “Black Widow,” Pixar’s “Luca,” a “Lion King” prequel — on course for theatrical release. Whereas WarnerMedia last week pushed its entire 2021 slate to streaming, Disney executives signaled that theatrical release remains essential to its big-budget spectacles and its business, overall.

“We build the franchises through the theatrical window,” said Chapek.

Still, the four-hour presentation presented a more seamless vision of content across platforms that made scant mention of its closed theme parks, or of the pandemic. That included a dizzying amount of series, many of them connected to big-screen movies past and present. Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige said a pair of new Marvel series — “Secret Invasion,” with Samuel L. Jackson, and “Ironheart” — will “tie directly to Marvel future films.” The only difference between the company’s short-form TV content and its theatrical content, said Bob Iger, executive chairman, “is length.”

Not all the news was in streaming. Lucasfilm announced that Patty Jenkins (“Wonder Woman”) will direct the next “Star Wars” theatrical film, “Rogue Squadron,” with a release in theaters planned for Christmas 2023.

Jenkins becomes the first woman to direct a “Star Wars” film. In a video, she said the film, about starfighter pilots, will satisfy a long-held dream of hers as the daughter of an Air Force captain.

“When he lost his life in service of this country, it ignited a desire in me to turn all of that tragedy and thrill into one day making the greatest fighter pilot movie of all time,” said Jenkins in a video message.

Other films are going ahead with theatrical plans, among them a Buzz Lightyear prequel, due in 2020, and the “Black Panther” sequel. Feige confirmed that the role of the late Chadwick Boseman will not be

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recast but that its makers are still interested in "exploring the world of Wakanda" in Ryan Coogler's film, due in theaters July 2022.

Among the "Star Wars" series are two spinoffs of "The Mandalorian," set during the series' timeline: "Rangers of the New Republic" and "Ahsoka," with Rosario Dawson. Shooting also recently began on "Andor," a series developed by Tony Gilroy ("Bourne Identity"), with Diego Luna's character from the 2016 film "Rogue One."

Other, less expected "Star Wars" stars are returning. Hayden Christensen, who played Anakin Skywalker in the prequels, will reprise his role as Death Vader in "Obi-Wan Kenobi," with Ewan McGregor.

"We have a vast and expansive timeline in the 'Star Wars' mythology, spanning over 25,000 years of history in the galaxy with each era being a rich resource for storytelling," said Kathleen Kennedy, president of Lucasfilm. "Now with Disney+ we can explore limitless story possibilities like never before and fulfill the promise that there is truly a 'Star Wars' story for everyone."

Disney steered several upcoming movies to its streaming service, including "Pinocchio," with Tom Hanks, "Peter Pan & Wendy" and an "Enchanted" sequel with Amy Adams titled "Disenchanted." The animated "Raya and the Last Dragon" will in March debut simultaneously in theaters and by premier access on Disney+. That's the same approach the company took earlier this fall for "Mulan," with a \$30 early-access fee on top of the monthly subscription.

Disney made other adjustments to reorient its film operations around streaming. Hulu, which this year debuted the Andy Samberg comedy "Palm Springs" and Sarah Paulson thriller "Run," will be home to more original films from 20th Century Studios and Searchlight Pictures. Hulu will also be the new home of the Kardashians, recently departed from E!. The streaming service also renewed "The Handmaid's Tale" for a fifth season.

FX is developing the first series based on the "Alien" films, with Noah Hawley ("Fargo") directing.

Many in Hollywood had eagerly awaited Disney's response following WarnerMedia's announcement last week that it will release all 17 of its 2021 films — from "Dune" to "The Matrix 4" — simultaneously on its streaming platform, HBO Max, and in theaters.

That move set off shockwaves prompting a backlash from much of the film industry, including theater chains, producing partners and some of the studio's top talent. Christopher Nolan criticized the plans as "a bit of a mess." Some said the long-forecast end times for cinemas had arrived. Others questioned the economics of one of Hollywood's top studios sacrificing a year of box office — and the cascading windows of release that follow a theatrical run — to salvage the rocky rollout of HBO Max — a service that many HBO subscribers have yet still haven't activated.

Wall Street approved. Stocks for WarnerMedia's parent company AT&T are up about 6% since the announcement by Jason Kilar, chief executive of WarnerMedia and a veteran of Hulu and Amazon. John Stankey, the AT&T chief executive, on Tuesday said the pandemic had unleashed a new media reality unlikely to fade after COVID-19. "That horse left the barn," he said.

Compared to WarnerMedia, the present situation is very different for Disney, which has already laid the foundation for a formidable Netflix competitor in Disney+ and which has for years dominated the box office. The company's films accounted for more than \$13 billion in ticket sales worldwide last year and 38% of moviegoing in the U.S. and Canada. Seven Disney films topped \$1 billion worldwide.

"Of the 100 new titles announced today, 80% of them will go to Disney+," said Chapek. "But we had \$13 billion of box office last year and that's obviously not something to sneeze at. For us it's about balance."

As Disney made its presentation to investors Thursday, its shares reached an all-time high of \$160.

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Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

## **Biden's transition contends with probe into son's finances**

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, ERIC TUCKER and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden's historically challenging transition to power is sud-



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denly becoming even more complicated.

A federal investigation into the finances of Biden's son Hunter threatens to embolden congressional Republicans, who have already shown little willingness to work with the incoming president or even acknowledge his clear victory in last month's election. For sure, it will complicate Senate confirmation hearings for Biden's yet-to-be-named attorney general, who could ultimately have oversight of the investigation into the new president's son.

It all raises the prospect of even deeper dysfunction in a capital that is already struggling to address the nation's most pressing crises, including a surging pandemic whose daily death tolls are beginning to surpass the devastation of the Sept. 11 attacks. Republicans, particularly those eyeing presidential runs in 2024, are making clear they will press Biden on the issue.

"Joe Biden needs to pledge today that he will cooperate with the federal investigation and answer any questions under oath," Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said Thursday, "and that if he is sworn in as president, no federal investigator or attorney working on the Hunter Biden criminal case will be removed."

Hunter Biden has long been a source of worry for his father's campaign and was the subject of repeated unsupported accusations by President Donald Trump and his allies. But news of the probe, which was revealed on Wednesday and scrutinizes some of Hunter Biden's Chinese business dealings and other transactions, caught most of his father's staffers by surprise.

The president-elect had no public appearance Thursday as he moved forward with filling out his administration. But the investigation threatens to destabilize a transition that has prioritized a methodical rollout of Cabinet selections, White House hires and policy goals — all meant to guarantee momentum when Biden takes office and immediately has to grapple with a surging pandemic and shaky economy.

Most notably, the probe casts a spotlight on one of Biden's most important choices: his attorney general. Alabama Sen. Doug Jones and federal appeals court judge Merrick Garland have emerged as the leading contenders, three people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press this week. But dynamics could shift, as any Biden choice now will be scrutinized for any perceived loyalty to the president-elect and bias in any probe of his son.

Both Garland and especially Jones have longtime ties to Biden.

The president-elect himself is not a subject of the investigation. And Biden aides believe that because other Hunter Biden stories have blown over, this will, too. They note that a tax fraud investigation pales in comparison to Trump's refusal to concede the election or to the pandemic that has killed more than 290,000 Americans.

Biden is expected to announce more Cabinet picks, but not attorney general, on Friday.

Trump's initial public response was surprisingly muted, just a pair of tweets about a Fox News segment on the story Wednesday night. But privately, he demanded to know why the investigation was not revealed ahead of Election Day, accusing officials of deliberately stalling in order to help Biden's chances, according to two Republicans familiar with the conversations but not authorized to discuss them publicly.

Other Republicans, including possible presidential contenders, were anything but shy in piling on.

"If there were ever circumstances that created a conflict of interest and called for a special counsel, I think those circumstances are present here," Sen. Tom Cotton of Arkansas said Thursday. "The Biden family has been trading on Joe Biden's public office for 50 years. Do we really think that that will change if Joe Biden becomes president, the highest office in the land?"

Some of Trump's children have also faced some legal questions.

Donald Trump Jr. was scrutinized in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe for the 2016 meeting he had with a Kremlin-connected lawyer. And Ivanka Trump was recently deposed by investigators from the District of Columbia attorney general's office as part of its lawsuit alleging the misuse of inaugural funds.

The Hunter Biden investigation is the latest in a series of politically charged inquiries that the Justice Department has grappled with in the past five years, following probes into Hillary Clinton's email use and the Trump campaign's ties to Russia.

Regardless of the facts of the investigation, a new Justice Department will likely feel compelled to as-

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sert its independence from the White House following allegations that its actions were overly politicized during the Trump administration. Biden has said he will play no role in department investigative decisions.

"There are plenty of people that are going to have their hands in this one, but I think it's really going to be driven by the new administration's push to have total independence on any investigation," said former Justice Department prosecutor Michael Weinstein, a New Jersey defense lawyer.

"I think that's going to be paramount," he added. "They are going to bend over backwards to make sure that they do the contrary to the current administration — which is independence, let the investigation takes its course."

In this case, though, there is no perfect outcome for Biden.

A protracted criminal investigation that results in an indictment would be a major distraction and then some as the new president tries to implement his agenda. But if the Justice Department decides against bringing charges, officials will feel pressure to explain their steps and reassure the American public the inquiry was done in a competent and thorough way.

Federal investigators served a round of subpoenas on Tuesday, including to Hunter Biden, according to a person familiar with the investigation who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing probe.

The federal investigation, centering on potential tax crimes, had been going on at least a year before Biden announced his candidacy. Investigators did not reach out in the weeks prior to voting because of a department policy surrounding elections that prohibits overt investigative acts.

Biden, fiercely protective of his own family, was said to be, in a statement released by his transition, "deeply proud of his son, who has fought through difficult challenges, including the vicious personal attacks of recent months, only to emerge stronger."

Biden struck a similarly defiant tone throughout the campaign whenever questions emerged about his son, which they frequently did. When Trump assailed Hunter Biden as a drug user during the first presidential debate in Cleveland, his father acknowledged that Hunter had had past substance abuse issues but added, "He's worked on it. I'm proud of him. I'm proud of my son."

The spotlight on Hunter Biden intensified in the election's final weeks, after Trump and his attorney Rudy Giuliani pushed unsubstantiated claims about his foreign business dealings. Those were based in part on New York Post reporting on a laptop that supposedly once belonged to Hunter Biden and was abandoned at a Delaware repair shop.

Hunter Biden had joined the board of Ukrainian gas company Burisma in 2014, around the time his father, then the vice president, was helping conduct Obama administration foreign policy with Ukraine. But, in a subsequent report, Senate Republicans did not produce any evidence that the hiring influenced U.S. policies.

Joe Biden largely refused to even acknowledge the laptop controversy. His son, meanwhile, kept almost completely out of the public eye during the nearly 18 months his father was running for president.

One of the few times he was seen was on stage outside the convention center in Wilmington, Delaware, as his father was surrounded by joyous family members following his speech declaring victory in the presidential election. Hunter Biden, and his baby son, were right in the middle.

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Tucker and Weissert reported from Washington. Additional reporting by Associated Press writer Mike Balsamo in Washington.

## World carbon dioxide emissions drop 7% in pandemic-hit 2020

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

A locked-down pandemic-struck world cut its carbon dioxide emissions this year by 7%, the biggest drop ever, new preliminary figures show.

The Global Carbon Project, an authoritative group of dozens of international scientists who track emissions, calculated that the world will have put 37 billion U.S. tons (34 billion metric tons) of carbon dioxide in the air in 2020. That's down from 40.1 billion US tons (36.4 billion metric tons) in 2019, according to a study published Thursday in the journal Earth System Science Data.

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Scientists say this drop is chiefly because people are staying home, traveling less by car and plane, and that emissions are expected to jump back up after the pandemic ends. Ground transportation makes up about one-fifth of emissions of carbon dioxide, the chief man-made heat-trapping gas.

"Of course, lockdown is absolutely not the way to tackle climate change," said study co-author Corinne LeQuere, a climate scientist at the University of East Anglia.

The same group of scientists months ago predicted emission drops of 4% to 7%, depending on the progression of COVID-19. A second coronavirus wave and continued travel reductions pushed the decrease to 7%, LeQuere said.

Emissions dropped 12% in the United States and 11% in Europe, but only 1.7% in China. That's because China had an earlier lockdown with less of a second wave. Also China's emissions are more industrial based than other countries and its industry was less affected than transportation, LeQuere said.

The calculations — based on reports detailing energy use, industrial production and daily mobility counts — were praised as accurate by outside scientists.

Even with the drop in 2020, the world on average put 1,185 tons (1,075 metric tons) of carbon dioxide into the air every second.

Final figures for 2019 published in the same study show that from 2018 to 2019 emissions of the main man-made heat-trapping gas increased only 0.1%, much smaller than annual jumps of around 3% a decade or two ago. Even with emissions expected to rise after the pandemic, scientists are wondering if 2019 be the peak of carbon pollution, LeQuere said.

"We are certainly very close to an emissions peak, if we can keep the global community together," said United Nations Development Director Achim Steiner.

Chris Field, director of the Stanford Woods Institute for the Environment, thinks emissions will increase after the pandemic, but said "I am optimistic that we have, as a society learned some lessons that may help decrease emissions in the future."

"For example," he added, "as people get good at telecommuting a couple of days a week or realize they don't need quite so many business trips, we might see behavior-related future emissions decreases."

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Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears .

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## Sen. Rand Paul delays defense bill vote over troop drawdowns

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Senate vote on a wide-ranging defense policy bill was delayed Thursday after Kentucky Republican Rand Paul objected to the measure, casting the next steps in doubt and raising the slim prospect of a government shutdown if a short-term spending bill caught up in the dispute is not approved by Friday.

Paul said on the Senate floor that he opposes provisions in the defense bill that would limit President Donald Trump's ability to draw down U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Germany. His objections threatened another must-pass bill, a one-week spending measure that would keep the government open through Dec. 18. The House has passed the stopgap measure, but a government shutdown would occur if the Senate does not act on it by midnight Friday.

Paul said he would drop his objection if GOP leaders allowed a final vote on the National Defense Authorization Act on Monday. Senators from both parties were eager to finish work on the bill this week.

South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican, said he thought Paul — who has provoked government shutdowns before — was using the time-crunch for maximum leverage to remove the provi-

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sion on troop withdrawals.

"I think he's just trying to figure out ways to derail the bill. And ... when you're in the U.S. Senate that's your prerogative. But most of our people would like to get it done" this week, Thune said.

"His thing is just to delay this and use all the time so it pushes the vote on (the defense bill) into next week, which pushes the override vote" on a possible Trump veto into the following week, Thune said of his fellow Republican, Paul.

A procedural vote on the defense bill was expected Friday, setting the stage for final votes on the defense bill and the stopgap spending measure later in the day.

Paul said he is concerned that the measure on troop deployment "creates 535 commanders-in-chief in Congress" and hampers the president's ability to deploy troops as he sees fit. Democrats support the measure because they oppose Trump, Paul said, but the amendment would also apply to future presidents, including President-elect Joe Biden.

One amendment, co-sponsored by Reps. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., and Jason Crow, D-Colo., would block troop withdrawals in Afghanistan unless the Pentagon submits inter-agency reports certifying that the drawdowns would not jeopardize national security. A separate provision pushed by Utah Republican Sen. Mitt Romney and other lawmakers would limit planned troop withdrawals in Germany.

Paul singled out Cheney by name in a floor speech, saying she and her father, former Vice President Dick Cheney, share a neoconservative belief in "perpetual war."

"The philosophy of these people is about war and substantiating war and making sure that it becomes and is perpetual war," Paul said.

Cheney hit back on Twitter, charging that Paul was "currently holding up passage of the #NDAA, blaming America, and delaying hazardous duty pay to hundreds of thousands of our service members and their families. Inexcusable."

She added: "Rand and I do have one thing in common, though. We're both 5'2" tall."

The dispute over the defense bill came after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, in a rare break with Trump, urged passage of the measure despite Trump's threat to veto it.

McConnell, R-Ky., said Thursday that it was important for Congress to continue a nearly 60-year streak of passing the National Defense Authorization Act, which affirms 3% pay raises for U.S. troops and authorizes billions in military programs and construction.

"This NDAA will unlock more than \$740 billion for the training, tools and cutting-edge equipment that our service members and civilian employees need to defend American lives and American interests," McConnell said in a Senate speech ahead of an expected vote Thursday or Friday. "It will give our troops the 3% pay raise they deserve. It'll keep our forces ready to deter China and stand strong in the Indo-Pacific."

The Democratic-controlled House overwhelmingly approved the defense bill on Tuesday, defying Trump's veto threat and setting up a possible showdown with the Republican president in the waning days of his administration.

A total of 140 Republicans joined 195 Democrats in backing the bill, which received support from more than 80% of the House — well above the two-thirds support required to override a potential veto.

Trump has vowed to veto the bill unless lawmakers clamp down on social media companies he claims were biased against him during the election. Trump also wants Congress to strip out a provision of the bill that allows renaming of military bases that now honor Confederate leaders.

McConnell did not address Trump's veto threat, but said the bill "will secure President Trump's major progress at modernizing our capabilities, our technologies and our strategic nuclear deterrent."

The bill "does not contain every policy that either side would like to pass. But a huge number of crucial policies are included and a lot of bad ideas were kept out," McConnell said.

Trump tweeted Tuesday that he will veto "the very weak" defense bill unless it repeals Section 230, a part of the communications code that shields Twitter, Facebook and other tech giants from content liability.

The dispute over social media content — a battle cry of conservatives who say the social media giants treat them unfairly — interjects an unrelated but complicated issue into a bill that Congress takes pride



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in having passed unflinchingly for nearly 60 years. It follows Trump's bid over the summer to sabotage the package with a veto threat over Confederate base names.

If he does veto the defense bill, Congress could cut short its Christmas recess to hold override votes, senior House members said.

"I think we can override the veto, if in fact he vetoes," House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said Tuesday. "I hope he does not veto. I hope he reconsiders. And I think he will get substantial pressure (from Republicans) that, you know, you don't want to put the defense bill at risk."

The defense measure guides Pentagon policy and cements decisions about troop levels, new weapons systems and military readiness, military personnel policy and other military goals. Many programs can only go into effect if the bill is approved, including military construction.

## US Jews plan smaller Hanukkah celebrations amid virus

By ELANA SCHOR and LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

Jewish Americans from a variety of branches of the faith are celebrating Hanukkah with smaller-than-usual gatherings this year, in hopes of keeping the year-end holiday safe but still joyful as coronavirus cases spike across the country.

Many Jewish Americans are already accustomed to more intimate celebrations of a holiday focused more on the home than on the synagogue, including Haredim or ultra-Orthodox communities. So the recent successful Supreme Court challenge to New York restrictions on in-person worship by some Orthodox groups won't mean much as far as their Hanukkah plans.

But celebrating Hanukkah during a pandemic still poses a challenge to some Jewish Americans, for whom the holiday has risen in prominence in part because its social elements and timing line up with non-Jewish holidays such as Christmas.

That has often provided a reason to host get-togethers, said Rabbi Avi Shafran, director of public affairs at Agudath Israel of America, a plaintiff in the court case.

But such large gatherings are "not an essential part of the holiday on any level whatsoever," he added. "So to Haredim, to us ultra-Orthodox, it's not something that's going to cramp our style."

Hanukkah is not affected by the restrictions on electronic device usage that observant Jews heed during the sabbath and holy days, allowing for virtual celebrations.

So, like many others, Shafran and his wife, who have nine children and 50 grandchildren, celebrated with some of them via Zoom this year in a nod to health recommendations — "just as festive ... because the meaning of the holiday is not parties, it's the memory of ancient times," Shafran said.

Before he lit the candles of the branched candelabra called a menorah, he recited blessings, including one expressing gratitude to God for life: "This year," Shafran said, "we really have to thank God."

Rabbi Moshe Hauer, executive vice president of the Orthodox Union, also planned to connect with extended family via Zoom, in addition to hosting a small in-person family get-together.

"Family gatherings are going to be limited, with or without the Supreme Court decision," he said.

The eight-day holiday beginning Thursday at sunset, also known as the Jewish Festival of Lights, honors the rededication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem during the second century B.C. following victory over the Syrians. Celebrated with the nightly lighting of the menorah, it usually falls in December but sometimes in late November.

Hauer linked Hanukkah's underlying message of the Jewish people's endurance, "the triumph of the spirit against tremendous odds," to the present-day coronavirus crisis.

"There's been a tremendous power of the spirit to continue to practice and continue to worship and celebrate, and find new ways to celebrate," he said.

Rabbi Daniel Sherman of Temple Sinai, which describes itself as New Orleans' oldest Reform congregation, said it has been more difficult to adapt other holidays on the Jewish calendar to the constraints of the pandemic.

"In some ways Hanukkah is a little bit easier, because the main celebration of Hanukkah is a home cel-

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celebration as opposed to everyone coming to temple each night," Sherman said. His synagogue is planning a drive-through candle-lighting on Thursday at the Audubon Zoo, as well as nightly candle-lightings over Zoom.

Still, Sherman added, "people are used to having friends and family over for those home celebrations, and this year the challenge is to have that Hanukkah spirit still, even though it might just be your immediate family or you might just be by yourself."

For Esther Reisman, who teaches Bible studies and Jewish history at Beth Jacob Academy in Brooklyn, Hanukkah gatherings with extended family can typically include dozens of people. But this year it may be just her and her husband, Rabbi Yisroel Reisman of Agudath Israel of Madison, also a plaintiff in the Supreme Court case.

"It will be much, much smaller," she said, adding that many others in their community were planning intimate gatherings just with immediate family members. Reisman's family was also consulting a specialist in infectious disease to minimize any risk, she said.

Hanukkah is more of a minor holiday in Israel, though it is still a festive occasion marked by communal candle-lighting gatherings, school vacation and the consumption of deep-fried, and often elaborately decorated, doughnuts known as sufganiyot.

With confirmed coronavirus cases quickly rising, the Israeli government this week announced plans for a nighttime curfew to prevent large public gatherings but subsequently backtracked. Instead, it has encouraged people to celebrate at home with their immediate families.

In the U.S., the holiday can take on a Christmas-like quality in some Jewish communities. In Ohio, Chabad Columbus is planning outdoor events designed for families to attend at a safe distance, including a menorah-lighting via helicopter performed by a man costumed as a member of the Maccabee family, which plays a central role in the Hanukkah story.

Rabbi Hara Person, the chief executive of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, urged celebrants everywhere to remain "very cognizant about what our home gatherings look like" in the pandemic context.

Hanukkah is "about spreading light and spreading joy," Person said, and "we need to maintain that idea of spreading light by not spreading infection."

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Schor reported from Washington, D.C., and Henao reported from Jersey City, New Jersey. Associated Press writers Josef Federman in Jerusalem and Gary Fields in Silver Spring, Maryland, contributed.

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Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through the Religion News Foundation. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

## US panel endorses widespread use of Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. government advisory panel endorsed widespread use of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine Thursday, putting the country just one step away from launching an epic vaccination campaign against the outbreak that has killed close to 300,000 Americans.

Shots could begin within days, depending on how quickly the Food and Drug Administration signs off, as expected, on the expert committee's recommendation.

"This is a light at the end of the long tunnel of this pandemic," declared Dr. Sally Goza, president of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

In a 17-4 vote with one abstention, the government advisers concluded that the vaccine from Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech appears safe and effective for emergency use in adults and teenagers 16 and over.

That endorsement came despite questions about allergic reactions in two people who received the vaccine earlier this week when Britain became the first country to begin dispensing the Pfizer-BioNTech shot.

While there are a number of remaining unknowns about the vaccine, in an emergency, "the question

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is whether you know enough" to press ahead, said panel member Dr. Paul Offit of Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. He concluded that the potential benefits outweigh the risks.

The decision came as COVID-19 cases surge to ever-higher levels across the U.S., with deaths setting an all-time, one-day record of more than 3,100 on Wednesday.

Pfizer has said it will have about 25 million doses of the two-shot vaccine for the U.S. by the end of December. But the initial supplies will be reserved primarily for health care workers and nursing home residents, with other vulnerable groups next in line until ramped-up production enables shots to become widely available on demand — something that will probably not happen until the spring.

Next week, the FDA will review a second vaccine, from Moderna and the National Institutes of Health, that appears about as protective as Pfizer-BioNTech's shot. A third candidate, from Johnson & Johnson, which would require just one dose, is working its way through the pipeline. Behind that is a candidate from AstraZeneca and Oxford University.

U.S. health experts are hoping a combination of vaccines will ultimately enable the U.S. to conquer the outbreak.

Still, experts estimate at least 70% of the U.S. population will have to be vaccinated to achieve herd immunity, the point at which the virus can be held in check. That means it could be several months before things start to get back to normal and Americans can put away their masks.

All eyes now turn to the FDA staff scientists who will make the final decision of whether to press ahead with large-scale immunizations with Pfizer-BioNTech's vaccine. The FDA's vaccine director, Dr. Peter Marks, said a decision would come within "days to a week."

Dr. William Moss of Johns Hopkins University, who was not involved in the expert panel's review, welcomed the outcome, saying, "Given how bad the pandemic is now, we need to move."

The independent review by non-government experts in vaccine development, infectious diseases and medical statistics was considered critical to boosting Americans' confidence in the safety of the shot, which was developed at breakneck speed less than a year after the virus was identified.

Regulators in both Britain and Canada have already approved the vaccine for use in their countries, and President Donald Trump and White House officials have complained for weeks that the FDA was moving too slowly.

"Americans want us to do a scientific review, but I think they also want us to make sure we're not wasting time on paperwork as opposed to going forward with the decision," FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said before the meeting.

FDA scientists issued a glowing review of the vaccine earlier in the week. Agency staffers said data from Pfizer's ongoing study of 44,000 people showed strong protection across different age groups, races and health conditions with no major, unexpected safety problems.

The Pfizer-BioNTech shot remains experimental because that final-stage study isn't complete. As a result, the expert panel wrestled with a list of questions that have yet to be answered.

For example, while the vaccine is more than 90% effective in blocking the symptoms of COVID-19, the FDA's advisers stressed it is not yet clear whether it can stop the silent, symptomless spread that accounts for roughly half of all cases.

"Even though the individual efficacy of this vaccine is very, very, very high, you really as of right now do not have any evidence" that it will lower transmission, said Dr. Patrick Moore of the University of Pittsburgh. He urged Pfizer to take additional steps to answer that question.

Several of the dissenting panel members objected to authorizing the shot for 16- and 17-year-olds, given their small numbers in the study and the low risk they face from COVID-19.

Members worried, too, that Pfizer will lose its opportunity to answer critical questions once it begins offering the real vaccine to study participants who had been getting dummy shots up to now.

The company proposed gradually moving those patients to the vaccine group, with priority based on age, health conditions and other factors. Under that plan, 70-year-old participants would cross over before healthy 30-year-olds.

Pfizer must still show whether the vaccine works in children younger than 16 and in pregnant women.

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On the safety front, as widespread vaccinations begin, the first recipients will be closely tracked by government health authorities, since studies in tens of thousands of people can't detect side effects that strike 1 in a million. Hanging over the meeting were the British allergic reactions and a warning from authorities there that people with a history of serious reactions shouldn't get the vaccine for now.

Pfizer representatives said they have seen no signs of allergic reactions in their trial. But some of the FDA advisers fear the British warning will deter millions of Americans with allergies who might benefit from the COVID-19 vaccine from giving it a try and urged additional studies to try to settle the issue.

"This issue is not going to die until we have better data," Offit said.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## One-day US deaths top 3,000, more than D-Day or 9/11

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and MARION RENAULT Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Just when the U.S. appears on the verge of rolling out a COVID-19 vaccine, the numbers have become gloomier than ever: Over 3,000 American deaths in a single day, more than on D-Day or 9/11. One million new cases in the span of five days. More than 106,000 people in the hospital.

The crisis across the country is pushing medical centers to the breaking point and leaving staff members and public health officials burned out and plagued by tears and nightmares.

All told, the crisis has left more than 290,000 people dead nationwide, with more than 15.5 million confirmed infections.

The U.S. recorded 3,124 deaths Wednesday, the highest one-day total yet, according to Johns Hopkins University. Up until last week, the peak was 2,603 deaths on April 15, when New York City was the epicenter of the nation's outbreak. The latest number is subject to revision up or down.

Wednesday's toll eclipsed American deaths on the opening day of the Normandy invasion during World War II: 2,500, out of some 4,400 Allied dead. And it topped the toll on Sept. 11, 2001: 2,977.

New cases per day are running at all-time highs of over 209,000 on average. And the number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 is setting records nearly every day.

A U.S. government advisory panel on Thursday endorsed widespread use of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine to help conquer the outbreak. Depending on how fast the FDA signs off on the panel's recommendation, shots could begin within days, inaugurating the biggest vaccination campaign in U.S. history.

In St. Louis, respiratory therapist Joe Kowalczyk said he has seen entire floors of his hospital fill up with COVID-19 patients, some of them two to a room. He said the supply of ventilators is dwindling, and the inventory is so thin that colleagues on one shift had to ventilate one patient by using a BiPAP machine, similar to the devices used to treat sleep apnea.

When he goes home to sleep during the day at the end of his grueling overnight shifts, he sometimes has nightmares.

"I would be sleeping and I would be working in a unit and things would go completely wrong and I would shock myself awake. They would be very visceral and very vivid," he said. "It would just really spook me."

In South Dakota, Dr. Clay Smith has treated hundreds of COVID-19 patients while working at Monument Health Spearfish Hospital and at Sheridan Memorial Hospital in neighboring Wyoming.

He said patients are becoming stranded in the emergency room for hours while they await beds on the main floor or transfers to larger hospitals. And those transfers are becoming more challenging, with some patients sent as far away as Denver, 400 miles (644 kilometers) from the two hospitals.

"That is a huge burden for families and EMS systems as well when you take an ambulance and send it 400 miles one way, that ambulance is out of the community for essentially a whole day," he said.

Smith added that some patients have gone from thinking "I thought this was a hoax" to "Wow, this is real and I feel terrible." But he also has seen people with COVID-19 who "continue to be disbelievers. It is hard to see that."



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"At the end of the day the virus doesn't care whether you believe in it or not," he said.

New Orleans' health director, Dr. Jennifer Avegno, described a recent visit to a hospital where she watched doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists and others risk exposure to the disease in a long, futile attempt to save a dying COVID-19 patient. Some broke down in tears afterward, she said.

"These are seasoned emergency and critical care personnel," she said. "We do not cry very often — and especially not a number of us all at once."

In Illinois, where authorities recorded an additional 196 deaths Thursday, Dr. Meeta Shah at Rush University in Chicago said medical workers are already beleaguered and waiting for the "other shoe to drop" from holiday gatherings.

"Every day you think, 'Today is going to be awful,'" Shah said.

In Virginia, Gov. Ralph Northam, a doctor by training, announced a midnight curfew and expanded mask rules to require face coverings be worn outdoors, not just inside.

Pennsylvania Gov. Tom Wolf temporarily halted school sports and other extracurricular activities, ordered gyms, theaters and casinos to close and banned indoor dining at restaurants.

In Idaho, Gov. Brad Little didn't order a statewide mask mandate or enact additional restrictions despite the public health agency announcing that COVID-19 is now the leading cause of death in the state. But the Republican governor warned that if hospitals continue to fill and the state has to initiate "crisis standards of care" — when life-saving treatment would be reserved for patients most likely to survive — car crash victims could be treated in hospital conference rooms and diabetics with infections could be denied beds.

Little was among the first governors to publicly wear a mask in the spring and has encouraged others to do so, but anti-mask sentiment is intense in the conservative state.

In New York City, which was ravaged by the virus in the spring, one doctor sounded a note of relative optimism, saying that at least physicians are more capable of managing the virus now.

"Early in the spring we did not know enough," said Dr. Jolion McGreevy, who directs Mount Sinai Hospital's emergency department. "We really are operating from a place of knowledge, now — which is a big leap from where we were in the spring."

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Associated Press National Writer Jocelyn Noveck in New York contributed to this report. Associated Press journalists from around the globe contributed to this report.

## **Hundreds of GOP members sign onto Texas-led election lawsuit**

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — The Texas lawsuit asking the U.S. Supreme Court to invalidate President-elect Joe Biden's victory has quickly become a conservative litmus test, as 106 members of Congress and multiple state attorneys general signed onto the case even as some have predicted it will fail.

The last-gasp bid to subvert the results of the Nov. 3 election is demonstrating President Donald Trump's enduring political power even as his term is set to end. And even though most of the signatories are far-right conservatives who come from deep red districts, the filing meant that roughly one-quarter of the U.S. House believes the Supreme Court should set aside election results.

Seventeen Republican attorneys general are backing the unprecedented case that Trump is calling "the big one" despite the fact that the president and his allies have lost dozens of times in courts across the country and have no evidence of widespread fraud. And in a filing Thursday, the Congressional Republicans claimed "unconstitutional irregularities" have "cast doubt" on the 2020 outcome and "the integrity of the American system of elections."

To be clear, there has been no evidence of widespread fraud and Trump has been seeking to subvert the will of the voters. Election law experts think the lawsuit will never last.

"The Supreme Court is not going to overturn the election in the Texas case, as the President has told them to do," tweeted Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine. "But we are in bad shape as a country that 17 states could support this shameful, anti-American filing" by Texas and its

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attorney general, Ken Paxton, he said.

The lawsuit filed against Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin repeats false, disproven, and unsubstantiated accusations about the voting in four states that went for Trump's Democratic challenger. The case demands that the high court invalidate the states' 62 total Electoral College votes. That's an unprecedented remedy in American history: setting aside the votes of tens of millions of people, under the baseless claim the Republican incumbent lost a chance at a second term due to widespread fraud.

Two days after Paxton sued, 17 states filed a motion supporting the lawsuit, and on Thursday six of those states asked to join the case themselves. Trump has acted to join the case, tweeting Thursday that "the Supreme Court has a chance to save our Country from the greatest Election abuse in the history of the United States." Hours later, Trump held a meeting at the White House, scheduled before the suit was filed, with a dozen Republican attorneys general, including Paxton and several others who are backing the effort.

Still, some of the top state Republican prosecutors urging the Supreme Court to hear the case have acknowledged that the effort is a long shot and are seeking to distance themselves from Trump's baseless allegations of fraud. North Dakota's Wayne Stenehjem, among the 17 attorneys general supporting the case, said North Dakota is not alleging voter fraud in the four states at issue.

"We're careful on that," said Stenehjem, who noted that his office has received thousands of calls and emails from constituents asking the state to support the suit. "But it's worth it for the Supreme Court to weigh in and settle it once and for all," he said.

Montana Attorney General Tim Fox called the lawsuit "belated" and said its chances "are slim at best." But Fox supported Texas because he said the case raised "important constitutional questions about the separation of powers and the integrity of mail-in ballots in those defendant states."

Suits brought by Trump and his allies have failed repeatedly across the country, and the Supreme Court this week rejected a Republican bid to reverse Pennsylvania's certification of Biden's victory.

Trump looked straight past the high court loss, claiming it didn't matter because his campaign wasn't involved in the case, though it would have benefited if the case had continued. He has spent the week relentlessly tweeting about the Texas case with the hashtag "overturn" and claiming, falsely, that he had won the election but was robbed.

Many of the attorneys general supporting the case have shown greater political ambitions.

In Kansas, Republican Attorney General Derek Schmidt, who is considering a bid for governor in 2022, said the Texas case presented "important and potentially recurring constitutional questions." Schmidt's announcement that Kansas would back the effort came only hours after former Republican Gov. Jeff Colyer — another potential candidate for governor — tweeted that Schmidt's office should join the Texas litigation.

The case has stirred Republican infighting in Utah, where GOP Gov. Gary Herbert and Lt. Gov. Spencer Cox, who will become governor in January, blasted Attorney General Sean Reyes for deciding to join the suit.

"The Attorney General did not consult us before signing on to this brief, so we don't know what his motivation is," they said in a joint statement. "Just as we would not want other states challenging Utah's election results, we do not think we should intervene in other states' elections."

Officials in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Wisconsin say the suit is a publicity stunt. More than 20 other attorneys general from states including California and Virginia also filed a brief Thursday urging the court to reject the case.

"Since Election Day, State and Federal courts throughout the country have been flooded with frivolous lawsuits aimed at disenfranchising large swaths of voters and undermining the legitimacy of the election. The State of Texas has now added its voice to the cacophony of bogus claims," Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro, a Democrat, wrote in the state's brief.

Despite the political pressure, Idaho's Republican attorney general chose not to join the Texas suit. Lawrence Wasden said he has concerns about "supporting a legal argument that could result in other states litigating against legal decisions made by Idaho's legislature and governor." Idaho's two congressmen, Republicans Mike Simpson and Russ Fulcher, joined the legal brief from GOP House members supporting Paxton's effort.

"As is sometimes the case, the legally correct decision may not be the politically convenient decision," Wasden said in a statement. "But my responsibility is to the state of Idaho and the rule of law."

Richer reported from Boston. Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers David Pitt in Des Moines, Iowa; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Amy Beth Hanson in Helena, Montana; James MacPherson in Bismarck, North Dakota, Keith Ridler in Boise, Idaho; and Sophia Eppolito and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City.

## **Q&A: What's next for Facebook in the antitrust case?**

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

Could Facebook be forced to spin off WhatsApp and Instagram? That's what the U.S. government is seeking in a long-awaited antitrust lawsuit filed Wednesday, the same day dozens of states sued the social media giant on similar grounds. Whatever happens, experts expect a long-drawn out battle that Facebook is prepared to defend vigorously — and with enormous resources.

Lawmakers of both major parties are also calling for stronger oversight of Facebook and other tech-industry giants. They argue that the companies' massive market power is out of control, crushing smaller competitors and endangering consumer privacy and choice. Facebook insists that its services provide useful benefits for users and that complaints about its power are misguided.

Here are some questions and answers about what the government actions against Facebook mean.

### **WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?**

The short answer is: We wait.

The battle initiated by the Federal Trade Commission and the states could take years to resolve. At the moment, experts think it's unlikely to end in a settlement, so it may be a fight to the verdict. And the two sides could spend months arguing over issues such as document disclosure before the trial even starts. Once it does, expect a slugfest.

Facebook has been "well aware" of the possibility for this antitrust challenge for some time and they have "the resources to make this a formidable challenge for prosecutors," said George Hay, an antitrust expert and law professor at Cornell University. "The one thing that is certain is that the demand for anti-trust lawyers and economists will increase."

### **ARE APPLE AND AMAZON NEXT?**

Justice Department prosecutors are pursuing a separate antitrust case against Google, one that mirrors its case against Microsoft 20 years ago. Microsoft lost that one, although it escaped a breakup when an appellate court disagreed with the trial judge's order.

It's possible that more cases could follow. Congressional investigators spent months digging into the actions of Apple and Amazon in addition to Facebook and Google, and called the CEOs of all four companies to testify. The FTC and the Justice Department reportedly have been investigating Amazon and Apple, respectively.

So no one can rule out the possibility that three or even all four of these companies could end up in court.

### **WILL FACEBOOK HAVE TO DIVEST INSTAGRAM AND WHATSAPP?**

Government prosecutors are asking for exactly that. But it could be harder than it sounds.

The FTC argues that Facebook has engaged in a "systematic strategy" to eliminate its competition, including by purchasing smaller up-and-coming rivals Instagram in 2012 and WhatsApp in 2014. Facebook called the government's claims "revisionist history" that punishes successful businesses and noted that the FTC cleared the Instagram and WhatsApp acquisitions years ago.

That's true, although experts say it doesn't really matter — at least not legally. The FTC approvals years ago don't preclude re-examining or even reversing those acquisitions. Still, it's complicated.

"It may be that, if the court agrees with the government's theory of the case, divestiture is the only way to cure the anticompetitive harm," said Daniel A. Lyons, a law professor and antitrust expert at Boston College. "But courts traditionally break up companies only as a last resort, because unwinding two merged entities is difficult. In this case, it would involve undoing over a decade of integration."

Facebook doesn't operate the three companies as separate businesses and has been integrating func-

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tions of Instagram and WhatsApp with its main platform. For instance, users can now access messages sent on either app in Facebook's Messenger app.

WOULD A BREAKUP BE GOOD FOR USERS?

In the short term: probably not. In the medium-to-long term: maybe.

Any spinoff would involve undoing years of technical integration, and that's not easy to untangle. And a split would almost inevitably create issues that could annoy users, ranging from the loss of features added by Facebook to technical problems as engineers muck around with the apps' internal code.

When Facebook bought Instagram, the photo-sharing app was a fraction of its current size, with just 30 million users; today it has well over 1 billion. It offered a simple app that users really liked, although it didn't make any money. Facebook has since added a bevy of new features, such as chats, disappearing "stories" and the ability to shop and create and watch longer videos.

While some original Instagram users deride the additions, others have come to appreciate them — and might miss them if they were to disappear.

WhatsApp has stayed truer to its origins, although Facebook has big plans underway for the messaging app as well. For instance, shopping. Facebook argues that neither app would be where they are today if it hadn't thrown vast resources at expanding features, beefing up security and moderating content.

But a post-breakup Facebook might be so busy trying to fill Instagram- and WhatsApp-sized holes that startups formerly under its shadow could spring up with their own innovative services. Which could be good for everyone.

GIVEN ALL ITS PROBLEMS, WHY IS FACEBOOK STILL GROWING?

Facebook has 2.7 billion users, most of them outside of the U.S. In 2012, when it bought Instagram, it had 1 billion. While growth has slowed, nothing — not privacy concerns, not abuse and misinformation, not criticisms about the giant's power and dominance, not even unproven claims about bias against conservatives — have been able to reverse this trend.

Even when people declare they are leaving Facebook, they often end up returning. And there are still enough people in the world, especially outside of the U.S. and Europe, who join and make up for anyone who "flounces."

Of course, acquiring Instagram and WhatsApp has also helped Facebook fold more people into its "family of apps." It's easy to join Facebook and not as easy to leave — both technically and because everyone you know is on there, not to mention photos, memories and the ability to keep tabs on exes and former classmates.

## Exposure feared after New Hampshire speaker dies of COVID-19

By MICHAEL CASEY Associated Press

The speaker of the New Hampshire House of Representatives died of COVID-19, a medical examiner ruled Thursday, a day after the Republican's unexpected death, raising concerns that other members of one of the world's largest legislative bodies might have been exposed at their swearing-in last week.

Dick Hinch, who was sworn in Dec. 2 as leader of the state's newly Republican-led, 400-member Legislature, died Wednesday. He was 71 and had been starting his seventh two-year term in the state House.

His death was announced Wednesday night by his office, which did not give details of what it called "this unexpected tragedy." Hinch is the first New Hampshire speaker to die during the session, according to House Clerk Paul Smith.

The swearing-in of the House and the 24-member state Senate was held outdoors at the University of New Hampshire because of the coronavirus pandemic. Hinch was photographed wearing a mask, though it did not cover his nostrils.

More than a quarter of House members, most of them Democrats, skipped the ceremony after learning the day before that several Republican lawmakers had tested positive for the virus after attending a Nov. 20 indoor GOP caucus meeting where many attendees weren't wearing masks.

At least one Republican blamed Hinch's death on a culture pushed by anti-mask forces.



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"I believe the peer pressure exerted by those in the Republican Party who refuse to take reasonable precautions is the ultimate cause of Speaker Hinch's passing," Republican Rep. William Marsh, a retired doctor, said in an email to The Associated Press.

Acting Speaker Sherman Packard and Senate President Chuck Morse issued a statement Thursday saying they were "committed to protecting the health and safety of our fellow legislators and staff members who work at the statehouse in Concord."

They said they will consult with the state Department of Health and Human Services and the legislature's administrative office regarding any additional steps needed beyond the current contact tracing and COVID-19 protocols in place "to ensure the continued protection of our legislators and staff."

Health Commissioner Lori Shibinette would not say whether Hinch had tested positive for the coronavirus before his death and couldn't say when he began showing symptoms. The state will investigate, she said, including tracking down people whom Hinch might have exposed.

"Part of the case investigation is to investigate the date of onset of symptoms, and then we go back a couple of days from there and do all of the contact tracing," Shibinette said.

Republican Gov. Chris Sununu told reporters that Hinch's death was a "just a stark reminder, unfortunately, that this virus doesn't care if you're in a long-term care facility, or if you're an elected official."

"No one is immune. It's spreading in our community; it doesn't affect the elderly, it affects everyone, everywhere, and we have to stay vigilant," he said.

Democrats called on Sununu's office to provide testing for all statehouse staffers, as well as any lawmakers who attended the swearing-in ceremony last week. A spokesperson for Sununu said the Department of Health and Human Services has told legislative leaders that the necessary resources will be made available for testing.

The House held several sessions inside an arena last spring to allow for appropriate social distancing — with about four dozen Republicans who refused to wear masks in a separate area.

Packard, who represents Londonderry and is serving his 15th term in the House, will remain the acting speaker until the full House membership meets Jan. 6.

Republicans won majorities in both chambers in November. Hinch previously served as majority leader for the 2016-17 session and as minority leader when Democrats were in control the past two years.

In an emotional speech when he was elected speaker Dec. 2, Hinch urged lawmakers to view each other as "friends and colleagues," rather than members of opposing parties, particularly during a pandemic.

"I've been working with members of our caucus in good times and in bad for a number of terms. Long nights, stressful days, but charging ahead for what we believed was the proper course," he said. "Through that time, I've worked to ensure that everyone has a seat at the table."

## US budget deficit up 25.1% in first 2 months of budget year

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government's deficit in the first two months of the budget year ran 25.1% higher than the same period a year ago as spending to deal with the COVID pandemic soared while tax revenues fell.

The Treasury Department reported Thursday that with two months gone in the budget year, the deficit totaled \$429.3 billion, up from \$343.3 billion in last year's October-November period.

The deficit — the shortfall between what the government collects in taxes and what it spends — reflected an 8.9% jump in outlays, to \$886.6 billion, and a 2.9% decline in tax revenues, to \$457.3 billion.

Spending for the first two months of the budget year, which begins Oct. 1, also set a record, while the deficit over the same period was also a record.

The government's deficit for the budget year that ended Sept. 30 was a record-shattering \$3.1 trillion, fueled by the trillion-dollar-plus spending measures Congress passed in the spring to combat the economic downturn triggered by the pandemic. The recession, which has seen millions of people lose their jobs, has meant a drop in tax revenues.

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Congress is debating another relief package that could total nearly \$1 trillion, which would add to this year's red ink. Without taking into account further relief measures, the Congressional Budget Office has forecast that this year's deficit will total \$1.8 trillion and will remain above \$1 trillion each year through 2030.

Economist Nancy Vanden Houten with Oxford Economics said that the outlook for the deficit for the rest of this budget year "depends heavily on the course of the pandemic, the economic recovery and whether additional stimulus measures are passed."

She said that if Congress ends up approving an additional \$1 trillion in stimulus measures, she expects the deficit will total \$2 trillion for this budget year.

Before last year's \$3.1 trillion deficit, the record-holder was a \$1.4 trillion shortfall in 2009, when the government was fighting to lift the country out of a deep recession caused by the 2008 financial crisis.

The federal government's November deficit totaled \$145.3 billion.

## **Airbnb shares more than double in price in long-awaited IPO**

By DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writer

Airbnb proved its resilience in a year that has upended global travel. Now it needs to prove it can live up to investors' sky-high expectations.

The San Francisco-based home sharing company made a triumphant debut on the public market Thursday. Its shares closed at \$144.71 apiece, more than double the \$68 price that Airbnb had set. The closing price gave the company a valuation of just over \$100 billion. The shares are trading on the Nasdaq Stock Market under the symbol "ABNB."

Instead of the traditional ringing of the bell prior to the trading day, Airbnb presented a video of Airbnb hosts from around the world ringing their doorbells. In a video message, CEO Brian Chesky also thanked the millions of guests who have stayed at its listings. In 2019 alone, 54 million guests stayed at an Airbnb.

"You gave us hope that the idea of strangers staying together, in each others' homes, was not so crazy after all," Chesky said. "Airbnb is rooted in the fundamental idea that people are good and we're in this together."

Airbnb raised \$3.7 billion in its offering, making it the biggest U.S. IPO this year, according to Renaissance Capital, which tracks IPOs. The company had initially set a price range of \$44 to \$50 for its shares, but raised that to a range of \$56 to \$60 earlier this week indicating rising investor demand.

Airbnb's listing comes a day after another San Francisco-based company, DoorDash, soared through its initial public offering, the second largest after Airbnb's. DoorDash's stock jumped 85.8% to close at \$189.51. The meal delivery app raised \$3.4 billion with its offering.

Airbnb wants to add more hosts and properties, expand in markets like India, China and Latin America and attract new guests.

First, it will need to recover. Airbnb — which has never posted an annual profit — said its revenue fell 32% to \$2.5 billion in the first nine months of this year as the coronavirus forced travelers to cancel their plans. The company delayed its IPO — initially planned for the spring — and funded operations with \$2 billion in loans. In May, Airbnb cut 1,900 employees — or 25% of its workforce — and halted programs not related to its core business, like movie production.

But in the months since, Airbnb's business rebounded faster than hotels as travelers felt safer booking private homes away from crowded downtowns during the pandemic.

Airbnb said the number of nights and experiences booked, which plummeted 72% in April compared to year-ago levels, were down 20% in September. Airbnb debuted experiences — from cooking classes to surfing lessons — in 2016.

"I think travel demand is going to probably follow vaccinations and people's confidence," Chesky told The Associated Press in an interview. Demand may be spotty at first and will come back region by region and even country by country, Chesky said.

Travel itself may change post-pandemic, he said. Some people are already renting Airbnbs for months at a time, combining work and vacation. The company is also seeing more nearby travel as people just

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want to get away from their own homes.

But Chesky stresses that the desire to travel is “innate” and won’t go away.

“That’s just who we are as people,” he said.

Airbnb now has 7.4 million listings, from castles to treehouses, in 220 countries. They are operated by 4 million hosts. The company controls around 39% of the global short-term rental market, according to Euromonitor. It’s the market leader in Europe but trails VRBO, a vacation rental company owned by Expedia, in North America.

It could also expand its offerings further into boutique hotels, as it signaled with its 2019 purchase of last-minute hotel room supplier Hotel Tonight.

Chesky said focusing on unique properties — along with great hosts and experiences — will help the company win.

“Last year, 69% of our revenues were from repeat customers,” Chesky said.

Still, Airbnb acknowledges it will be difficult and expensive to attract new hosts and guests. Its revenue growth rate was already slowing in the years leading up to the pandemic.

“I do think the company will benefit from the pent-up travel demand once the vaccine is widely distributed, but why would someone want to buy into a travel-related, unprofitable business with slowing growth?” said Scott Rostan, the CEO of Training the Street, which advises Wall Street analysts.

Airbnb was born 13 years ago in the San Francisco apartment shared by Brian Chesky — now the company’s CEO — and Joe Gebbia, who leads its design studio and Airbnb.org, its charitable arm.

Chesky and Gebbia were looking for a way to subsidize their apartment. When they learned a design conference was coming to town and hotels were full, they set up a website and rented out air mattresses. They got three takers. In 2008, they formed a company with Nate Blecharczyk, a software engineer.

Home sharing wasn’t new. VRBO was launched in 1995. Booking.com, another older rival based in Amsterdam, mainly offers hotel rooms but has also branched into vacation rentals.

What Airbnb did differently was focus on affordability, letting hosts rent out spare rooms and sofa beds, said Tarik Dogru, an assistant professor in the Dedman College of Hospitality at Florida State University who studies Airbnb. Guests strayed further into neighborhoods than they would if they stayed at a hotel.

“Airbnb offered that feel of authenticity for those who are looking for it,” Dogru said.

That has sometimes been a problem. The company has angered some cities, which accuse it of promoting overtourism and making neighborhoods less affordable by taking housing off the market. Los Angeles, Paris and even Airbnb’s home city of San Francisco have passed laws restricting its rentals.

Airbnb’s rapid growth has also made it difficult for the company to ensure quality. Last November, Airbnb promised to verify all its listings to make sure they match the photos on its site. That effort is ongoing, Chesky said. It also spent the last year removing party houses and tightening rules for guests after a deadly 2019 shooting at an illegal Airbnb house party in California.

Relationships with hosts and guests have been rocky at times. After multiple reports of racist behavior targeting guests, Airbnb instituted a nondiscrimination statement that all guests and hosts must sign. It won’t display a guest’s profile photo until a property is booked, so a host can’t deny a room based on a guest’s race.

And earlier this year, hosts revolted after the company let guests cancel bookings and get full refunds due to the pandemic. Airbnb responded by promising \$250 million to hosts to help make up the shortfall.

Cary Gillenwater, a university professor and Airbnb host in Duivendrecht, The Netherlands, said the company didn’t provide much financial assistance to him, even though he let many guests cancel without penalties.

Gillenwater usually makes more than \$21,000 each year renting out a room on his property with its own entrance. This year, he’ll be lucky to make \$2,500. He’s looking into renting the room to office workers to use during the day.

Despite his experience, he’s considering investing in Airbnb and thinks it will continue to grow. Home sharing is invaluable for his family of five, he said, because it’s difficult to find hotel rooms that are large enough.

"I feel like there is a future for them, but we have to get through all this first," he said.

## 'Tis the pandemic season: White House parties on amid virus

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's the season for holiday gatherings, both official and informal. But it's also still very much pandemic season, and COVID-19 infection numbers are setting records in the nation's capital.

The District of Columbia government faces a unique challenge in balancing those two factors, as the capital is riddled with federal government property, where the D.C. government has limited enforcement powers.

President Donald Trump's administration has pushed ahead with as many as two dozen holiday events, including Thursday night's Congressional Ball. The D.C. Health Department can't do much more than track the numbers and hope its virus guidelines are being followed.

The first doses of a COVID-19 vaccine are expected to arrive soon, with the first batch reserved for health care professionals and first responders. But health officials warn that it could be months before the vaccine is readily available to the general population, and the average case rate in Washington has set records every day for the past week.

Last month, with virus numbers on the rise, Mayor Muriel Bowser dialed up the city's virus restrictions, limiting the size of indoor gatherings to 10 people. But the White House and other federal properties are not required to comply with those rules. Similarly, any COVID-19 protocol violations happening inside Washington's many foreign embassies or consulates would be outside the D.C. government's jurisdiction.

On Wednesday night, Trump hosted about 200 guests at the White House for the annual Hanukkah celebration. Photos and videos posted on social media showed most, but not all, attendees wearing masks and guests crowding tightly together to witness a brief speech by a maskless Trump.

On Thursday night, Trump was scheduled to attend and give remarks at the annual Congressional Ball. When asked this week about whether such activities were wise in the midst of a pandemic, Trump said he believed the events could be held safely.

"Well, they're Christmas parties, and frankly, we've reduced the number very substantially, as you know. And I see a lot of people at the parties wearing masks. I mean, I would say that I look out at the audience at those parties, and we have a lot of people wearing masks, and I think that's a good thing," he said.

The Bowser administration did not respond to requests for comment on the holiday gatherings. But her government has repeatedly called for residents to skip traditional Thanksgiving and Christmas gatherings this year.

Over the course of the pandemic, the D.C. government has found itself at odds with the White House, which operated for months in open violation of mask protocols and local virus restrictions. At least one event — a Sept. 26 Rose Garden gathering for Supreme Court nominee Amy Coney Barret — was later labeled a superspreader after multiple attendees tested positive.

Bowser's government has generally avoided direct confrontations with the Trump White House over virus protocols. But after the Rose Garden event, the D.C. Health Department took the extraordinary step of publicly complaining that vital contact tracing from the event had been insufficient.

Trump himself contracted the virus in October and was briefly hospitalized.

The State Department, led by Trump stalwart Mike Pompeo, has also scheduled a series of indoor holiday gatherings. A statement released by the State Department said all events followed local guidance and the department's own "Diplomacy Strong" virus protocols. That included a mask requirement for all attendees and temperature checks at the entrances.

"We've taken every precaution to thin out the number of individuals," the statement said. "We do not anticipate any problems in monitoring the number of individuals in these indoor spaces."

The statement noted that the sheer number of events was partially a reflection of that diligence, as normally large events were being broken up in multiple smaller gatherings to limit the crowds.

But the American Foreign Service Association, which represent career diplomats, said it was "very con-



cerned" by the plans.

"Celebrating the season by spending time with friends, colleagues and family is a time-honored tradition, but this year has to be different due to the pandemic," the association said in a statement. "We urge the Department to reverse course and model responsible behavior in accordance with its own guidelines."

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar suggested that partying during a pandemic isn't forbidden, as long as revelers follow the public health advice about wearing face coverings, washing their hands and watching how close they get to other people.

"You can engage in things, but wear your mask if you're not going to be socially distant," he told CNN in an interview Wednesday.

Azar said he felt "comfortable" at a recent White House party, although photos of those gatherings posted on social media have shown well-dressed guests packed into Christmas tree-lined hallways and few of them wearing face masks.

"I felt safe," Azar said. "I wore my mask, of course, at all times."

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Associated Press writers Darlene Superville and Matthew Lee in Washington contributed to this report.

## **VIRUS TODAY: 1 million cases in 5 days, FDA meets on vaccine**

By The Associated Press undefined

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

### THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— A Food and Drug Administration panel is meeting to decide whether to endorse the Pfizer vaccine. What normally would be a dull scientific event has attracted a massive following as the world anxiously awaits word on a vaccine.

— The U.S. recorded more than 3,000 new COVID-19 deaths Wednesday as hospitals sink deeper into crisis. That exceeds the number of Americans who died on Sept. 11 and D-Day.

— With the virus surging and new restrictions taking effect nationwide, more Americans are applying for unemployment. The 853,000 people who sought jobless benefits last week was the most since September.

**THE NUMBERS:** More than 1 million people have tested positive for the virus in the last five days. The U.S. is averaging 2,279 deaths per day.

**QUOTABLE:** "No one asked for this pandemic. I am trying to play the cards I am dealt with, and I have a really bad hand." - Montrell McGraw, an out-of-work restaurant employee in New Orleans.

**IN CASE YOU MISSED IT:** As the virus tears through the country, plenty of people are still commuting to work, on trains, buses and cars. The commute has become an anxiety-ridden ordeal for many of them.

**ON THE HORIZON:** The FDA has to sign off on the recommendation from the panel discussing the Pfizer drug.

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

## **Watchdog faults VA chief over handling of sex assault report**

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Confronted with a sexual assault allegation at a veterans hospital, Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie repeatedly sought to discredit the congressional aide who made the complaint and his staff worked to spread negative information about her while ignoring known problems of harassment at the facility, according to an investigative report released Thursday.

The 47-page report by the VA's internal watchdog paints a portrait of a department led by senior officials who were indifferent, if not hostile, to the issues at the department's flagship medical center in the nation's capital. It found that Wilkie acted unprofessionally if not unethically, in the case of Navy veteran Andrea Goldstein, a policy adviser to Democratic Rep. Mark Takano of California, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

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Associated Press policy is not to name victims or possible victims of sexual assault. Goldstein agreed to be publicly identified.

Wilkie and other senior officials declined to fully cooperate with the investigation. For that reason, VA Inspector General Michael Missal said he could not conclude whether Wilkie had acted illegally, allegedly by personally digging into the woman's past and working with a Republican congressman to dismiss her as a repeat complainer.

Wilkie said the allegations are false. "After nearly a year of investigation, interviews with 65 people and analysis of nearly 1.5 million documents, VA's inspector general cannot substantiate that I sought to investigate or asked others to investigate the veteran," Wilkie said.

Takano called on Wilkie to resign.

Goldstein said the report confirmed that Wilkie's response "was not to take ownership and ensure accountability, but to investigate me and attempt to impugn my character." She said she hopes Wilkie's successor "will center and prioritize eradicating sexual violence at VA, and actively work to gain women veterans' trust."

The findings are a black eye for a department that has seen improved performance and veterans' satisfaction with VA care under the Trump administration. But there also has been persistent turmoil, ethical challenges and disarray in its leadership. The department has received particular criticism for an unwelcoming culture for female veterans, the military's fastest growing subgroup.

"The response of Secretary Wilkie and senior VA officials to the veteran's complaint of sexual assault was troubling," Missal said in a statement. "Scrutinizing the veteran's background is contrary to VA's stated goal to serve veterans with respect. Every VA employee should commit to making VA facilities safe and welcoming places where such complaints are met with the highest standards of professionalism and responsiveness."

According to the report, Wilkie showed undue defensiveness after learning of the complaint in late 2019. He referred the matter as requested to the inspector general but spent parts of leadership meetings dismissing her concerns as politically motivated, the report said.

It said former VA Deputy Secretary Jim Byrne testified that Wilkie indicated to staff he had gathered negative information from the Pentagon and Rep. Dan Crenshaw, R-Texas, who knew Goldstein when she was in the Navy, and that she had made frivolous complaints previously.

The inspector general could not conclusively confirm that Wilkie improperly investigated her, in part because of his refusal to fully cooperate. But the report said they had "substantial sworn testimony" from staff of Wilkie repeatedly belittling her. Crenshaw denies discussing the case with Wilkie.

At another point, Curt Cashour, a VA deputy assistant secretary working in the press shop, urged a news organization to dig into Goldstein's background, according to the report. Cashour denied that he was directed to do this, but told investigators the tip was based on communications he had with Wilkie about Goldstein.

"The tone set by Secretary Wilkie appears to have influenced aspects of the initial VA police investigation and the conduct of other VA employees," the report said.

Wilkie became VA secretary in 2018 after President Donald Trump fired David Shulkin amid ethics troubles and inner rebellion at the department over Shulkin's leadership.

Trump repeatedly points to an improved VA as one of his top accomplishments. "For years, you'd always see vets and how badly treated they were," he told a Georgia rally last week. "You don't see that anymore."

President-elect Joe Biden is pledging to rebuild trust in the VA and better agency relations with Congress, including boosting medical services for women veterans. On Thursday, Biden said he will nominate Denis McDonough, who served as President Barack Obama's White House chief of staff, to be VA secretary.

Goldstein filed her assault complaint in September 2019 after visiting the VA medical center for an appointment. She has told media outlets that she was buying a snack in the hospital cafeteria when an unidentified man slammed his body into hers and propositioned her. Her case was ultimately closed by the inspector general's office and Justice Department this year due to lack of enough evidence.

The VA medical center in Washington has had a history of complaints from women about harassment

that were widely known by senior officials, according to the report.

William Hudson, the VA's acting general counsel, testified that after the complaint, he sought to improve the Washington facility but got no support. The report said senior officials showed "an unusual level of engagement" in the police investigation, with one officer reporting that a VA official had remarked that she "made a complaint similar to this before" and seemingly encouraged background checks on her.

If the VA had taken the complaint seriously and reviewed VA police reports, it would have learned that a female VA employee complained in May 2019 about being repeatedly sexually harassed by the same man, as well as information about the contractor's criminal history. VA officials did not examine the information, the report said.

The VA says it has strived to improve some services for women, though advocates say change has not come fast enough. A study released by the VA last year found 1 in 4 female veterans using VA health care reported inappropriate comments by male veterans on VA grounds.

Currently, about 10% of the nation's veterans are women. In the U.S. military forces, about 17% of those enlisted are women, compared with about 2% in 1973.

## Watchdog faults VA chief over handling of sex assault report

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Confronted with a sexual assault allegation at a veterans hospital, Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie repeatedly sought to discredit the congressional aide who made the complaint and his staff worked to spread negative information about her while ignoring known problems of harassment at the facility, according to an investigative report released Thursday.

The 47-page report by the VA's internal watchdog paints a portrait of a department led by senior officials who were indifferent, if not hostile, to the issues at the department's flagship medical center in the nation's capital. It found that Wilkie acted unprofessionally if not unethically, in the case of Navy veteran Andrea Goldstein, a policy adviser to Democratic Rep. Mark Takano of California, chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Associated Press policy is not to name victims or possible victims of sexual assault. Goldstein agreed to be publicly identified.

Wilkie and other senior officials declined to fully cooperate with the investigation. For that reason, VA Inspector General Michael Missal said he could not conclude whether Wilkie had acted illegally, allegedly by personally digging into the woman's past and working with a Republican congressman to dismiss her as a repeat complainer.

Wilkie said the allegations are false. "After nearly a year of investigation, interviews with 65 people and analysis of nearly 1.5 million documents, VA's inspector general cannot substantiate that I sought to investigate or asked others to investigate the veteran," Wilkie said.

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The findings are a black eye for a department that has seen improved performance and veterans' satisfaction with VA care under the Trump administration. But there also has been persistent turmoil, ethical challenges and disarray in its leadership. The department has received particular criticism for an unwelcoming culture for female veterans, the military's fastest growing subgroup.

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## UK's Johnson: 'Strong possibility' Brexit talks will fail

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — With a chaotic and costly no-deal Brexit three weeks away, leaders of both the European Union and United Kingdom saw an ever likelier collapse of trade talks Thursday, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson even spoke of a "strong possibility" of failure.

Both sides told their citizens to brace for a New Year's shock, as trade between the U.K. and the European mainland could face its biggest upheaval in almost a half century.

Johnson's gloomy comments came as negotiators sought to find a belated breakthrough in technical



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talks, where their leaders failed three times in political discussions over the past week.

Facing a Sunday deadline set after inconclusive talks between EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Johnson Wednesday night, both sides realized their drawn-out four-year divorce might well end on bad terms.

"I do think we need to be very very clear, there is now a strong possibility — a strong possibility — that we will have a solution that is much more like an Australian relationship with the EU," Johnson said, using his phrasing for a no-deal exit.

Australia does not have a free trade deal with the 27-nation EU.

"That doesn't mean it's a bad thing," Johnson added.

On the EU side, reactions were equally pessimistic.

"I am a bit more gloomy today, as far as I can hear," Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven said at a EU summit where von der Leyen briefed the 27 leaders on her unsuccessful dinner with Johnson.

"She was not really confident that all difficulties could be resolved," said David Sassoli, president of the EU parliament that will have to approve any deal brokered.

A cliff-edge departure would threaten hundreds of thousands of jobs and cost tens of billions of dollars in commerce.

To prepare for a sudden exit on Jan. 1, the EU on Thursday proposed four contingency measures to make sure that at least air and road traffic would continue as smoothly as possible between both sides for the next six months.

It also proposed that fishermen should still have access to each other's waters for up to a year, to limit the commercial damage of a no-deal split. The plans depend on the U.K. offering similar initiatives. The move was indicative of how the EU saw a bad breakup as ever more realistic.

Johnson warned that "yes, now is the time for the public and businesses to get ready for January 1, because, believe me, there's going to be change either way."

For months now, trade talks have faltered on Britain's insistence that as a sovereign nation it must not be bound indefinitely to EU rules and regulations — even if it wants to export freely to the bloc. That same steadfastness has marked the EU in preserving its cherished single market and seeking guarantees against a low-regulation neighbor that would be able to undercut its businesses.

After Johnson's midnight return to London, reactions were equally dim there.

U.K. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the Sunday deadline was a "moment of finality" — though he added "you can never say never entirely."

In four years of talks on the U.K.'s departure terms and a future trade relationship, such self-imposed deadlines have been broken time and again since Britain voted to leave the EU.

Jan. 1 though is different, since the U.K. has made the 11-month transition time since its Jan. 31 official departure legally binding.

"There are big ideological, substantive and policy gaps that need to be bridged," said Mujtaba Rahman, Europe managing director for the Eurasia Group. "They're so far apart and the time is so limited now."

A no-deal split would bring tariffs and other barriers that would hurt both sides, although most economists think the British economy would take a greater hit because the U.K. does almost half of its trade with the bloc.

Months of trade talks have failed to bridge the gaps on three issues — fishing rights, fair-competition rules and the governance of future disputes.

While both sides want a deal, they have fundamentally different views of what it entails. The EU fears Britain will slash social and environmental standards and pump state money into U.K. industries, becoming a low-regulation economic rival on the bloc's doorstep — hence the demand for strict "level playing field" guarantees in exchange for access to its markets.

"I still hope that we will find a solution but it's half-half," said Luxembourg Prime Minister Xavier Bettel, before adding

"I prefer no deal than a bad deal."

Jill Lawless reported from London.

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## Fears and tension mount for commuters still heading to work

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — One by one, the fears creep in as Aura Morales rides the bus to her job at CVS in Los Angeles. A passenger boards without a mask but she doesn't dare confront him. More riders board and it's impossible to stay six feet apart. Driving to work isn't an option; Morales can't afford a car, especially after her work hours were cut.

"I get on the bus, I just pray," said the 53-year-old.

As the coronavirus rages across the U.S., grocery workers, health care professionals, university staffers, cleaning crews and others who don't have the option to work from home must weigh safety against affordability when deciding how best to commute to their jobs.

Those who can have ditched public transportation and drive to work instead, contributing to a boon in used car sales in the U.S., which spiked to their highest level on record in June, according to Edmunds.

Meanwhile, public transit agencies have seen ridership plummet, not only because of all the people opting for cars but also so many are now working from home or have lost their jobs altogether. Transit ridership fell 62% nationwide in the third quarter compared to last year, according to the American Public Transportation Association. Heavy rail fared even worse, dropping 72% in the third quarter.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency warned that without an influx of cash it would have to lay off up to 1,226 full-time workers, or 22% of its workforce, and provide just 35% of the service it offered before the pandemic. New York's transit agency proposed slashing subway and bus service by 40%, cutting commuter rail service in half and laying off nearly 9,400 positions. Washington D.C.'s transit system warned of layoffs and shorter hours as federal financial assistance dries up.

"It really is survival mode for the industry, or we're going to see dramatic reductions in their service deliveries, which would really be counter-productive," said Paul Skoutelas, APTA's President and CEO. "Essential workers rely on public transit by and large, and we can't let them down."

In September, 71% of U.S. workers across all sectors were commuting to physical workplaces while 29% were doing their jobs remotely, according to a survey of 1,015 employed adults by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Those relying on public transit have already seen schedules cut since the start of the pandemic in March, leading to packed crowds on fewer buses and trains. Mounting tensions over lax social distancing and mask-wearing as coronavirus cases spike have only made their commuting experience worse.

Hipolito Andon, 44, rides the subway to Rockefeller Center in Manhattan where he works as a porter cleaning and maintaining the building. He and his wife, who takes a bus to her school cooking job, are diabetic, increasing their risk of complications if they catch COVID-19. Andon's son takes public transit to a porter job as well. As soon as they get home, everyone showers and changes clothes.

As the pandemic has dragged on, Andon sees more people boarding trains without masks.

"You hear people muttering, 'Why is this guy not wearing a mask?' But there's no confrontation. People just move away," Andon said.

Alexandra Fee chose her apartment in Arlington, Virginia based on its proximity to the buses. But when the 28-year-old was confronted with returning to her job as a university academic adviser, she plunked down cash for a used car after noticing the full buses that passed by her home, sometimes skipping her stop because they had reached capacity.

"If I plan on catching a bus at a certain time and they were too full that morning, would I then have to wait a half-hour for another bus?" Fee wondered.

Traffic patterns show a growing number of commuters making the same calculation.

Dozens of cities worldwide, including Paris and London, saw traffic rebound to pre-pandemic levels in

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September despite the fact that many major employers were keeping their workforces at home, according to Inrix, a company that analyzes traffic data. In the U.S., traffic in smaller cities from Colorado Springs to Knoxville, Tennessee surpassed pre-pandemic levels during the morning commute. In the Seattle region, transit use was down 70% while the amount people drove was down just 20%, according to Inrix.

"What in many ways the pandemic did, in terms of automobile ownership and people's general use of various forms of mobility, is it reaffirmed the value of owning the means of transportation, especially in times of crisis," said Stephen Beck, founder and managing partner of cg42, a management consulting firm.

Parking lots are also filling up on weekday mornings in parts of New York, according to SP+, which operates more than 200 parking lots in the city. Revenue from lots near entertainment venues and hotels was down in early November but revenue from lots where cars arrive by 10 a.m. on weekdays was up 4% to 10% compared with pre-pandemic levels, said Jeff Eckerling, chief growth officer at SP+.

"Sitting here today, compared to where we were, this is great," he said.

For the millions of others riding subways, buses and trains daily, they must set aside their fears in order to get to work.

Sule Sokoni, a porter at a co-op building on Manhattan's Upper West Side, positions himself on his one-and-a-half-hour subway ride so he can see who's getting in and out, and will switch cars if someone boards coughing or without a mask instead of dozing off for the long ride. He's converting a bicycle into an electric bike so he can ride it to work instead.

Indeed, bike-sharing has become a more attractive alternative to public transit during the pandemic. Lyft saw its shared bike rides increase by 12% in Chicago this fall compared to the same time last year, and by 7% in New York.

Uber is also trying to capture wary commuters, offering van services and shared rides to employees who work for the same company. The number of businesses using Uber's commuting products doubled from the start of the pandemic to September, said Ronnie Gurion, global head of Uber for Business.

"More and more companies are really looking for and thinking about how do I get more involved in the commute needs of my employees," Gurion said.

Most workers are on their own, however, taking calculated risks.

In New York's Bronx, two dozen passengers crowded together on a recent day to board a cross-town bus with nearly every seat full during the evening rush. Riders wore masks, but once inside, many sat just inches apart from each other.

Virginia Rodriguez hung back on the sidewalk, checking her smartphone to see when the next bus would arrive, hoping it would be less crowded as she headed home from her hospital job handling insurance.

"It's stressful in the sense that you don't know who's going to be next to you," Rodriguez said. "I try to keep my distance, and keep my mask on at all times. There's nothing else I can do. I just hope I don't get sick."

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Associated Press Writer Emily Swanson contributed from Washington.

## Minneapolis approves cuts to police budget, not staffing

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Minneapolis City Council unanimously approved a budget early Thursday that will shift about \$8 million from the police department toward violence prevention and other programs — but will keep the mayor's targeted staffing levels for sworn officers intact, averting a possible veto.

Mayor Jacob Frey, who had threatened to veto the entire budget if the council went ahead with its plan to cap police staffing, said the vote was a defining moment for the city, which has experienced soaring crime rates amid calls to defund the police since the May 25 death of George Floyd.

"We all share a deep and abiding reverence for the role our local government plays in service of the people of our city," Frey said. "And today, there are good reasons to be optimistic about the future in Minneapolis."

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Spokesman Mychal Vlatkovich said Frey intends to sign the budget.

City Council members had initially approved a proposal to cut the city's authorized police force to 750 officers, down from the current 888, beginning in 2022. But they changed course late Wednesday after the mayor called the move "irresponsible." The council voted 7-6 on Wednesday to keep the cap at 888.

"Tonight the City Council passed a budget that represents a compromise, and also a big step forward into a more compassionate and effective public safety future," said City Council member Steve Fletcher, co-author of the proposal to lower the cap on staffing. He said the City Council has more work to do and "we cannot afford to remain stuck in the past any longer."

Supporters call the City Council's plan "Safety for All," the latest version of the "defund the police" movement that Minneapolis and other cities have considered since Floyd's death ignited mass demonstrations against police brutality and a nationwide reckoning with racism.

The plan cuts nearly \$8 million from Frey's \$179 million policing budget and redirects it to mental health teams, violence prevention programs and other initiatives.

More than 300 Minneapolis residents signed up to speak about the proposal Wednesday, with some pleading for City Council members to deliver the reforms they promised after Floyd's death, and others warning it would be irresponsible to cut officers.

Some in favor of the plan called police officers cowards, gang members, white supremacists or terrorists. They spoke about violence that African Americans and other minorities have experienced at the hands of police. Those against the plan said the City Council was acting irresponsibly and has bungled its attempts to bring change. They cited increasing violence, saying they don't feel safe.

"The place I grew up this summer burned," said Will Roberts, who grew up in the Longfellow neighborhood. "And it burned because of police misconduct."

Loraine Teel, of south Minneapolis, said she supported the mayor's position, telling council members: "You cannot achieve reform without a plan that includes the cooperation of those being reformed ... You have failed miserably."

Cities around the U.S., including Los Angeles, New York City and Portland, Oregon, are shifting funds from police departments to social services programs in an effort to provide new solutions for problems traditionally handled by police. Such cuts have led some departments to lay off officers, cancel recruiting classes or retreat from hiring goals.

In Minneapolis, violent crime rates have surged since the death of Floyd, a Black man who was handcuffed and pleading for air for several minutes while Derek Chauvin, a white former officer, pressed his knee against his neck. Chauvin and three others were charged in Floyd's death and are expected to stand trial in March.

Police have recorded 532 gunshot victims this year as of last Thursday, more than double the same period a year ago. Carjackings have also spiked to 375 so far this year, up 331% from the same period last year. Violent crimes have topped 5,100, compared with just over 4,000 for the same period in 2019.

"This summer happened because George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis Police Department and it wasn't an accident, it's because the system of policing we know now is not just racist, but it doesn't create safety for all," said Oluchi Omeoga, a cofounder of Black Visions, which supports "Safety for All" as a step toward more transformational change.

Due to austerity forced by the coronavirus pandemic, the mayor's proposal already includes a \$14 million cut to the department compared with its original 2020 budget, mostly through attrition. Frey aims to hold the number of sworn officers around 770 through 2021 with hopes of eventually increasing the force to its current authorized cap of 888. The department is already down by about 120 — partly due to officers claiming post-traumatic stress disorder from a summer of unrest — with more preparing to leave amid retirements and poor morale.

A proposal over the summer to dismantle the department and replace it with a "Department of Community Safety and Violence Prevention" initially had support from a majority of the council but faltered when a separate city commission voted against putting it on the November ballot. The city was paying



\$4,500 a day at one point for private security for three council members who reported getting threats after supporting defunding.

## **Biden hails historic Pentagon pick, but some Dems in a bind**

By WILL WEISSERT, ROBERT BURNS, JONATHAN LEMIRE and LISA MASCARO Associated Press  
WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden on Wednesday introduced his choice for secretary of defense, calling retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin the right man for a potentially volatile moment in global security while hailing the prospect of the first African American to lead the Pentagon.

But the nomination is putting some congressional Democrats in a political bind. In the past, they've opposed naming recently retired military officers to a post typically occupied by civilians, yet they don't want to defy their party's incoming president nor be seen as blocking history.

"He is the right person for this job at the right moment," Biden said at a Delaware event with Austin, adding, "He's loved by the men and women of the armed forces, feared by our adversaries, known and respected by our allies."

The choice has both won applause and provoked consternation on Capitol Hill.

Three years ago, Congress waived a law prohibiting the appointment as defense secretary of military officers who have been retired fewer than seven years. That allowed confirmation of President Donald Trump's choice for the post, retired U.S. Marine Gen. Jim Mattis.

That came, however, over the objections of some Democrats, who may now have to reverse themselves to back Austin, who served 41 years in the Army and retired in 2016. Biden said his pick understands the need to keep a clear distance between military and civilian rule, but he added, "Just as they did for Jim Mattis, I am asking Congress to grant a waiver."

"There's a good reason for this law that I fully understand and respect," said the president-elect, whose son Beau, the former Delaware attorney general who died of brain cancer in 2015, served as an attorney on Austin's military staff in Iraq. "I would not be asking for this exception if I did not believe this moment doesn't call for it."

Austin said he comes to "this new role as a civilian leader, with military experience to be sure, but also with a deep appreciation and reverence for the prevailing wisdom of civilian control of our military."

"I recognize that being a member of the president's Cabinet requires a different perspective and unique responsibility from a career in uniform," Austin said. "And I intend to keep this at the forefront of my mind."

Austin's nomination as the first Black leader of the Pentagon could have even more resonance at a time of extraordinary racial tension in the country. Before announcing that he'd settled on Austin, Biden was facing pressure from activists over a lack of diversity in some of the key posts of the Cabinet he was building.

Before Mattis, the last time Congress approved a waiver was in 1950, for retired Gen. George Marshall. The waiver would have to be approved by both congressional chambers, giving the House a rare say over a nomination that otherwise would require only Senate confirmation.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., has followed Biden's lead, announcing her support and calling Austin "particularly well-positioned to lead during this precarious moment."

The Senate could prove more precarious, though. Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York struck a cautious tone Wednesday when asked about a waiver for Austin, saying, "I'm gonna have to study that."

"Bottom line is that Austin's a very good nominee and we'll figure out where to go from there," Schumer said.

Rhode Island Sen. Jack Reed, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said at the time of the Mattis confirmation, "Waiving the law should happen no more than once in a generation. ... Therefore, I will not support a waiver for future nominees."

Now Reed is suggesting he'd be open to the possibility for Austin. "I feel, in all fairness, you have to give the opportunity to the nominee to explain himself or herself," he said Tuesday.

Similarly, Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin opposed the waiver for Mattis but now says of Biden's nominee, "I was so impressed with his performance that I would consider a waiver for Austin, once I get to know him."

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Civilian control of the military has long been rooted in Americans' wariness of large standing armies with the power to overthrow the government they are intended to serve. That is why the president is the civilian commander in chief, and it is the rationale behind the prohibition against a recently retired military officer serving as defense secretary.

Some Democrats who agreed to the 2017 waiver saw Mattis as tempering Trump's impulsive nature and offsetting his lack of national security experience. Now the Mattis period at the Pentagon is viewed by some as an argument against waiving the rule again.

Mattis' critics say he surrounded himself with military officers at the expense of a broader civilian perspective. He resigned in December 2018 in protest of Trump's policies.

Connecticut Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal said despite the historic racial angle of Austin's nomination, he would not vote for a waiver because it "would contravene the basic principle that there should be civilian control over a nonpolitical military."

"That principle is essential to our democracy. ... I think (it) has to be applied, unfortunately, in this instance," Blumenthal said Tuesday.

Sen. Tim Kaine, a Virginia Democrat, was noncommittal, saying in a statement he'd "closely evaluate the implications for waiving the National Security Act requirement twice in just four years." Hawaii Democratic Sen. Brian Schatz, went further Tuesday, saying, "This is becoming a trend, and I don't like it. It is difficult to imagine voting for a Mattis waiver and not an Austin waiver."

With the Senate almost evenly divided politically — with the outcome of two Georgia special elections pending next month — Biden can lose only a limited number of Democrats, which is unusual for an incoming president from the same party.

That means he'll need some Republican support to get Austin confirmed, though, that will be forthcoming, at least in some quarters. Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., the current chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said, "I always support waivers."

Austin is widely admired for his military service, which includes leading troops in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan and overseeing U.S. military operations throughout the greater Middle East as head of Central Command.

Still, opposition to another waiver has also come from outside Congress. Kori Schake, director of foreign and defense policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute think tank, tweeted that she had reluctantly supported a waiver for Mattis because she believed Trump posed "a threat to Constitutional governance domestically and the liberal order internationally. Thankfully, Biden is neither, so the circumstances don't support a waiver."

Weissert, Burns and Mascaro reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Matthew Daly and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

This story has been clarified to provide a fuller quote from Sen. Brian Schatz of Hawaii.

## US B-52H bombers fly to Middle East in mission to deter Iran

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a new show of military might, two American bomber aircraft flew from the United States to the Middle East on Thursday, in a round-trip mission that U.S. officials said covered a wide swath of the region and was a direct message of deterrence to Iran.

The flight of the two massive B-52H Stratofortress bombers, the second such mission in less than a month, was designed to underscore America's continuing commitment to the Middle East even as President Donald Trump's administration withdraws thousands of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.

The long-range heavy bombers, which are capable of carrying both conventional and nuclear weapons, are a formidable sight and are flown less frequently in the Middle East than smaller combat aircraft, such as American fighter jets. Adversaries often complain about bomber flights in their region, deeming them a provocative show of force.

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"The ability to fly strategic bombers halfway across the world in a non-stop mission and to rapidly integrate them with multiple regional partners demonstrates our close working relationships and our shared commitment to regional security and stability," Gen. Frank McKenzie, the top U.S. commander for the Middle East, said in a statement.

The troop cuts coupled with the impending departure of the USS Nimitz aircraft carrier strike group in the Gulf have fueled allies' concerns that the U.S. is abandoning the region. Those worries are compounded by fears that Iran may strike out at the U.S. or allies in retaliation for the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.

Iran has blamed the death on Israel, which has been suspected in previous killings of Iranian nuclear scientists.

U.S. officials are also worried about a possible Iranian retaliatory strike on the anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani, and senior Iraqi militia leaders near Baghdad's airport in early January.

Iranian-backed militias routinely launch rockets near installations in Iraq where U.S. and Iraqi troops are based, and officials worry about a larger, more deadly assault.

"We do not seek conflict," McKenzie said, "but we must remain postured and committed to respond to any contingency or in opposition to any aggression."

A senior military official, who spoke to a small group of reporters on the condition of anonymity to provide details of the mission, said the administration believes that the risk of an Iranian attack on U.S. or allied interests in the region is a bit higher than normal now, and the Pentagon wants to ensure that Tehran thinks twice before doing anything. Adding to the concerns is the presidential transition in the U.S. following Joe Biden's November victory over Trump. The official said Iran or other adversaries often believe the U.S. may be weaker or slower to respond during a political transition, which American officials flatly deny.

Bomber deployments and short-term flights to the Middle East and Europe have been used in the past to message Iran, a few times in the last two years.

According to officials, the bombers flew out of Barksdale Air Force Base in Louisiana on Wednesday and conducted the flight into Thursday. Officially nicknamed the Stratofortress and informally known as the Big Ugly Fat Fellow, the B-52 gained lasting fame in Vietnam as an aerial terror.

The two bombers left the U.S. Wednesday evening, arrived in the Middle East early Thursday morning, and then began the return trip home. They flew a roughly 36-hour mission, traveling across the Atlantic Ocean and Europe, then over the Arabian Peninsula and down the Persian Gulf, making a wide loop near Qatar and staying a safe distance from Iran's coastline, said the military official.

The flight was coordinated with U.S. allies in the region, and aircraft from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar flew with the bombers as they traveled through the airspace, according to the official.

A senior defense official said the bombers did not drop any munitions of any type during the flight. On some training missions, U.S. aircraft may deploy live, inert or simulated conventional weapons in order to ensure forces stay proficient.

U.S. bombers from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota flew a similar mission in late November.

The USS Nimitz, and as many as three other warships in its strike group, had been scheduled to head home by the end of the year, but they have been held in the region and no new timeline on the departure has been given. Officials, however, have made it clear that the ships' return hasn't been decided and the additional time in the Gulf area is open-ended.

The Pentagon announced last month that the U.S. will reduce troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan by mid-January, asserting that the decision fulfills Trump's pledge to bring forces home from America's long wars. Under the accelerated pullout, the U.S. will cut the number of troops in Afghanistan from more than 4,500 to 2,500 and in Iraq from about 3,000 to 2,500.

## Justices rule Muslim men can sue FBI agents over no-fly list

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — A unanimous Supreme Court ruled on Thursday that Muslim men who were placed on the government's no-fly list because they refused to serve as FBI informants can seek to hold federal agents financially liable.

The justices continued a string of decisions friendly to religious interests in holding that the men could sue the agents under the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act for what it calls "appropriate relief."

"The question here is whether 'appropriate relief' includes claims for money damages against Government officials in their individual capacities. We hold that it does," Justice Clarence Thomas wrote for the court.

The three foreign-born men claim in the lawsuit that their religious convictions led them to rebuff agents who wanted them to inform on people in their Muslim communities. "This is a clear prohibition in the Islamic faith," Ramzi Kassem, the men's lawyer, told the justices during arguments in October.

The men claim the agents then placed or kept them on the list of people prevented from flying because they are considered a threat. The men have since been removed from the no-fly list.

A trial court dismissed the suit once their names had been dropped from the list, but they argued that the retaliation they claimed "cost them substantial sums of money: airline tickets wasted and income from job opportunities lost," Thomas wrote. The federal appeals court in New York agreed with the Muslim men, and the high court affirmed that decision.

There's no guarantee the men will win their case or collect anything from the agents. Thomas noted that the agents can argue that they should be shielded from any judgment by the doctrine of qualified immunity, which the Supreme Court has said protects officials as long as their actions don't violate clearly established law or constitutional rights they should have known about.

Lori Windham, senior counsel at the public interest law firm the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, said governments too often change policies to avoid court judgments. "We're glad the Supreme Court unanimously emphasized that the government can't expect to be let off the hook by simply changing its tune at the last second. This is a good decision that makes it easier to hold the government accountable when it violates Americans' religious liberties," Windham said.

In recent years, the court has ruled in favor of people and companies asserting claims under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, or the Constitution's guarantee of religious liberty.

The decision involving the no-fly list was among four issued Thursday in cases that were argued in October. In the others, all decided unanimously, the court:

—Reinstated convictions for rape by a military officer and two enlisted men, reversing a military court ruling that had thrown them out because too much time had elapsed between the assaults and the prosecutions. The cases involve women who for different reasons initially decided not to press charges but later changed their minds. The crimes all were committed before 2006. The Uniform Code of Military Justice has been changed so that there is no statute of limitations on rape charges.

—Revived a provision of the Delaware Constitution, struck down by a lower court, that requires that appointments to Delaware's major courts reflect a partisan balance. The justices did not rule on the substance of the requirement. Instead they held that lawyer James R. Adams, a political independent who challenged the provision, didn't have the legal right to do so because he had not shown that at the time he brought his lawsuit that he was "able and ready" to apply to be a judge.

—Reversed lower-court decisions that had prevented an Arkansas pharmacy law passed in 2015 from going into effect. The law, Act 900, was enacted to ensure that pharmacies are fully reimbursed for the cost of drugs they dispense to customers.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett had not yet joined the court when the cases were argued and did not take part in the decisions.

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Associated Press writer Jessica Gresko contributed to this report.

## Across US and Europe, pandemic's grip on economies tightens

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer



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WASHINGTON (AP) — The worsening of the viral pandemic across the United States and Europe is threatening their economies and intensifying pressure on governments and central banks on both continents to intervene aggressively.

In a worrisome sign of the harm the virus is inflicting in the U.S, the government said Thursday that the number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits jumped last week to 853,000 — the most since September. The surge in jobless claims made clear that many companies are still shedding workers as states reimpose business shutdowns and consumers avoid shopping, traveling or dining out.

Consumers thus far haven't spent as much this holiday shopping season as they have in previous years, according to credit and debit card data, and last month U.S. employers added jobs at the slowest pace since April. Restaurants, bars and retailers all cut jobs in November.

Responding to similar pressures, the European Central Bank announced Thursday that it will ramp up its bond-buying program to try to hold down longer-term interest rates to spur borrowing and spending. The ECB's action coincided with the highest single-day viral death toll in Germany, Europe's largest economy, and the shutdown of restaurants, bars, gyms, movie theaters and museums in France.

The coronavirus "is having an impact on consumers, it is having a big impact on the labor force, it is having an impact on businesses," said Gus Faucher, an economist at PNC Financial. "There are reasons to be concerned."

When the U.S. Federal Reserve meets next week, it may provide more detailed guidance on how long it will continue its own bond-buying program, which could reassure markets that its purchases won't end anytime soon. The Fed could announce other moves, such as shifting more of its purchases to longer-term bonds to try to further cut long-term borrowing rates and encourage spending. But most analysts think the Fed will keep that step in reserve.

Last week, the number of Americans who applied for jobless benefits jumped from 716,000 in the previous week. Before the coronavirus paralyzed the economy in March, weekly jobless claims typically numbered only about 225,000.

The surge in laid-off people seeking aid could raise pressure on Congress and the Trump administration to agree on another financial aid package to bolster the economy through what is sure to be a financially painful winter for millions.

A bipartisan group of senators has proposed a \$908 billion package that would extend two unemployment benefit programs that are set to expire Dec. 26 for an additional four months. Without such an extension, more than 9 million unemployed workers would lose benefits, making it even harder for them to pay bills, buy food and keep up with rent or mortgage payments.

One disturbing sign in Thursday's report on jobless claims was that the total number of people who are receiving state-provided unemployment aid rose for the first time in three months — from 5.5 million to 5.8 million. The increase indicated that some companies have pulled back on hiring.

AnnElizabeth Konkol, an economist at the job listing website Indeed, said that increase was particularly concerning because it suggested that the December jobs report, to be released in early January, could show that the U.S. economy suffered a net loss of jobs in a month for the first time since April.

"Today's report is the first overt signal of a backward slide," Konkol said. "It's evident the labor market is still in crisis."

One of the jobless, Montrell McGraw, said he just had to cancel his car insurance and now can't drive because his unemployment benefit of just \$222 a week isn't enough to keep up with the payments. He is also behind on his rent.

He managed to cover all his bills when the federal government was providing \$600 a week in jobless aid. But that program ended in July. And his current unemployment aid will expire in just over two weeks if it isn't extended.

McGraw, 26, lost his job as a cook at a Hilton Hotel in New Orleans, where he lives, back in March just after the virus erupted in the United States. He said he's applied for 35 jobs without any luck. His primary work experience is in restaurants, few of which are hiring. It will be even harder to search for work with-

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out a car.

Most of the available jobs he sees involve trucking or work on offshore oil rigs, which require certifications he can't afford to obtain. McGraw has also worked with an advocacy group, Stand Up Louisiana, in support of extending jobless benefits.

"I didn't ask for this — no one asked for this pandemic," he said. "I am trying to play the cards I am dealt with, and I have a really bad hand."

He said he hopes that Congress will agree soon to extend jobless aid.

"Maybe then I can get my car insurance back," he said.

Across the U.S. economy are widespread signs of sluggish growth. According to data from Opportunity Insights, a research center affiliated with Harvard and Brown universities, spending on debit and credit cards — a critical barometer of growth — sank nearly 12% in the week that ended Nov. 29 compared with a year earlier. That marked a sharp drop from the previous week, when such spending was down just 2.3% from 12 months earlier.

And last week's jump in jobless claims ranged broadly. New applications surged more than 47,000 in California, 31,000 in Illinois, 17,000 in New York and 13,000 in Georgia. Many states, particularly California, have adopted sweeping new restrictions on business activity. But even some states that generally haven't imposed stricter rules on businesses reported sharp increases in jobless claims last week. In Texas, for example, they jumped by nearly 20,000 to 45,000.

The worsening figures may partly reflect a rebound after applications for unemployment benefits had fallen during the Thanksgiving holiday week. Still, the increase was much larger than most economists had expected.

All told, more than 19 million people are still dependent on some type of unemployment benefit. And unless Congress acts soon, nearly half of them will lose that aid in just over two weeks. That's when two jobless aid programs that the federal government created in the spring are set to expire.

The first program provides unemployment benefits to the self-employed and contract workers, who weren't eligible in the past. The second program is the one that extends jobless aid for 13 weeks.

With a coronavirus vaccine nearing approval, many economists are optimistic that the economy will rebound strongly next year. But most warn that another federal financial relief package is urgently needed to support unemployed workers, small businesses and state and local governments until then.

## Gun restrictions face uphill battle even under Biden

By LISA MARIE PANE Associated Press

The gun debate in America will soon enter a new chapter with a Democrat in the White House after four years under President Donald Trump in which gun control advocates developed a long wish list for reform amid a spate of large-scale mass killings in places like Las Vegas, El Paso and Parkland, Florida.

But any hope that Joe Biden will usher in a new era of restrictions on firearms is highly unlikely because of the same polarization in Washington that has tripped up similar efforts under past administrations.

The items on the agenda — largely relegated to the political shelf in recent years — include renewing a ban on AR-style rifles, universal background checks, restrictions on high-capacity magazines and a federal red flag law designed to prevent people at risk of harming themselves or others from purchasing a firearm.

But virtually all of those will require Congress to act. And regardless the outcome in two Senate races in Georgia that will determine which party holds the majority in that chamber, it will be a tall order to get a majority of lawmakers on board.

One key reason is because the issues have become so polarized. Years ago, gun politics crossed party lines, and it was easier for Republicans and Democrats to find common ground.

"It used to be a cross-cutting issue, there used to be Democrats that were very pro-gun and Democratic legislators who won districts in part on their pro-gun views," said Matt Grossmann, an associate professor at Michigan State University and director of its Institute for Public Policy and Social Research who follows gun politics. "And you just don't have that anymore."

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The number of firearms in circulation has mushroomed in the past 12 years, starting in President Barack Obama's administration when gun owners feared he would push through significant restrictions.

It continued unabated during Trump's lone term. In the first years of his tenure, Americans amassed firearms amid fears about new gun measures following mass killings. The gun buying picked up even more steam in the past year as civil unrest, economic turmoil and the pandemic propelled unparalleled buying sprees.

And with the pandemic dominating the conversation, guns took a back seat in the 2020 election.

Gun control groups still want to be heard, however. For one, they want universal background checks that would require the review for virtually every sale of a firearm, and a ban on online sales of firearms, ammunition and parts.

Among the legislative proposals, the one viewed as having some bipartisan support is a federal "red flag" law that would make it easier to temporarily confiscate firearms from someone deemed a risk to themselves or others. Currently, fewer than two dozen states have such laws on the books.

Gun control groups also are more aggressively underscoring the fears they have about the abundance of guns in homes of Americans. They worry about the toll it will have on households where firearms are present, both through murder-suicides and suicides.

During a news conference Thursday announcing their priorities for Biden to take executive action on guns, Everytown for Gun Safety cited statistics that show calls into domestic violence hotlines and suicide hotlines up, and gun violence in cities on the rise. Their list of priorities includes restricting access to untraceable "ghost guns" and cracking down on people who are able to purchase a firearm if the FBI background check isn't conducted within the required 3 business days.

"The need for action is urgent," said Michael-Sean Spence, Everytown's director of community safety initiatives. "This was already a public health crisis before COVID arrived — and the pandemic has made things far worse."

There are other steps Biden can take administratively. Among the key items likely to be pursued is a rule enacted in the waning weeks of the Obama administration but scrapped by Trump soon after taking office: requiring the Social Security Administration to provide information to the gun-buying background check system on recipients with a mental disorder so severe they cannot work or handle their own benefit checks. The rule would affect an estimated 75,000 beneficiaries.

The most coveted piece of legislation by gun control advocates has been a renewal of the ban on "assault weapons" that expired in 2004. Biden played a central role in pushing through that decade-long ban, and he has pledged to push for another ban on the semiautomatic long guns that have only surged in popularity since their return to the market.

Much has changed since that ban was pushed through — from the political landscape to the saturation of those firearms in the civilian market.

In the years leading up to and following the ban, there were an estimated 8.5 million AR-platform rifles in circulation in the United States. Since the ban was lifted, the rifles — called "modern sporting rifles" by the industry — have only surged in popularity. The National Shooting Sports Foundation now estimates there are more than 17 million in circulation. And there are likely significantly more after this year, which consistently smashed monthly records for federal background checks.

The National Rifle Association, which poured tens of millions of dollars toward electing Trump in 2016, has been weakened by infighting as well as legal tangles over its finances. While it remains a force in the gun arena, it's unclear what influence it will be able to muster during the Biden administration.

Alan Gottlieb, the founder of the Second Amendment Foundation, said he's watching for the outcome of two runoff elections in Georgia that will determine which party controls the U.S. Senate. But regardless what happens, he's hopeful that efforts to severely restrict firearms will face resistance in the courts after four years of Trump appointing conservative justices throughout the federal court system as well as on the U.S. Supreme Court.

"We know where they're coming from, we know what they want to do. They have a very long laundry list of things they'd like to accomplish," Gottlieb said. "And we'll see where we go with that."

## **Azerbaijan holds parade after Nagorno-Karabakh fighting**

BAKU, Azerbaijan (AP) — More than 3,000 troops took part in a military parade in Azerbaijan on Thursday to celebrate reclaiming control over broad swathes of Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding lands in a conflict with Armenia.

The parade attended by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who strongly backed Azerbaijan, also involved dozens of military vehicles, and a flyby of combat aircraft. The display, which also featured a Turkish commando brigade and Turkish drones, was held a month after a Russia-brokered deal ended six weeks of fierce fighting over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev showered Turkey with praise, hailing its support for the ex-Soviet Caspian Sea nation as “an example of our unity, our brotherhood.”

Nagorno-Karabakh lies within Azerbaijan but was under the control of ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia since a separatist war there ended in 1994. That war left Nagorno-Karabakh itself and substantial surrounding territory in Armenian hands.

In 44 days of fighting that began in late September and left more than 5,600 people killed on both sides, the Azerbaijani army pushed deep into Nagorno-Karabakh, forcing Armenia to accept a Russia-brokered peace deal that saw Azerbaijan reclaim much of the separatist region along with surrounding areas.

In his speech, Erdogan reiterated Turkey’s continued support to Azerbaijan, saying that “as long as Turkey and Azerbaijan work hand in glove, they will continue to overcome all difficulties and run from one success to the next.”

Erdogan voiced hope that Armenia would “take lessons” from its defeat and noted that Turkey was ready to reopen the border with Armenia if it takes unspecified “positive steps.”

Turkey and Azerbaijan have shut their borders with Armenia ever since the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted, a blockade that has weakened the economy of the landlocked country.

“As long as positive steps are taken, we would open our gates, which were closed,” Erdogan said. “It’s not that we want to keep our doors closed to Armenia ... we have no enmity with the people of Armenia. Our problem is with the Armenian leadership.”

The Nov. 10 peace deal became a major trauma for Armenians, triggering a month of protests calling for the resignation of the country’s prime minister, Nikola Pashinyan. Pashinyan has refused to step down, describing the peace agreement as a bitter but necessary move that prevented Azerbaijan from taking over the entire Nagorno-Karabakh.

As Aliyev and Erdogan watched the parade in Baku, several thousand people in Armenia’s capital demonstrated in front of the government building to push the demand for Pashinyan to resign. Protesters tried to enter the building but were pushed back by police who arrested scores.

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Associated Press writers Suzan Fraser in Ankara, Turkey, Avet Demourian in Yerevan, Armenia, and Daria Litvinova and Vladimir Isachenkov in Moscow, contributed to this report.

## **Biden taps Rice as domestic policy adviser, McDonough for VA**

By JULIE PACE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden is naming Susan Rice as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, giving her broad sway over his administration’s approach to immigration, health care and racial inequality and elevating the prominence of the position in the West Wing.

The move marks a surprising shift for Rice, a longtime Democratic foreign policy expert who served as President Barack Obama’s national security adviser and U.N. ambassador. She worked closely with then-Vice President Biden in those roles and was on his short list to become his running mate during the 2020 campaign.

Biden is also nominating Denis McDonough, who was Obama’s White House chief of staff, as secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs, a sprawling agency that has presented organizational challenges for



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both parties over the years. But he never served in the armed forces, a fact noted by a leading veterans organization.

In selecting Rice and McDonough, Biden is continuing to stockpile his administration with prominent members of the Obama administration. He will make the formal announcements Friday, along with his nominations of Ohio Rep. Marcia Fudge to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Katherine Tai as U.S. trade representative and Tom Vilsack as agriculture secretary. Vilsack filled that same role during Obama's two terms.

"The roles they will take on are where the rubber meets the road — where competent and crisis-tested governance can make a meaningful difference in people's lives, enhancing the dignity, equity, security, and prosperity of the day-to-day lives of Americans," Biden said in a statement.

In choosing Rice to oversee the White House council, advisers said Biden is signaling the importance of domestic policy in his early agenda. Though the council was created with the intention of being on par with the White House National Security Council, it traditionally has had a lower public profile, including for its directors.

Rice is expected to be more of a force, both inside and outside the White House, and her appointment creates a new power center in the West Wing. She's discussed replicating some elements of the National Security Council in her new role, including a principals committee of Cabinet secretaries and others that could bring more structure to domestic policymaking, but also pull more power into the West Wing.

She's expected to play an active role in the Biden administration's response to the coronavirus pandemic. Health care, immigration and tackling racial inequality are also expected to be among the top issues for the domestic policy shop next year.

The 56-year-old Rice will be among the most prominent Black women in Biden's administration. Rice was also in the running to become Biden's running mate before he picked California Sen. Kamala Harris.

Since then, Rice has been discussing other roles with the Biden team and was initially seen as a contender for secretary of state. But as a longtime target of Republicans, her prospects for a Cabinet position faded after the election, given the close makeup of the Senate. A pair of runoffs in Georgia next month will determine which party has control, but either configuration will be exceedingly close.

Rice's role overseeing the council does not require Senate confirmation.

Although Biden has insisted his administration will not simply be a retread of Obama's presidency, he is bringing back numerous familiar faces. His team has defended the moves as a nod toward experience and the need to hit the ground running in tackling the pressing issues facing the nation across multiple fronts.

Shirley Anne Warshaw, a professor at Gettysburg College who has studied the presidency and Cabinets, said following Obama as he builds out his team gives Biden an advantage.

"This is a much better bench than Obama had because these people have the experience of serving in the Obama administration," Warshaw said. "In that way, Joe Biden is the luckiest man in the world."

McDonough, the VA nominee, is an experienced manager who was chief of staff throughout Obama's second term. McDonough was previously Obama's deputy national security adviser, including during the Navy SEAL raid in 2011 that killed al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, and was a longtime congressional staffer.

McDonough was credited with helping Obama try to bridge divides on Capitol Hill, including around one of his most substantial second-term legislative achievements: the Veterans Choice Act. The legislation, for which President Donald Trump tries to take credit, gave former service members more options to seek care and the VA secretary more authority to fire underperforming staffers.

The bill came about following exposes during the Obama administration into mismanagement at some VA hospitals and mounting complaints by advocacy groups. As chief of staff, McDonough was also deeply involved in an overhaul of VA leadership after the scandals, which led to the ouster of the department's secretary.

"We are surprised by this pick. No way to deny that," said Joe Chenelly, national executive director of AMVETS, or American Veterans. "We were expecting a veteran, maybe a post-9/11 veteran. Maybe a

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woman veteran. Or maybe a veteran who knows the VA exceptionally well. We are looking forward to hearing from President-Elect Biden on his thinking behind this nomination.”

McDonough’s wife, Kari, co-founded the nonprofit group Vets’ Community Connections, which helps veterans and their families develop stronger ties to their communities.

Biden is balancing numerous priorities as he fills out his Cabinet, including making good on his pledge to have a diverse group of top advisers. That’s created some tensions over top jobs, including agriculture secretary.

Allies of Fudge made no secret of their desire for her to lead the department, given its oversight of food stamps and other programs meant to address food insecurity — one of her longtime priorities. Instead, Biden went with Vilsack, a longtime friend and advocate for Democrats paying more attention to rural America.

A transition official said Vilsack and Fudge spoke Wednesday to lay the groundwork for cooperation between their two agencies on those and other initiatives.

Associated Press writer Hope Yen contributed to this report.

## Pop Culture in (ugh) 2020, from the bizarre to the sublime

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

And now, for our annual look at the year in pop culture.... Oh, wait. This was 2020. The year everything stopped cold.

Well, not really. Truth is, people turned to culture of all kinds in 2020 — highbrow and lowbrow — to satisfy varied and sometimes conflicting needs: Distraction, inspiration, consolation, escapism, hope. And those needs evolved: If we began lockdown in March by addictively binge-watching the darkly bizarre “Tiger King,” by early winter we were transfixed by a different sort of animal: the graceful octopod of “My Octopus Teacher,” extending her tentacles to make connections that seemed achingly poignant in a time when mere hugs between humans are taboo.

And while live entertainment was tragically curtailed due to the raging pandemic, performers often found their own stages, in endlessly creative ways. A Broadway star serenaded health workers from his apartment window, and ballet dancers performed “Swan Lake” from their bathtubs. There were Zoom proms, drive-in concerts and a host of cast reunions.

And then there was the TikTok guy on the skateboard. Drinking Ocean Spray from the bottle. Singing Fleetwood Mac. For all of us.

A totally selective, appropriately scatterbrained journey through some cultural moments of 2020:

JANUARY:

The year starts like any other ... as if! At the GOLDEN GLOBES, RICKY GERVAIS hosts for the fifth time and seems eager to get home. MICHELLE WILLIAMS speaks passionately of a woman’s right to choose, PATRICIA ARQUETTE about voting, and JOAQUIN PHOENIX about ... something. The world mourns the sudden loss of KOBE BRYANT, and ponders a royal first when HARRY and MEGHAN step back from their duties. What will it all mean?

FEBRUARY:

And the Oscar goes to ... was that THIS year? Yep, it was only months ago that “PARASITE” swept the Academy Awards, a historic moment for South Korea and director BONG JOON HO, clearly adored in Hollywood. (If not by PRESIDENT TRUMP, who asks supporters at a rally: “What the hell was that all about?”)

MARCH:

In a landmark moment for the #MeToo movement, HARVEY WEINSTEIN is sentenced to 23 years in prison for sex crimes, the once-powerful mogul led away in handcuffs for what could be the rest of his life. Days later, the coronavirus shuts down much of life as we know it. Binge-watching reaches new heights. “TIGER KING” on Netflix, a story of very big cats and very strange people, becomes the thing everyone can’t look away from.

APRIL:

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Enough weirdness, anybody got some good news? JOHN KRASINSKI's feel-good web series named, yes, "SOME GOOD NEWS," brings a "HAMILTON" cast reunion for a starstruck musical theater fan and a prom for high-school seniors missing theirs, with musical guests like BILLIE EILISH. Then there's LADY GAGA's star-studded lineup — try PAUL McCARTNEY and the ROLLING STONES — honoring front-line workers. A stay-at-home edition of "Saturday Night Live" features newly minted Oscar winner BRAD PITT playing DR. ANTHONY FAUCI. "He did a great job," quips Fauci (the real one).

MAY:

Who's that singing from the fifth-floor window? Every night at 7 as front-line workers are honored with cheers and honking horns, a beautiful tenor is heard in upper Manhattan singing "The Impossible Dream": It's Tony winner BRIAN STOKES MITCHELL, just recovered from COVID-19 himself, doing his signature song. Another artist making use of pandemic free time: MISTY COPELAND, American Ballet Theatre's first Black female principal dancer, brings together 32 ballerinas from 14 countries, all dancing the famous "Dying Swan" in a video for "Swans for Relief," a fundraiser for struggling dancers.

JUNE:

A new SPIKE LEE joint arrives at the perfect time: In a year when Black Lives Matter is forcing a rethinking of so many things, "DA 5 BLOODS" looks at the Vietnam War from the oft-ignored perspective of its Black soldiers. And in what might be the future — or near-future — of concert-going, GARTH BROOKS presents a one-night-only show at 300 drive-in theaters, for \$100 a car. (Unlike the live, secret show KEITH URBAN did in May for health-care workers, though, Brooks' concert is prerecorded.)

JULY:

Independence Day barbecues may be canceled, but musical (and history) fans have reason to cheer: the live-captured film version of Broadway smash "HAMILTON" is fast-tracked by more than a year to stream on Disney+. The roar of a real Broadway crowd, from performances filmed in 2016, is enough to bring a tear to a theatergoer's eye. On a MUCH smaller scale, ballet lovers are treated to a wildly inventive YouTube video featuring dancers across the globe performing "Swan Lake" in their bathtubs (Get it? Lakes?)

AUGUST:

Fans are gutted by the death of CHADWICK BOSEMAN, who achieved fame with a series of star-making performances as Jackie Robinson, James Brown and Thurgood Marshall, and as groundbreaking superhero "BLACK PANTHER." Boseman dies at 43 of colon cancer, an illness he kept secret from almost everyone, making movies in between surgeries and treatments. The world mourns an actor of immense talent who, like many of his characters, radiated a regal sense of dignity.

SEPTEMBER:

What do fashion shows look like in the pandemic era? Mostly they're virtual, but CHRISTIAN SIRIANO invites guests to his Connecticut home for a socially distanced runway show with models in masks. The EMMYS are virtual, too, but the awkward format can't quash the ebullient celebration up in Canada for the zany talented cast of "SCHITT'S CREEK." Oh, and BRAD and JEN are back together! Just kidding! But they appear together in a Zoom reading of "Fast Times at Ridgemont High." On the other side of the world (and underwater) in South Africa, we meet a glorious creature who simultaneously captures our need for escape and for emotional connection: "My Octopus Teacher" is an antidote for troubled times.

OCTOBER:

Oh hey, BORAT... Somehow when we weren't looking, SACHA BARON COHEN was filming a sequel. It's typically outrageous and features a scene with Trump lawyer RUDY GIULIANI for which the word "cringe-worthy" just doesn't cut it. "DAVID BYRNE'S AMERICAN UTOPIA," a filmed version of the Broadway concert helmed by SPIKE LEE no less, finds the sweet spot in translating the exhilaration of live performance to the screen. Speaking of exhilaration, try watching @420dogface208, aka Nathan Apodaca of Idaho, peacefully skateboarding on TikTok to Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" and drinking Cran-Raspberry juice on the way to work — a thing we somehow never knew we wanted to do.

NOVEMBER:

The first post-election "SNL" ends with ALEC BALDWIN holding a sign that says "YOU'RE WELCOME!!!"

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-- a reference to his long-running Trump impersonation (and Trump's loss). BEYONCÉ, already the most nominated female artist in GRAMMY history, scores nine more, including for "Black Parade," released on Juneteenth. In his final screen role, BOSEMAN fittingly soars in "MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM" with a searing performance as a troubled jazz trumpeter.

DECEMBER:

"My name is Elliot." ELLIOT PAGE, the Oscar-nominated actor for "Juno," announces he is trans, a landmark moment for Hollywood's trans community. In a year with precious few blockbusters, WONDER WOMAN gears up to lasso end-of-year attention for its sequel, to be released simultaneously in theaters and on HBO Max. And speaking of blockbusters, how about BOB DYLAN's deal: The 79-year-old bard sells his entire catalog for a sum estimated at more than \$300 million. As a treacherous 2020 draws to a close, aren't we all just so ready, as Dylan was in 1964, for these times to be a-changin'?

## No drama corona-Christmas has some secretly jumping for joy

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Corritta Lewis has a huge extended family. Her mom is one of 12 siblings. Usually, Christmas means that she, her wife and their 2-year-old son dig out their cold-weather gear for the schlep from home in sunny Southern California to Ohio and days of holiday chaos.

Not this year.

"We're happy to be saving money, spending more time together, and to just have a less stressful holiday," said the 31-year-old human resources analyst in Oceanside. "We don't have to deal with the crowded airports, stores and overall mania that the holiday brings. We're going to lie in our pajamas and watch movies all day."

Though Thanksgiving pleas to stay put were ignored by thousands, and authorities fear the same for Christmas and New Year's, many around the world are gleefully looking forward to spending the December holidays at home without the expense, family drama and travel headaches they normally endure.

Some plan to use the money they save to buy gifts for those in need as coronavirus deaths and hospitalizations rage on nearly 10 months into the pandemic.

Many who stayed home during Thanksgiving to keep safe already experienced the restfulness of opting out of holiday madness, said Maryanna Klatt, a professor of clinical family medicine at the Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center and a facilitator of mindfulness classes.

"What has emerged is that many people discovered something via the Thanksgiving restriction of gathering with less people — they loved it. They thought they would feel a huge sense of loss from the inability to travel and the typical gathering with larger groups," she said.

Participants in her classes reported less anxiety without extended family and friends around, and deeper, more meaningful conversations with the smaller numbers left around them.

"COVID-19 and its ensuing collateral damage may have some realizations that sculpt future behavior, and not all in a negative way. We just need to have our eyes open to these surprising realizations," Klatt said, falling short of the "silver lining" cliché.

In Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 33-year-old Shannon O'Reilly usually travels back home to New Jersey at Christmas, "and it never, ever feels like a vacation." She and her husband both have large extended families. Trying to squeeze in visits with all of them leaves little meaningful face time for any, she said.

"We're constantly house hopping and never really feel settled when we go back up there. Quite frankly, as soon as we land on the tarmac in Newark, we both look at each other every time and say, 'Why are we doing this?'"

This year, it will be just the two of them in 80-degree weather with "zero familial obligations."

As it did for Thanksgiving, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is urging people to avoid travel during the December holidays while the pandemic continues to surge. For those who don't heed the call, the CDC recommends travelers get tested for COVID-19 before and after their trips. Testing before travel is critical to help stave off asymptomatic spread of the virus, warns Deborah Birx, the White House



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coronavirus response coordinator.

On the Upper East Side of Manhattan, 38-year-old Rosalin Siv can't say she's happy to be missing her annual holiday trip to Southern California with her husband and 4-year-old son to visit her parents, siblings, and extended family and friends.

But she's relieved.

"This year I'm pregnant, and the thought of juggling a busy work schedule with holiday and family activities is more stressful than usual," said Siv, the founder of an online bakery. "I can't say I'll miss all the logistics."

There's the 5- to 6-hour plane trip, for one, requiring numerous activities and snacks to keep their child calm and contented in transit.

The sentiments are shared around the world.

Ben Taylor, 43, lives on the Kent coastline of southeast England with his wife and two kids, ages 6 and 2. He calls their normal Christmas holiday a "crazy magical mystery tour" that lasts about a week. They usually travel by car, about four hours, to visit relatives and old friends in Norfolk.

"I've always felt a little envious because it feels like we visit house after house where people are relaxing, whilst not getting to do the same thing ourselves," he said. "Well, now it's our turn!"

Vaccines for COVID-19 are on the way, but they won't come in time to save Christmas for most. Birm and other virus experts couldn't be clearer about the need to avoid travel and large gatherings, along with hugging and kissing loved ones outside of one's protective social bubble.

Nicoletta Barbata is an Italian who's been living on the Greek island of Santorini for nearly four years. Christmas is usually her one and only trip home to Milan every year.

"I usually stay for four to six weeks," said the single Barbata, who's 39. "My time back to Milan is devoted to catching up with my family and friends, spending time with my parents and meeting friends all over Italy who I haven't seen for months."

While she'll "deeply miss" the trip this year, she'll happily make do with the friends she's made in Greece.

"I'm a person who always tries to see the positive side of every situation," Barbata said.

Christmas is tinged with sadness this year for Holly Nordenberg in Madison, Wisconsin.

"My grandfather passed away from COVID last month," said the mom of two girls, ages 3 and 5.

With their patriarch gone, the 36-year-old Nordenberg said the usual extended family get-together with up to 40 people back home in Rock Island, Illinois, may not happen, regardless of whether she goes.

There are other reasons why she's fine not returning.

"I've been dreading our Christmas gathering this year because of the political climate and how polarized my family is regarding politics," Nordenberg said.

Instead, she, her husband and their kids will focus on "gratitude and baking" at home.

"I'm honestly looking forward to a quiet holiday season," Nordenberg said. "We have all our decorations up, a pantry full of baking supplies, and we're finding ways to really appreciate how fortunate we are each day."

## Beirut silos at heart of debate about remembering port blast

By SARAH EL DEEB Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Ghassan Hasrouty spent most of his life working at the silos in Beirut's port, unloading grain shipments to feed the country even as fighting raged around him during the 1975-90 civil war.

Decades later, he perished under the same silos, their towering cement structure gutted by the force of the Aug. 4 explosion at the port, when 2,750 tons of improperly stored ammonium nitrates ignited in what became one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history.

In a horrific instant, a burst of power ravaged Beirut. More than 200 people died and the horror and devastation scarred the survivors.

Hasrouty's son, Elie, wants justice for his father and thinks the silos should stay as a "mark of shame" and reminder of the corruption and negligence of politicians that many Lebanese blame for the tragedy.

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A government-commissioned study in the wake of the disaster says the 50-year-old silos could collapse at any moment and should be demolished, sparking an emotional debate among the city's residents over how to preserve the memory of the tragedy.

In Lebanon, where a culture of impunity has long prevailed and where those behind violent attacks, bombings and assassinations have rarely been brought to justice, the debate is steeped in suspicion.

Sara Jaafar believes the government wants to obliterate the silos and move on as if nothing happened. "It is a reminder of what they did," said Jaafar, an architect whose apartment overlooking the silos was destroyed in the explosion.

"I never want to lose the anger that I have," she said.

Just days after the catastrophic blast, as public outrage mounted, Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab stepped down, saying the country's endemic corruption was "bigger than the state."

The massive, 48-meter-high silos absorbed much of the explosion's impact, effectively shielding the western part of the city from the blast that damaged or completely destroyed thousands of buildings.

The investigation into how such a large amount of dangerous chemicals was poorly stored for years under the nose of the port authority and the wider political leadership has dragged on. Rights groups and families are concerned it's a tactic to protect senior officials, none of whom have so far been detained or charged with any wrongdoing.

On Thursday, Lebanon's prosecutor investigating the explosion filed charges against Diab, who after his resignation continues to function in caretaker capacity while efforts to form a new government have floundered amid political disputes. Along with Diab, three former ministers were also charged, all four accused of negligence leading to the death of hundreds of people. They are the most senior officials to face such charges so far.

At the silos, rotting wheat is dripping from the shredded but still-standing structure, which stored up to 85% of Lebanon's grain. Pigeons and rodents have found home among the wreckage.

Emmanuel Durand, a French civil engineer who volunteered for the government-commissioned team of experts, spent several weeks using a laser scanner to gather digital data for an analysis of the silos' structure after the explosion.

Though they may look structurally sound from afar, the silos are tilted and their foundation is broken, which has caused vertical cracks in two of them. They could collapse at any moment, Durand said, although it is impossible to calculate when.

"Silos are very strong as long as they have integrity, just like an egg," Durand said. "Now if the shell of the egg is slightly broken, it becomes very weak and you will have no difficulty in crushing the egg."

The army has plans to demolish the silos with equipment that crushes concrete and rebar, Durand said. Kuwait, which financed the building of the silos in the 1970s, has offered to donate to rebuild them.

Then came a proposal by Fadi Abboud, a former tourism minister and member of the largest Christian party, the Free Patriotic Movement, to turn the port and silos into a "tourist attraction," a site that would rival the Roman ruins in Baalbek.

Families of the victims protested, called it a heartless commercialization of the site where so many died.

"In their dreams!" vowed Gilbert Karaan, whose 27-year-old fiancée, firefighter-medic Sahar Fares, died battling the fire that broke out just before the explosion. "They will not profit off the martyrs."

Jonathan Dagher, a journalist with the independent online media platform Megaphone, said Abboud's words were in line with comments by Gebran Bassil, the party's leader, who said the explosion could be turned into a "big opportunity" to secure international support for Lebanon's cash-strapped government.

"These words are not an accident" and belittle the tragedy of what happened, Dagher said.

There are concerns the port blast could be treated in the same way as Lebanon's 15-year civil war.

The war is not taught in schoolbooks. There is no memorial for the 17,000 missing from the war. A general amnesty allowed warlords and militia leaders to dominate the country's postwar politics. After the war, downtown Beirut was quickly rebuilt, a high-end corporate hub emerging from the ruins and devastation.

Jaafar, the architect, said pushback against demolishing the silos stems from fear that a similar scenario, based on a "concept of amnesia" — if you don't see it, it didn't happen — is being engineered for the

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Aug. 4 blast.

Lebanese architect Carlos Moubarak says the gutted silos should remain in place, their sheer size forever an echo of the massive explosion.

"There is something very, very powerful about the silos," he said. "They are now part of the people's collective memory".

Moubarak has designed a memorial park at the site, with the silos as a focal point, a remembrance ring at the crater, a museum and green space. The aim, he said, is to honor the victims and survivors while also capturing the spirit of solidarity among the Lebanese in the wake of the explosion. He is now trying to figure out ways to fund it.

Elie Hasrouty's father and grandfather had both worked at the silos since they were built.

His father, Ghassan, 59, called home 40 minutes before the explosion to tell his wife that a new shipment of grains would keep him there late and asked her to send his favorite pillow and bedsheets for the unplanned overnight at work.

His remains were found at the bottom of the silos, 14 days later.

The silos should stay on as "a witness to corruption, so we can learn," Hasrouty said. "Something must change."

## China restricts US official travel to Hong Kong

BEIJING (AP) — China is imposing restrictions on travel to Hong Kong by some U.S. officials and others in retaliation for similar measures imposed on Chinese individuals by Washington, the Foreign Ministry said Thursday.

U.S. diplomatic passport holders visiting Hong Kong and nearby Macao will temporarily no longer receive visa-free entry privileges, spokesperson Hua Chunying said.

U.S. administration officials, congressional staffers, employees of non-governmental organizations and their immediate family members will face "reciprocal sanctions," Hua said.

She was apparently referring to U.S. sanctions that bar certain Chinese and Hong Kong officials from traveling to the U.S. or having dealings with the U.S. financial system over their roles in imposing a sweeping National Security Law passed this summer that ushered in a crackdown on free speech and opposition political activity in Hong Kong.

Hua said the move was taken "given that the U.S. side is using the Hong Kong issue to seriously interfere in China's internal affairs and undermine China's core interests."

Those sanctioned "have performed egregiously and are primarily responsible on the Hong Kong issue," she said at a daily briefing.

"China once again urges the U.S. side to immediately stop meddling in Hong Kong affairs, stop interfering in China's internal affairs, and not go further down the wrong and dangerous path," Hua said.

China had long threatened to retaliate against the U.S. sanctions and other actions seen as hostile.

Earlier, China's official Xinhua News Agency said Trump administration officials are "digging a hole" for the next U.S. administration's relationship with China through actions targeting the country and its officials.

Steps such as restricting visas for the 92 million members of the ruling Communist Party and their families have "again exposed the sinister intentions of extreme anti-China forces in Washington to hijack China-U.S. relations for their own political gain," Xinhua said in an editorial.

The U.S. State Department last week cut the duration of such visas from 10 years to one month, another example of the increasingly hard-line stance adopted by the administration in its waning days. That came in addition to the sanctions targeting specific Chinese and Hong Kong officials over their actions in Hong Kong, the northwestern region of Xinjiang and elsewhere.

While President-elect Joe Biden has signaled he intends to keep pressure on China, he's also expected to seek a return to more conventional, less confrontational style of diplomacy. Rolling back Trump-era measures could be difficult however, while giving Republicans the chance to renew accusations that Biden is softening Washington's stance toward Beijing.

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"By relentlessly challenging the bottom line of China-U.S. relations on issues concerning China's core interests, anti-China politicians are not only digging a hole for the next administration's relationship with China, but also eyeing their own personal political gains," Xinhua said.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has castigated China on almost a daily basis over its policies toward Taiwan, Tibet, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and the South China Sea.

Dozens of officials from mainland China and Hong Kong have been hit with visa bans and other sanctions and new restrictions have been imposed on Chinese diplomats, journalists and academics. Chinese tech giant Huawei has been shut out of the U.S. market and the U.S. has lobbied other countries to follow suit, often successfully.

On Wednesday, Pompeo accused U.S. universities of caving to Chinese pressure to blunt or bar criticism of the the Chinese communist party, which he said was "poisoning the well of our higher education for its own ends."

Chinese responded by vowing to impose countervailing measures against American officials, saying U.S. accusations and punitive measures only solidified the Chinese people behind their leaders.

Perhaps with an eye toward Biden, who takes office Jan. 20, Xinhua held open the possibility of better relations if Washington changed its approach.

"Today, China and the United States should also uphold the spirit of non-conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation," Xinhua said. "The two must focus on managing their differences, with the top priority being a smooth transition toward stronger China-U.S. relations."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 11, the 346th day of 2020. There are 20 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 11, 1936, Britain's King Edward VIII abdicated the throne so he could marry American divorcee Wallis Warfield Simpson; his brother, Prince Albert, became King George VI.

On this date:

In 1816, Indiana became the 19th state.

In 1844, the first experimental use of an inhaled anesthetic in dentistry took place as Dr. Horace Wells of Hartford, Connecticut, under the influence of nitrous oxide, had a colleague extract one of his teeth.

In 1941, Germany and Italy declared war on the United States; the U.S. responded in kind.

In 1946, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was established.

In 1964, singer-songwriter Sam Cooke was shot to death by a motel manager in Los Angeles; he was 33.

In 1972, Apollo 17's lunar module landed on the moon with astronauts Eugene Cernan and Harrison Schmitt aboard; they became the last two men to date to step onto the lunar surface.

In 1997, more than 150 countries agreed at a global warming conference in Kyoto, Japan, to control the Earth's greenhouse gases.

In 1998, majority Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee pushed through three articles of impeachment against President Clinton, over Democratic objections.

In 2001, in the first criminal indictment stemming from 9/11, federal prosecutors charged Zacarias Moussaoui (zak-uh-REE'-uhs moo-SOW'-ee), a French citizen of Moroccan descent, with conspiring to murder thousands in the suicide hijackings. (Moussaoui pleaded guilty to conspiracy in 2005 and was sentenced to life in prison.)

In 2004, doctors in Austria said that Ukrainian presidential candidate Viktor Yushchenko had been poisoned with dioxin, which caused the severe disfigurement and partial paralysis of his face.

In 2008, former Nasdaq chairman Bernie Madoff was arrested, accused of running a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme that wiped out the life savings of thousands of people and wrecked charities. (Madoff is serving a 150-year federal prison sentence.) The remains of missing Florida toddler Caylee Anthony were



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found six months after she disappeared. (Her mother, Casey Anthony, was acquitted of murder in her daughter's death.)

In 2018, a man who had been flagged as a possible extremist sprayed gunfire near the famous Christmas market in the French city of Strasbourg, killing three people and wounding 13 others; the suspect died in a shootout with police two days later. (A fourth person wounded in the attack later died.) A Virginia jury called for a sentence of life in prison plus 419 years for the man who killed a woman when he rammed his car into counterprotesters at a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. (James Alex Fields Jr. received that sentence in July, 2019.)

Ten years ago: The eldest son of disgraced financier Bernard Madoff, 46-year-old Mark Madoff, hanged himself in his Manhattan apartment on the second anniversary of his father's arrest. A U.N. conference in Cancun, Mexico, adopted a modest climate deal. Auburn quarterback Cam Newton won the Heisman Trophy.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama signed legislation keeping government agencies open into the following week, giving White House and congressional bargainers more time to complete sweeping deals on taxes and federal spending. Dow Chemical and DuPont announced they were merging to form a company valued at about \$130 billion. Willard Scott announced he was hanging it up after 35 years as part of NBC's "Today" show.

One year ago: Israel's parliament failed to meet a midnight deadline to form a coalition government, triggering an unprecedented third election in a 12-month period. Saudi Arabian oil company Aramco surpassed Apple as the world's most valuable public company when its shares made their debut on the Saudi stock exchange; a 10% rally brought the company's value to \$1.88 trillion.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jean-Louis Trintignant is 90. Actor Rita Moreno is 89. Pop singer David Gates (Bread) is 80. Actor Donna Mills is 80. Former Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., is 79. Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is 77. Singer Brenda Lee is 76. Actor Lynda Day George is 76. Music producer Tony Brown is 74. Actor Teri Garr is 73. Movie director Susan Seidelman is 69. Actor Bess Armstrong is 67. Singer Jermaine Jackson is 66. Rock musician Mike Mesaros (The Smithereens) is 63. Rock musician Nikki Sixx (Mötley Crüe) is 62. Rock musician Darryl Jones (The Rolling Stones) is 59. Actor Ben Browder is 58. Singer-musician Justin Currie (Del Amitri) is 56. Rock musician David Schools (Hard Working Americans, Gov't Mule, Widespread Panic) is 56. Actor Gary Dourdan (DOOR'-dan) is 54. Actor-comedian Mo'Nique is 53. Actor Max Martini is 51. Rapper-actor Mos Def is 47. Actor Rider Strong is 41. Actor Xosha (ZOH'-shah) Roquemore is 36. Actor Karla Souza is 34. Actor Hailee Steinfeld is 24.