

Groton Daily Independent

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“SIBLINGS--THE
DEFINITION THAT
COMPRISES LOVE,
STRIFE, COMPETITION
AND FOREVER
FRIENDS.”
-BYRON PULSIFER

Chicken Soup
for the Soul

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.

BOYS
Britton-Hecla at Groton Area
Saturday, Dec. 12, 3 p.m.
GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

We will be broadcasting the JV Game starting at 1:30 today!



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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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 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

Updated December 11, 2020; 3:35 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	3	6

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Early Friday morning, while it was still on the dark side, you could see sparks falling from the welding being done on the Groton Water Tower.

The Life of Robert Groeblinghoff



A private Mass of Christian Burial for Robert "Bob" Groeblinghoff, 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 on GDILIVE.COM and will also be broadcast on GDIRADIO at 89.3FM within one mile of Groton.

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

Robert passed away December 9, 2020 at Avera St. Luke's Hospital, Aberdeen.

Robert Elroy was born on March 24, 1933 in St. Paul, Missouri to Joseph and Frances (Haislip) Groeblinghoff. He attended school in Wentzville, Missouri graduating in 1951. On April 4, 1964, he was united in marriage with Karen Houchard in St. Charles, Missouri. The couple made their home in Missouri where Robert was employed with Purina. In the mid 70s, Bob was granted a transfer with work and chose South Dakota as their new home. He later was employed as a feed specialist with South Dakota Wheat Growers. Bob and Karen enjoyed life on their hobby farm, west of Groton.

In early years, Bob played baseball and was honored in the Missouri State Baseball Hall of Fame. This love of the game would continue with his son and grandchildren. Bob also enjoyed fishing and the outdoors; including all of God's creatures and the game of golf. He came from a musically talented family and loved to sing and play the harmonica. Bob was a prankster and loved telling stories and jokes. Bob served on the Brown County Fair Board for a number of years. He was a member of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church and had held various positions there over the years. He was a member of the Knights of Columbus.

Celebrating his life is his wife, Karen of Groton, his son, Matt (Joni) Groeblinghoff and his beloved grandchildren, Katie, Joe, Ryan and Nicholas.

Preceding him in death were his parents, 6 infant children, one sister and four brothers.

Service Notice: Douglas Doeden

Services for Douglas Doeden, 76, of Groton will be 10:00 a.m., Saturday, December 19th at Groton Area School Arena. Rev. Charlie Bunk and Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery, Groton under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Services will be live streamed on GDILIVE.COM and will also be broadcast on GDIRADIO at 89.3FM within one mile of Groton.

Private visitation will be held on Friday at Emmanuel Lutheran Church with a prayer service at 6:00 p.m. One hour of public visitation will be held prior to services on Saturday.

Doug passed away December 9, 2020 at his home.

#292 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Record-setting day, of course, not in a good way, not good at all. It's been a long time since we set the sort of record that leads to celebration. For starters: new cases. We broke 250,000 for the first time today, and we're more than 20,000 over our last record. There were 254,300 new cases reported today, putting us at 15,928,400 total, which is 1.6% over yesterday's total and pretty much a guarantee we're going to hit 16 million tomorrow, and not that far into the day either.

Hospitalizations also set a record—for the fifth consecutive day—with 107,258 today. We've been at a record level 29 of the past 31 days. Hospitals are moving to an emergency footing across the country. I think it is important to recognize that this fact alone means death rates will increase; people are going to die who would not otherwise have died due to this strain on the system.

There were also a record-setting number of deaths today with 3448; this is well over the last record set just two days ago at 3100. We have now lost 295,664 Americans to this virus; we'll be at 300,000 Sunday, latest. There is a wild chance we could get there tomorrow, but it would require a huge increase in daily deaths, and I don't see that happening tomorrow on a weekend.

Dr. Robert Redfield, director of the CDC, made a stark prediction yesterday: that for the next two to three months "we're going to have more deaths per day than we had at 9/11 or than we had at Pearl Harbor." That means we're looking at more than 3000 deaths per day for a period of 60 to 90 days, which adds up to a minimum of 180,000 to 270,000 additional deaths by the middle of March. He urged us to "double down" on precautions and not to travel, acknowledging the imminent distribution of vaccine, but adding, "We are turning a corner, but I want us to come back to the reality that this is going to be a brutal time for us."

He's not the only one issuing warnings. Catherine Troisi, infectious disease epidemiologist at the UTHealth School of Public Health in Houston, "The worst is yet to come in the next week or two or three. What happens after that is going to depend on our behavior today."

The funeral industry cautions us that business is too good. Linda Anzani, assistant manager of Perches Funeral Homes in El Paso, said, "There's not enough of us to go around. Not enough directors to see families. Not enough facilities to have funerals. Not enough chapels." Time to listen up, folks.

A report in the Journal of Korean Medical Science last month indicates dining indoors is riskier than previously thought. I was unable to access the paper, so I am reporting on a summary here. The paper is a case study of three infections in a restaurant in June in the city of Jeonju, which had not had an infection in the preceding two months. Diner A, a high school student who had not been outside the city, became infected after sitting in the airflow from the air conditioning system that carried air from Diner B, a saleswoman from out of town who was infected, but asymptomatic at the time. She was seated 21 feet away from Diner A. Diner A left the restaurant five minutes after Diner B entered (at 5:15 pm), so the time of exposure was very short. These two individuals (Diner A and Diner B) had no interactions inside the restaurant. Then, at 5:22 pm, Diner C was seated, also in the airflow from Diner B at a distance of nearly 16 feet. There were no interactions between these two diners either, and Diner B left at 5:43. The researchers suggest these two individuals (Diner A and Diner C), but not their companions, were infected because they directly faced the airflow circulating from Diner B's table. Other customers outside the air flow were not infected, even though they were present in the restaurant with Diner B for longer periods of time. Virus from each case was genetically sequenced, and the researchers found they were identical variants, although they did not provide the sequencing information as part of their paper. We should probably note this is a study which likely couldn't be done in the US. Korea uses technology—cellphone location data, credit card records, and closed-circuit television feeds—for disease control in a way which would almost certainly run into constitutional challenges here.

The researchers concluded that the virus, under certain airflow conditions, travels farther than six feet and can infect others in as little as five minutes. They recommend that public health authorities update safety guidelines based on these findings saying six feet between tables is not enough to prevent transmission.

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They wrote that "transmission can occur at a distance greater than [six feet] if there is direct air flow from an infected person in an indoor setting. Therefore, updated guidelines for quarantine and environmental management of covid-19 are needed until approval of an effective treatment drug or vaccine."

We should point out that this is a single study involving just these three cases and it is not a controlled experiment, so we should generalize from that with some caution. Nonetheless, experts, even those who point out these limitations, are generally in agreement with the conclusions of the researchers, pointing out similarity to earlier work, including an investigation of an outbreak in an air-conditioned restaurant in Guangzhou, China. Donald Milton, professor of environmental health at the University of Maryland School of Public Health, said the study confirms that infected people can shed virus which can travel long distances through the air and that more air movement indoors can be a problem. Because he sees more such viral outbreaks in our future, he recommends investing in air-handling units which will offer some better protection of individuals indoors.

The FDA has approved the first sample-at-home coronavirus test which can be purchased without a prescription. The specimen collected by the patient at home will still need to be sent to a lab for testing. This is the LabCorp Pixel COVID-19 Test Home Collection Kit. I provide this information, not because I'm getting a commission from the company (I am not), but simply so you will know which test kit has been approved and don't fall for some scam purporting to sell you an approved test; I've been given to understand there's no shortage of scammers fleecing the unwary during this pandemic. This is the only such test approved at this time. You must be 18 years of age to purchase it, and it will be available online and in stores without a prescription. A negative result will be accessible through an online portal or via e-mail, but a positive or invalid result will have to come from a physician. The test is free for the uninsured and has no upfront costs if billed to insurance, but will cost \$119 if you make a direct purchase. Before you get all excited and order a dozen to have on hand, I recommend you talk with your insurer because I'm pretty sure they're not going to have to cover random tests ordered by the patient instead of by a physician.

The FDA has informed Pfizer and BioNTech that it plans to "rapidly work toward finalization and issuance" of an emergency use authorization (EUA) for their Covid-19 vaccine candidate. What appears to be going on right now is final negotiation between the FDA and the company about labeling. We're not talking just about the label slapped on the little vials at this point, but about the likely multi-page leaflet that ships with vaccines detailing all sorts of considerations, warnings, and precautions for prescribing and administering; these "labels" are standard with any medication or biologic, and they're filled with details needing to be settled before vaccine can ship.

One of the issues requiring resolution is what sort of warning to include regarding allergies. We discussed this issue last night—the question whether anyone with a history of severe allergies or just who with severe vaccine/vaccine component allergies should be excluded. According to one report I saw that referenced the UK's decision not to vaccinate anyone with a severe allergy, "It's not clear if the FDA will follow suit." So we'll wait and see on that one. (For the record, I've just seen a new article with more details on these allergic reactions in the UK. I'll write about that tomorrow night; this is entirely too long already.)

Another issue will be whether there should be any special information for 16- and 17-year olds. The FDA may require the label say something about the fact that data are not as extensive for that age group; no one thinks the vaccine won't be approved for them.

One more concern we've discussed and which needs resolution is what to do about pregnant or likely-to-become-pregnant people. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) is pushing regulators not to exclude them. Denise Jamieson, chair of the Department of Gynecology and Obstetrics at Emory University School of Medicine and a member of the ACOG working group, says, "I can't think of any potential reason or theoretical reason to be concerned about mRNA vaccines in pregnancy Knowing what I know about the mechanism of action, I would anticipate that this vaccine should be very safe in pregnancy." Experts are pretty much in the same place on lactating women, thinking there's no particular reason to exclude them from vaccination or for them to end breastfeeding so they can be vaccinated.

There is one more thing the FDA would like resolved before issuing authorization, even though it's not

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labeling information; it is what to do with the placebo group from the clinical trial. We discussed that too recently, and I haven't seen anything further on it today—just wanted you to be aware it's still out there needing an answer. At any rate, the authorization should be issued by tomorrow morning. According to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, vaccinations could begin as soon as Monday or Tuesday.

Update was finished and ready to post when this came across my news feed: The FDA has issued the EUA for the Pfizer vaccine. I don't have any details on this; I'll update tomorrow with any further information that becomes available.

In the midst of so much good vaccine news, there is some disappointing vaccine news too. The candidate from Sanofi/Glaxo-Smith-Kline has encountered a setback. This is a more traditional protein vaccine; the principle is that we inject a protein from the virus into people and they'll have an immune response to it. This sort of technology is tried-and-true, so was considered a safer bet than the cutting-edge stuff Moderna and Pfizer/BioNTech were trying, but things are not going as planned.

After work in monkeys, the companies; research team had identified a protein which triggered nice responses in adults under 50. The plan was to be ready for human trials in February with phase 3 testing to begin in March or so. That's probably not going to happen because, when tested in older adults, it failed to elicit a similarly-promising response. Today's announcement indicates they believe they can further optimize the antigen to boost this response, but they're back to the lab to work on that.

Another vaccine candidate under development by Novavax has been delayed, but is progressing. They had hoped to begin phase 3 clinical trials in October, but are now looking set to get started in the next few weeks. The delays were caused by problems scaling up manufacturing; let's hope those have been resolved. More vaccines are better.

I guess we're not the only country with a populace freaked out by misinformation and anti-science propaganda. Australia had a vaccine developed at the University of Queensland in trials, but has ended the trials, not because of safety or efficacy issues, but because the vaccine appears to cause false-positive HIV tests in recipients. The reason for the false-positives is pretty clear: The vaccine candidate includes a spike protein from the coronavirus and also a protein from the human immunodeficiency virus to stimulate antibody production. Let's be clear that this HIV protein cannot cause infections; it's not a virus, only a protein from one. But there was such concern about what they term "the risk to vaccine confidence," that is, the worry people would believe the vaccine is causing HIV in people, that they bagged the vaccine candidate entirely. Sigh.

We have a paper published in the journal *Science* yesterday which I believe is one I saw in preprint back in August. I wrote about it then; if you're interested in more of the nuts and bolts, have a look at my Update #185 posted on August 26 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3907721769244200>. It has now survived peer review, been updated to November 1, and published. It deals with an outbreak early in the pandemic—in February—stemming from a business conference held for Biogen employees in Boston. The researchers sequenced 772 complete viral genomes from early cases in Boston and identified superspreader events linked to a great many infections. One such was that Biogen conference which "produced sustained community transmission and was exported, resulting in extensive regional, national, and international spread," according to the paper. They have determined that about two percent of US samples that have been analyzed are the variant linked to that event and documented the variant in 29 states. We're looking at a total of 205,000 and 300,000 cases in the US. Mind-boggling.

Michael Esmond owns a pool and spa business in Florida, and business has been pretty darned good, even through this pandemic. He says he's "almost ashamed" to tell people that because he gets how tough it's been for so very many. And despite that, this guy gets what it's like. Many years ago he was in a very different place. "I have been down on my luck like people are today, where I had trouble paying bills and raising three daughters. The gas company shut the gas off and we didn't have any heat" during the coldest winter he's ever seen in his area, with temperatures in single digits. Now he sees others in the same situation.

Only this time, he's in a position to do something about it. And he's doing it. He explained, "I can relate

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to people suffering and not being able to pay bills. That's probably one of the biggest motivators for me, because I've been there." Last year, he stepped up and paid off overdue utility bills for 36 households in his community, but this year with a hurricane followed by the pandemic, he figured he needs to do more. So this time, he's picking up the tab for 114 families who were facing disconnection. Just like that. The utility company will send out holiday cards notifying these folks their bills are now current.

Esmond says, "This year to me probably is more meaningful than last year with the pandemic and all the people out of work having to stay home." He said this time around he was shocked at how many of these bills were \$100 or less. "That really impacted me—that people can't even afford to pay a \$100 bill on their utilities and things are so bad." He explained, "We've had a really good year and that's why I want to share what I have with the people who need it."

Joanne Oliver, the city's utility billing supervisor, said, "Even though our country and our city is currently going through probably the most difficult years of some of our lifetimes, there are still people out there who are generous and kind and really do want to help others. To have others within the community wanting to reach out and help their neighbors, now is more important than ever."

She's not wrong about that. There's some powerful encouragement to us to have a look around to see whether there's something we can do in our own communities. The need is great and growing. We're not out of this thing yet, not by a long shot, and we're going to have to help one another along until we come out the other side.

Stay safe. I'll be back

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December 11th COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent
from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota:

Positive: +945 (89672 total) Positivity Rate: 13.0%

Total Tests: 7244 (673,281 total)

Hospitalized: +61 (5086 total). 467 currently hospitalized -24)

Deaths: +33 (1210 total)

Males: 12, Females: 21

Ages: 60s=5, 70s=4, 80+=24

Counties: Brown-1, Charles Mix-3, Codington-1, Custer-1, Davison-1, Day-1, Douglas-1, Grant-1, Hamlin-1, Hughes-2, Hutchinson-1, Meade-1, Miner-1, Minnehaha-6, Pennington-9, Perkins-1.

Recovered: +1524 (73,840 total)

Active Cases: -612 (15,622)

Percent Recovered: 81.2%

Beadle (32) +6 positive, +37 recovered (342 active cases)

Brookings (23) +26 positive, +38 recovered (401 active cases)

Brown (35): +28 positive, +71 recovered (643 active cases)

Clark (1): +1 positive, +7 recovered (60 active cases)

Clay (11): +14 positive, +29 recovered (245 active cases)

Codington (58): +40 positive, +50 recovered (536 active cases)

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

Day (13): +4 positive, +10 recovered (123 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +6 positive, +6 recovered (55 active cases)

Faulk (10): +2 positive, +2 recovered (28 active cases)

Grant (20): +10 positive, +3 recovered (191 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +11 recovered (57 active cases)

Hughes (24): +18 positive, +32 recovered (309 active cases)

Lawrence (25): +26 positive, +23 recovered (410 active cases)

Lincoln (54): +70 positive, +92 recovered (983 active cases)

Marshall (3): +0 positive, +10 recovered (47 active cases)

McCook (20): +6 positive, +7 recovered (98 active cases)

McPherson (1): +2 positive, +4 recovery (42 active case)

Minnehaha (221): +292 positive, +382 recovered (3710 active cases)

Pennington (107): +114 positive, +141 recovered (1829 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +5 recovered (52 active cases)

Roberts (23): +15 positive, +15 recovered (175 active cases)

Spink (20): +4 positive, +9 recovered (137 active cases)

Walworth (13): +6 positive, +19 recovered (133 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 11:

- 8.5% rolling 14-day positivity
- 513 new positives
- 8,086 susceptible test encounters
- 277 currently hospitalized (-25)
- 4,406 active cases (-190)
- 1,130 total deaths (+27)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	387	316	741	7	Substantial	30.77%
Beadle	2410	2036	4871	32	Substantial	18.98%
Bennett	336	296	1054	5	Substantial	16.22%
Bon Homme	1417	1296	1797	21	Substantial	28.04%
Brookings	2685	2261	9218	23	Substantial	19.73%
Brown	4021	3343	10580	35	Substantial	19.87%
Brule	607	529	1626	5	Substantial	20.45%
Buffalo	401	359	837	10	Substantial	25.00%
Butte	798	662	2712	15	Substantial	17.73%
Campbell	107	95	199	1	Minimal	12.50%
Charles Mix	1017	758	3415	10	Substantial	24.12%
Clark	286	225	808	1	Substantial	12.12%
Clay	1495	1239	4296	11	Substantial	17.47%
Codington	3071	2478	7842	58	Substantial	31.98%
Corson	426	377	867	5	Substantial	38.46%
Custer	626	496	2264	8	Substantial	23.68%
Davison	2550	2099	5452	49	Substantial	23.42%
Day	452	316	1445	13	Substantial	24.55%
Deuel	367	275	924	5	Substantial	38.03%
Dewey	1149	730	3369	7	Substantial	23.81%
Douglas	332	266	784	6	Substantial	32.14%
Edmunds	294	236	869	3	Substantial	14.29%
Fall River	390	324	2174	10	Substantial	13.04%
Faulk	296	258	575	10	Moderate	13.64%
Grant	761	560	1830	20	Substantial	33.33%
Gregory	459	384	1037	23	Substantial	9.73%
Haakon	186	139	454	3	Substantial	4.94%
Hamlin	547	419	1428	27	Substantial	25.50%
Hand	299	256	678	1	Substantial	11.76%
Hanson	287	227	554	3	Substantial	39.13%
Harding	86	66	140	0	Moderate	63.64%
Hughes	1823	1490	5210	24	Substantial	8.29%
Hutchinson	638	488	1915	14	Substantial	29.13%

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Hyde	128	104	344	0	Moderate	8.33%
Jackson	235	181	842	8	Substantial	24.56%
Jerauld	248	206	470	15	Moderate	12.50%
Jones	63	57	172	0	Moderate	11.11%
Kingsbury	479	386	1327	13	Substantial	13.54%
Lake	929	774	2622	12	Substantial	29.01%
Lawrence	2301	1866	7262	25	Substantial	21.71%
Lincoln	5995	4958	16254	54	Substantial	25.35%
Lyman	493	423	1633	9	Substantial	18.39%
Marshall	220	170	943	3	Substantial	32.94%
McCook	627	509	1331	20	Substantial	26.58%
McPherson	161	118	480	1	Substantial	4.13%
Meade	1994	1580	6365	18	Substantial	19.60%
Mellette	204	165	633	1	Substantial	21.05%
Miner	212	174	477	6	Substantial	36.36%
Minnehaha	22743	18812	63704	221	Substantial	23.46%
Moody	479	364	1524	13	Substantial	30.30%
Oglala Lakota	1775	1470	6066	29	Substantial	20.18%
Pennington	9817	7881	31979	107	Substantial	22.91%
Perkins	232	164	604	3	Substantial	36.21%
Potter	289	238	681	2	Substantial	12.90%
Roberts	836	638	3649	23	Substantial	27.24%
Sanborn	296	226	575	3	Substantial	15.15%
Spink	641	484	1801	20	Substantial	17.18%
Stanley	246	208	717	2	Substantial	9.52%
Sully	101	86	224	3	Moderate	17.65%
Todd	1070	917	3669	15	Substantial	26.10%
Tripp	580	458	1275	10	Substantial	23.29%
Turner	880	715	2250	47	Substantial	25.66%
Union	1391	1116	5038	25	Substantial	21.75%
Walworth	564	418	1568	13	Substantial	24.90%
Yankton	2176	1515	7790	17	Substantial	27.84%
Ziebach	261	160	605	7	Substantial	36.84%
Unassigned	0	0	1858	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range	# of Cases	# of Deaths
0-9 years	3259	0
10-19 years	9895	0
20-29 years	16802	3
30-39 years	15016	12
40-49 years	12893	20
50-59 years	12851	63
60-69 years	10158	160
70-79 years	5326	262
80+ years	4207	723

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	47274	611
Male	43133	632

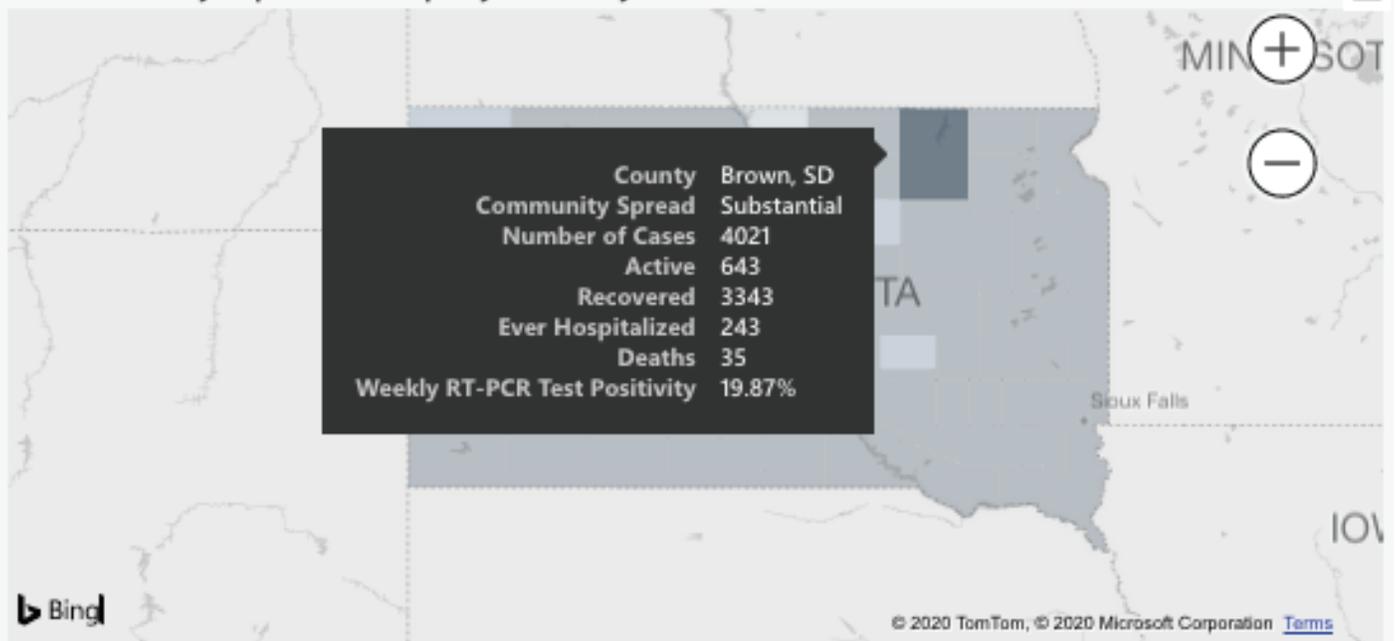
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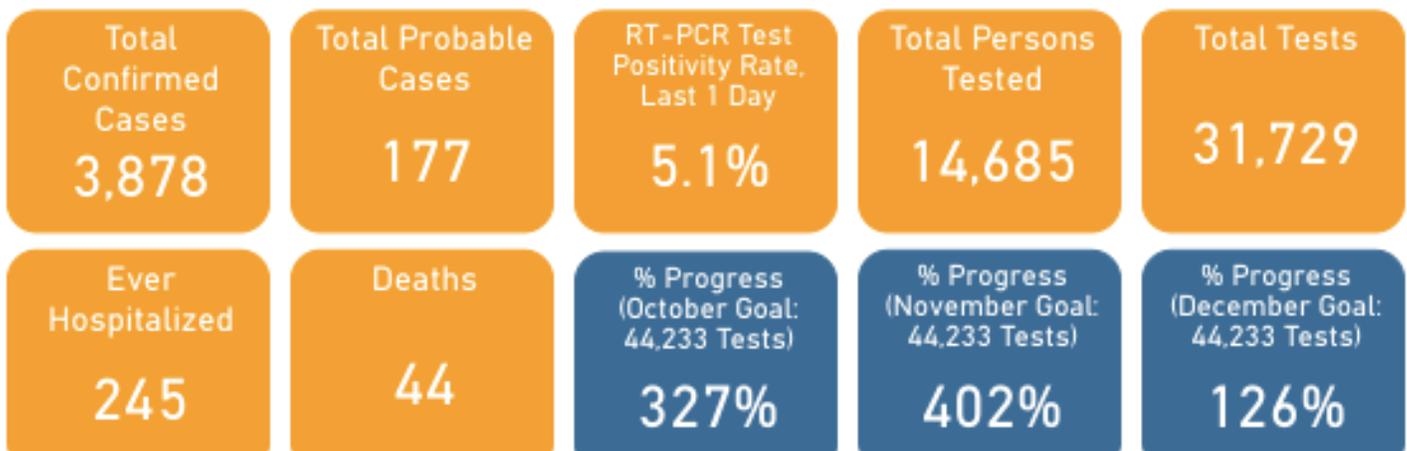
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



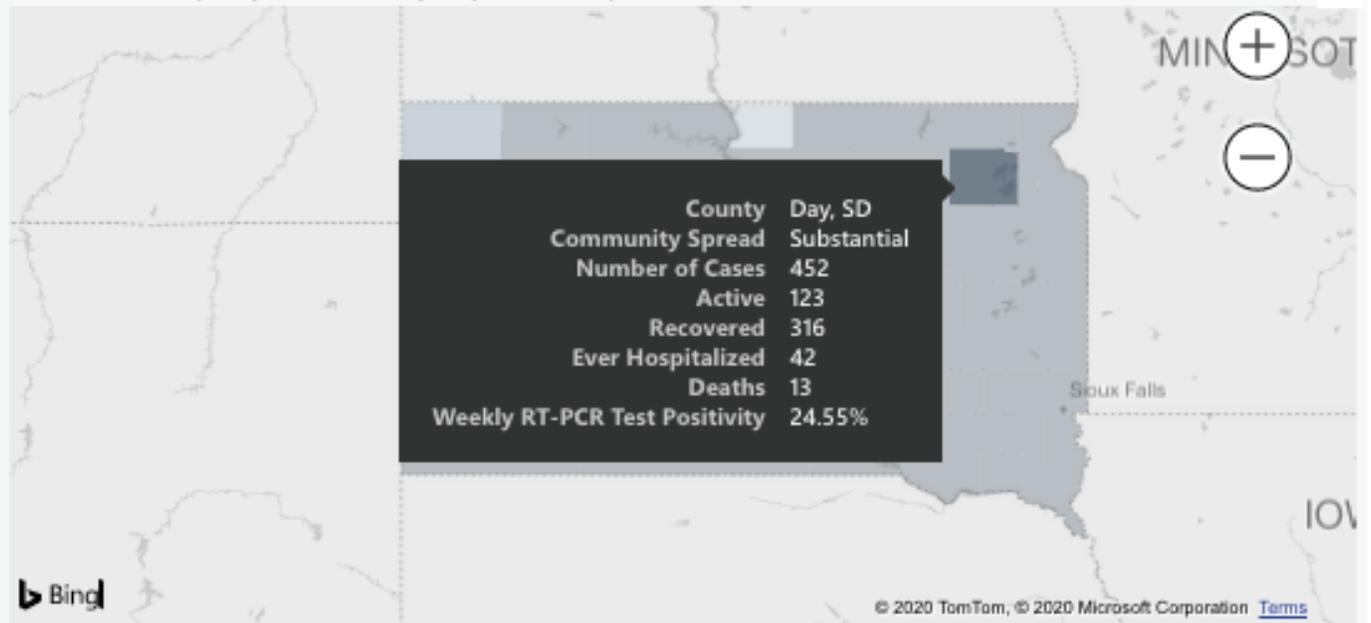
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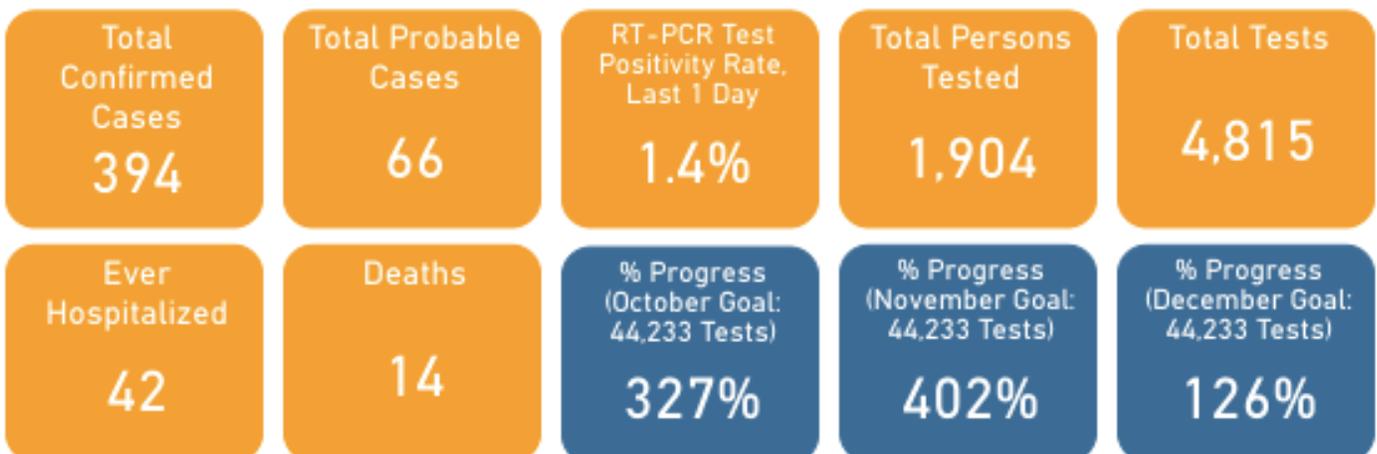
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



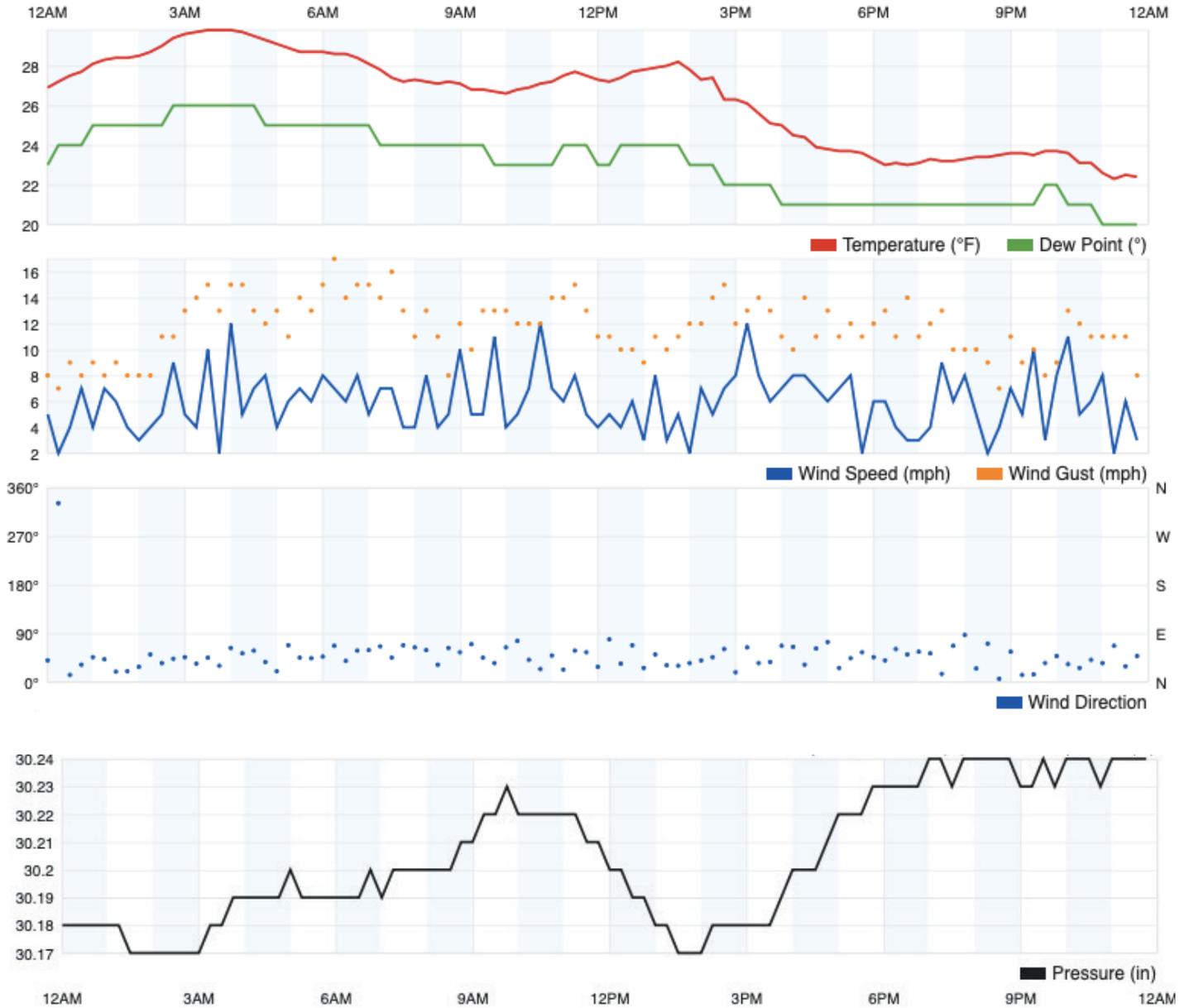
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Cloudy

High: 25 °F

Tonight



Cloudy

Low: 18 °F

Sunday



Gradual
Clearing

High: 32 °F

Sunday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 4 °F

Monday



Partly Sunny

High: 22 °F

Cool & Cloudy Today!
Highs in the upper 20s to around 30°

Morning Fog
Especially over northwestern to north central SD & the Sisseton Hills

Fog Safety Reminders

- Slow Down
- Increase Following Distance between Vehicles
- Keep Headlights On
- Reduce Distractions

Created: 12/12/2020 3:23 AM

Cool and cloudy conditions will continue today, with highs in the upper 20s to around 30 degrees. Fog will continue through much of the morning hours, especially over northwestern to north central South Dakota, and the Sisseton Hills. If you encounter fog: Slow down, increase your following distance between vehicles, keep your headlights on, and reduce distractions.

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Today in Weather History

December 12, 1968: An intense blizzard visited most of South Dakota and Minnesota on the 12th and 13th of December. The storm began in the western part of South Dakota on the morning of the 12th then spread into the eastern part of the state and west central Minnesota by that afternoon, where it continued into the morning of the 13th. Freezing rain preceded snow, and in west central Minnesota, with thunder and lightning as well. Winds of over 50 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which occasionally reduced visibilities to near zero. Gusts reached 70 mph in many places. Temperatures were falling to near zero during the day also resulted in dangerously low wind chills, particularly in Minnesota. The eastern half of South Dakota into west central Minnesota experienced the most severe blizzard conditions. Many schools were closed, and most other activities were greatly curtailed.

Automobile accidents were numerous across the area. Multiple utility lines were downed, and power and telephone outages were numerous due to the high winds. Power outages from less than an hour up to 12 hours were common across Minnesota. Snowfall ranged from around one inch in western South Dakota, to five inches in eastern South Dakota, to five to ten inches in west central Minnesota. One death in South Dakota was attributed to the storm when a man died of exposure to the cold near Allen in southwest South Dakota. In Minnesota, one man was found frozen to death near his car after it had run into the ditch several miles northwest of Boyd in Lac Qui Parle County. Another man was killed by a train when his vehicle became stalled on a railroad crossing at Hancock. 5 inches of snow fell at Watertown, Sisseton, and Webster with 6 inches at Clear Lake.

December 12, 1967: From December 12th through the 20th, Flagstaff, Arizona, a series of snowstorms buries Flagstaff with nearly 85 inches of snow.

1882 - Portland, OR, was drenched with 7.66 inches of rain, a record 24 hour total for that location. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1960 - The first of three Middle Atlantic snowstorms produced a foot of snow at Baltimore MD. A pre-winter blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. producing wind gusts as high as 51 mph, along with 16 inches of snow at Nantucket MA, and 20 inches at Newark NJ. (David Ludlum)

1969 - The worst tornado of record for western Washington State tracked south of Seattle, traveling five miles, from Des Moines to Kent. The tornado, 50 to 200 yards in width, began as a waterspout over Puget Sound. One person was injured and the tornado caused half a million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - While a developing winter storm began to spread snow across New Mexico into Colorado, high winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern states. Winds in California gusted to 60 mph in the Sacramento River Delta, and in the San Bernardino Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Cold arctic air spread from the Great Lakes Region to the Appalachian Region. Twenty-five cities, mostly in the northeastern U.S., reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 12 degrees below zero at Albany NY was their coldest reading of record for so early in the season. Saranac Lake NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 28 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A winter storm produced snow from northern Mississippi to the Middle Atlantic Coast, with 10.5 inches reported at Powhatan VA. Heavy snow whitened the Black Hills of South Dakota, with 36 inches reported at Deer Mountain. Thirteen cities in the north central U.S., from Minnesota to Texas, reported record low temperatures for the date, including Duluth MN and Yankton SD with morning lows of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995 - A severe coastal storm is blamed for five deaths and loss of power to over one million people in Oregon and Washington. Winds at Sea Lion Caves near Florence topped out at 119 mph before problems developed with the anemometer. In Newport, a gust of 107 mph occurred downtown, while Astoria and Cape Blanco also had gusts of over 100 mph. Astoria's air pressure dropped as low as 28.53 inches, an all-time record (and comparable to the central pressure of a Category 2 hurricane!). Gusts in the Willamette Valley exceeded 60 mph.

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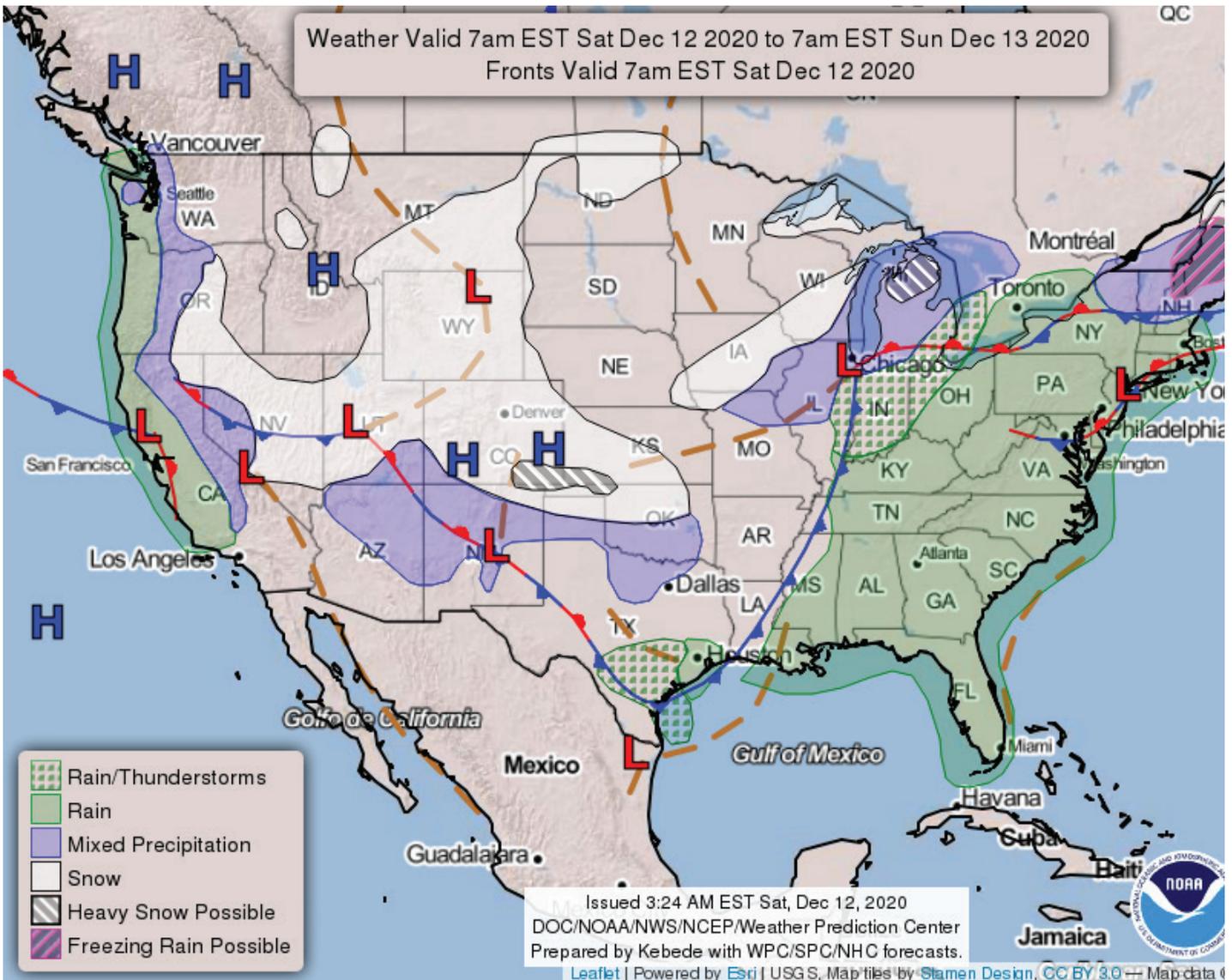
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 30 °F at 3:29 AM
Low Temp: 22 °F at 11:13 PM
Wind: 17 mph at 6:13 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 54° in 1924
Record Low: -28° in 1893
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.19
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.39
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:51 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:06 a.m.



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WHAT KIND OF DAY WILL IT BE?

As you look forward to Christmas, what special memories will you take from the day that will remain with you after it's over? Will it be a "horrible day," a "holiday" or a "holy day?"

For some, it will be a "horrible" day. It will be a day when families gather and feuds erupt, unwanted gifts are exchanged, stomachs are stuffed, alcohol generated hangovers will dull minds and memories, and promises to "never do this again" are made. Not ever!

Or, will it be a holiday? Families traveling many miles to get together to share problems and pains that brought them closer together, share joyous memories of special events that united them in love and laughter, introducing a new-born child or one who will soon be the next in-law uniting two "love-birds."

Would it not be special, however, if we made it a "holy day?" A day of worship and praise, a day when we set aside time to share and emphasize the gift of our new birth through Christ?

Paul wrote some inspiring words about the gift of our new birth made possible because of the birth of Jesus. "You have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you."

This "new nature" means that it is possible for us to have a new life through His Son, our Savior, and the hope that one day we will be like Him and spend eternity with Him.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for the gift of Jesus Who gives us a new life and the promise of joy, peace, and presence that comes with the assurance of salvation. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Colossians 3:10 Put on your new nature, and be renewed as you learn to know your Creator and become like him.

News from the Associated Press

Sioux Falls Fire Chief Brad Goodroad to retire in February

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The fire chief of South Dakota's largest city is retiring. The Argus Leader reports Sioux Falls Fire Chief Brad Goodroad will retire from the department on Feb. 12. Goodroad has been with the department for 27 years and has been the fire chief since 2017. The city said in a statement that a new fire chief will be appointed by Mayor Paul TenHaken, and the search will begin immediately. Goodroad began his career with Sioux Falls Fire Rescue in 1994. He served as a firefighter for about seven years before applying to be a fire apparatus operator. He progressed to captain, battalion chief, and eventually to division chief.

Pheasant Fest cancellation an economic loss for South Dakota

By MAKENZIE HUBER Sioux Falls Argus Leader
SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The annual Pheasant Fest & Quail Classic scheduled for February 2021 in Sioux Falls has been canceled due to concerns about the coronavirus pandemic. The event would have brought millions of dollars to the Sioux Falls and South Dakota economies, officials say, but it'll be back. Officials for Pheasants Forever, the nonprofit behind Pheasant Fest, are already talking to Experience Sioux Falls about returning to the city in 2024, said Bob St. Pierre, chief marketing and communications officer for Pheasants Forever. "It's our intent to come back to Sioux Falls as soon as possible," St. Pierre said. "It's one of our favorite markets." Pheasant Fest's first foray to the Pheasant Capital in 2018 resulted in landmark successes for both local tourism officials and the national groups that organize the three-day convention, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. Topping 28,000 in attendance, the event drew guests and vendors from across the Midwest and the region. The same people who spent their days in the various halls and show floors of the building at 1201 N. West Ave. also made their mark on the rest of the Sioux Falls community. The money they spent on hotels, food, entertainment, transportation, medical care and everything else guests might want or need during a three-day stay totaled in the millions of dollars. The estimated economic impact of the 2018 event was \$3.9 million, said Teri Schmidt, executive director of the Sioux Falls Convention and Visitors Bureau. The Sioux Falls community expected the same or better turnout for the planned event when it was announced earlier this year. "We really feel badly about it, but it is the reality of our time right now," Schmidt said of the cancellation. "Even if we save one person from passing away from COVID, then we have absolutely done what's right. One person's life is more valuable than pushing for an event that can wait." Several large events, conferences and conventions have been impacted due to the pandemic. Economically, it's a hit to not only Sioux Falls, but South Dakota as a whole to not have the event in February, Schmidt said. And Sioux Falls isn't the only one losing out because of the decision. Pheasant Fest is one of the Pheasants Forever's largest fundraisers and would have raised nearly \$1 million for the nonprofit, St. Pierre said. "There's a worldwide pandemic going on and it's not getting any better in the short-term," St. Pierre said. "This decision was not made lightly, and the safety of our audiences was first and foremost." While it isn't finalized that Pheasant Fest will return in 2024, it is the earliest they can return since they've already committed to Omaha in 2022. The organization does not sign multiple year contracts, St. Pierre said. But he's sure they'll return, based on the outpouring of support when Sioux Falls last hosted the event.

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And Sioux Falls will be waiting when they do.

"We'll be ready, open arms and orange carpet ready to roll out when they're ready to come back," Schmidt said.

Although the in-person event was canceled, there will be a virtual gathering in late February. Until then, Schmidt is waiting until Pheasant Fest can return to South Dakota.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

19-31-37-55-67, Mega Ball: 25, Megaplier: 4

(nineteen, thirty-one, thirty-seven, fifty-five, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: twenty-five; Megaplier: four)

Estimated jackpot: \$276 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$277 million

Eady lifts North Dakota St. over South Dakota 74-67

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Tyree Eady scored 17 points as North Dakota State topped South Dakota 74-67 on Friday night at the Dakota Showcase. Sam Griesel and Rocky Kreuser added 16 points each for the Bison. Kreuser also had eight rebounds.

Maleeck Harden-Hayes had 11 points for North Dakota State (1-5, 1-1 Summit League), which ended its season-opening five-game losing streak.

Mason Archambault had 17 points for the Coyotes (0-5, 0-2), who have now lost five consecutive games to start the season. A.J. Plitzuweit added 14 points. Stanley Umude had 14 points.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Dentlinger leads S. Dakota St. past North Dakota 74-62

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Matt Dentlinger had 21 points as South Dakota State got past North Dakota 74-62 on Friday.

Noah Freidel had 15 points for South Dakota State (5-2, 2-0 Summit League), which earned its fourth consecutive win. Baylor Scheierman added 11 points, 10 rebounds and six assists. Alex Arians had 11 points and seven rebounds.

Filip Rebraca had 18 points and seven rebounds for the Fighting Hawks (1-4, 1-1). Caleb Nero added 13 points. Tyree Ihenacho had eight rebounds.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Indian Health Service plans for COVID vaccine distribution

By FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

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FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. (AP) — The federal agency that provides health care to Native Americans said Friday it will receive more than enough vaccines to protect all the people working in hospitals and clinics, including doctors, nurses and support staff.

The Indian Health Service, treated much like a state for distribution purposes, submitted a plan to vaccinate more than 2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives. The agency expects to receive 22,425 doses of the Pfizer vaccine next week and 46,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine before the end of the year, officials said.

More than 44,000 people work at the 338 facilities that chose to get the vaccines through the Indian Health Service. Other tribal health facilities opted to be covered under states' allocations.

The ones under the Indian Health Service are encouraged to follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines, which prioritize health care workers, said Rear Adm. Francis Frazier, who is leading the agency's COVID-19 Vaccine Task Force. Tribes can deviate from the guidelines. For example, a tribe might consider elders as being 55 and older, rather than 65.

"They really are the best determinants of the needs of their population," he told The Associated Press.

The Navajo Nation is expecting 3,900 doses on Monday and Tuesday that will be delivered under police escort, said Dr. Loretta Christensen, the chief medical officer for the Navajo area Indian Health Service. About 7,900 doses of the Moderna vaccine should arrive the following week.

Those vaccines will cover healthcare workers, emergency medical staff, traditional practitioners working in Indian Health Service facilities, and the staff and patients in long-term nursing facilities, Christensen said.

The first in line for vaccinations within the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma includes hospital workers, first responders, and participants and workers in the Cherokee Elder Program. Those whose first language is Cherokee and others considered tribal treasures would follow.

"I know some of our Cherokee elders may have reservations about taking the vaccine," Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. said in a statement. "But it will save our elders, our speakers, our national treasures and frontline workers."

The Navajo, Phoenix and Oklahoma City areas serve the largest populations of Native Americans, meaning they will get more vaccines than other Indian Health Service areas. The Alaska region chose to get allocations from the state, while one facility in the Navajo area — the Utah Navajo Health System — also went with the state for distribution.

The Seattle Indian Health Board chose to get its allocation from Washington because of its relationship with state officials and knowing that the Indian Health Service is chronically underfunded, said Abigail Echo-Hawk, the board's chief research officer.

"Making us choose one or the other is, in my perspective, a very bad decision," she said. "It is limiting our access to life-saving vaccines. We need as much access as possible because we have been more disproportionately impacted."

Like others, she expects some hesitancy in Indian Country.

Tribal health facilities across the U.S. have relied on elders as trusted members of the community to advocate for previous vaccines, as well as messaging that promotes protection of the next generation, Indian Health Service officials said.

Annarita Begay has been researching the coronavirus vaccines but still has questions about any adverse, long-term effects. Still, she's keeping an open mind because she is considered an essential employee and has a grandmother and other high-risk people at home.

"(It's) kind of like a pick-your-poison game at this point," said Begay, who is Dine, the Navajo word for "the people." "If you have underlying conditions like asthma, high blood pressure, obesity, diabetes, you either have that and get COVID, or you take a vaccine and experience some side effects later on."

"If I could get it, I would probably be setting an example for my own family to see how it would work," she said.

Crystal Kee, a 43-year-old Navajo woman who works in early childhood development, wouldn't be among the first group vaccinated. But she encouraged anyone who is able to get the vaccine to help protect

children, the elderly and healthcare workers.

"Along this entire journey has been significant heartbreak and loss," said Kee, of Steamboat, Arizona. "In terms of just the vaccine development, I feel like it offers us a glimmer of hope and protection, not selfishly ... but really for others."

Guns allowed in Custer County Courthouse for now

CUSTER, S.D. (AP) — The Custer County Commission has agreed to continue allowing members of the public to carry guns into the county courthouse — at least until January, when the state Supreme Court is expected to review the issue.

The commission voted 3-1 last month to allow county workers and the public to carry guns into the courthouse and administration building, but not into courtrooms. Supporters said armed individuals can protect the courthouse from bad actors. But judges opposed the ordinance, citing safety risks.

County commissioners voted Wednesday to keep the ordinance on the books until the Supreme Court weighs in, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Judge Craig Pfiefler, the presiding judge of the 7th Judicial Circuit, filed a proposed order that said judges will appear at Custer County hearings remotely through audio or video feeds, or hearings will take place at the Pennington County Courthouse in Rapid City. All trials for Custer County will be comprised of Custer County jurors but take place in Rapid City.

Tracy Kelley, Custer County state's attorney, said judges are already appearing via video or audio feed. Any hearing that involves testimony or physical evidence will have to take place at the Pennington County Courthouse since it's difficult to handle those remotely.

Custer County doesn't have to worry about jury trials for now since COVID-19 has paused the proceedings across the 7th Circuit, which includes Custer, Pennington, Fall River and Oglala Lakota counties. That order expires Dec. 31.

South Dakota reports 33 more COVID-19 deaths, 945 new cases

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials reported an additional 33 deaths related to COVID-19 on Friday and 945 new cases, bringing the death toll to 1,210.

The total number of positive cases in South Dakota is now at 89,672, according to state data. Hospitalizations from COVID-19 were down 24 on Friday, to 467. That marks the lowest number of hospitalizations since early November, when the state began seeing a surge.

Of those hospitalized, 91 patients were receiving intensive care, with 55 on ventilators.

Health experts say that while vaccines are expected to be distributed soon, it will be challenging to make them widely available in South Dakota, due to the state's rural nature, the difficulty in storing the shots at extremely cold temperatures, and concerns that some people may be reluctant to be inoculated, the Argus Leader reported.

The cold storage requirement may be a big hurdle, experts said. Dana Darger, director of pharmacy for Monument Health Rapid City Hospital, said few hospitals in South Dakota have freezers that can store a vaccine made by Pfizer, which must be kept at roughly minus-158 degrees Fahrenheit. That vaccine and one by Moderna also have short shelf lives.

"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."

The Pfizer and Moderna vaccines also require two doses. That could be challenging for rural residents, who will have to travel significant distances to get inoculated.

Fatal shooting victim in Sioux Falls identified as teen

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SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police have identified the victim of a fatal shooting in Sioux Falls as a 16-year-old boy.

Authorities say Ephraim Duolo Shulue was found in a parking area on the city's northeastern side shortly before 11 p.m. Wednesday. He was pronounced dead at the hospital about 30 minutes later.

An autopsy is expected to be done Friday.

Lt. Terrance Matia says police have not identified any suspects yet, the Argus Leader reported.

It's the second fatal shooting involving a teenager in Sioux Falls in the past month. Eighteen-year-old Venance Kitungano was shot to death in early November outside of the Red Sea Pub where a Halloween party was taking place.

Police said the Lincoln High School student was not targeted and that he was "an innocent bystander." A juvenile was arrested in that shooting.

More than 100 arrested at Paris protest over security bill

PARIS (AP) — Paris police took more than 100 people into custody at what quickly became a tense and sometimes ill-tempered protest Saturday against proposed security laws, with officers wading into the crowds of several thousand to haul away suspected trouble-makers.

Police targeted protesters they suspected might coalesce together into violent groups like those who vandalized stores and vehicles and attacked officers at previous demonstrations.

Paris police reported at least 107 arrests. Long lines of riot officers and police vehicles with blue lights flashing escorted Saturday's march through rain-slickened streets in Paris. They hemmed in protesters, seeking to prevent the flare-up of violence that marked many previous demonstrations.

A police water cannon doused demonstrators at the end of the march, as night fell.

Marchers were protesting against a proposed security law that has sparked successive weekends of demonstrations and against a draft law aimed at combating Islamist radicalism.

The security bill's most contested measure could make it more difficult to film police officers. It aims to outlaw the publication of images with intent to cause harm to police. Critics fear it could erode media freedom and make it more difficult to expose police brutality. The provision caused such an uproar that the government has decided to rewrite it.

Slogans on placards carried by marchers in Paris said "I will never stop filming" and "Camera equals mutilation?"

There were also protests in other cities. In Lyon, in the southeast, authorities reported five arrests among people they said attacked police and sought to loot shops.

US says COVID-19 vaccine to start arriving in states Monday

By LAURAN NEERGAARD, MATTHEW PERRONE and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's first COVID-19 vaccine will begin arriving in states Monday morning, U.S. officials said Saturday, after the government gave the final go-ahead to the shots needed to end an outbreak that has killed nearly 300,000 Americans.

Trucks will roll out Sunday morning as shipping companies UPS and FedEx begin delivering Pfizer's vaccine to nearly 150 locations, said Army Gen. Gustave F. Perna of Operation Warp Speed, the Trump administration's vaccine development program. Another 450 sites will get the vaccine Tuesday and Wednesday.

The locations include hospitals and other sites able to meet the ultra-cold storage requirements for the vaccine. Within three weeks, vaccines should be delivered to local pharmacies and other locations, Perna said at a news conference.

The vaccine was timed to arrive Monday morning so that health workers would be available to receive the shots and begin giving them, Perna said.

It was unclear who would receive the first dose of the vaccine, though health workers and nursing home residents were the priority. Perna said that decision would be determined by health authorities.

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The announcement kicks off a massive logistical operation involving the federal and state governments, private companies and health care workers to quickly distribute limited vaccine supplies throughout the U.S.

Initially, about 3 million shots are expected to be shipped nationwide, according to officials with Operation Warp Speed. A similar amount is to be held in reserve for those recipients' second dose.

Initial shipments are expected to leave Pfizer's manufacturing plant in Kalamazoo, Michigan, via truck and then be flown to regional hubs around the country.

Adding to the distribution challenge is that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine must be stored and shipped at ultra-low temperatures of about 94 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. Pfizer has developed shipping containers that use dry ice, and GPS-enabled sensors will allow the company to track each shipment and ensure it stays cold.

The green light to begin vaccinations came late Friday after the Food and Drug Administration authorized emergency use of the vaccine. The signoff capped an unprecedented global race to speed vaccines through testing and review, chopping years off the normal development process.

The FDA found the vaccine highly protective with no major safety issues. U.S. regulators worked for months to emphasize the rigor and independence of their review, but the Trump administration pressured the agency up until the final announcement. A top White House official even threatened to remove FDA chief Stephen Hahn if a ruling did not come before Saturday.

Concerns that a shot was rushed out could undermine vaccination efforts in a country with deeply ingrained skepticism about vaccines. Hahn again emphasized his agency's independence to reporters Saturday.

"Science and data guided the FDA's decision," Hahn said. "We worked quickly because of the urgency of this pandemic, not because of any other external pressure."

While determined to be safe, regulators in the U.K. are investigating several severe allergic reactions. The FDA's instructions tell providers not give it to those with a known history of severe allergic reactions to any of its ingredients.

The FDA's vaccine director, Dr. Peter Marks, said the agency will carefully track any reports of allergic reactions in the U.S.

"I think we still need to learn more, and that's why we'll be taking precautions," Marks said.

The FDA next week will review a second vaccine from Moderna and the National Institutes of Health that appears about as protective as Pfizer's shot. On Friday, the Trump administration announced it had purchased 100 million more doses of that vaccine on top of 100 million it previously ordered.

The announcement came after revelations last week that the White House opted not to lock in an additional 100 million doses of Pfizer's vaccine for delivery in the second quarter of 2021. The Trump administration contends the current orders plus those in the pipeline will be enough to accommodate any American who wants to be vaccinated by the end of the second quarter of 2021.

Associated Press writer Candice Choi contributed to this story from New York.

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.

Shadowy Ethiopian massacre could be 'tip of the iceberg'

By FAY ABUELGASIM, NARIMAN EL-MOFTY and CARA ANNA Associated Press

UMM RAKOUBA, Sudan (AP) — The only thing the survivors can agree on is that hundreds of people were slaughtered in a single Ethiopian town.

Witnesses say security forces and their allies attacked civilians in Mai-Kadra with machetes and knives or strangled them with ropes. The stench of bodies lingered for days during the early chaos of the Ethiopian government's offensive in the defiant Tigray region last month. Several mass graves have been reported.

What happened beginning Nov. 9 in the agricultural town near the Sudanese border has become the most visible atrocity in a war largely conducted in the shadows. But even here, much remains unclear,

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including who killed whom.

Witnesses in Mai-Kadra told the Ethiopian Human Rights Commission and Amnesty International that ethnic Tigrayan forces and allies attacked Amhara — one of Ethiopia's largest ethnic groups but a minority in Tigray. In Sudan, where nearly 50,000 people have fled, one ethnic Amhara refugee gave The Associated Press a similar account.

But more than a dozen Tigrayan refugees told the AP it was the other way around: In strikingly similar stories, they said they and others were targeted by Ethiopian federal forces and allied Amhara regional troops.

It's possible that civilians from both ethnicities were targeted in Mai-Kadra, Amnesty now says.

"Anyone they found, they would kill," Tesfaalem Gernay, an ethnic Tigrayan who fled to Sudan with his family, said of Ethiopian and Amhara forces. He said he saw hundreds of bodies, making a slicing gesture at his neck and head as he remembered the gashes.

But another refugee, Abebete Refe, told the AP that many ethnic Amhara like him who stayed behind were massacred by Tigrayan forces.

"Even the government doesn't think we're alive, they thought we all died," he said.

The conflicting accounts are emblematic of a war about which little is truly known since Ethiopian forces entered Tigray on Nov. 4 and sealed off the region from the world, restricting access to journalists and aid workers alike. For weeks, food and other supplies have run alarmingly low. This week Ethiopia's security forces shot at and briefly detained U.N. staffers making the first assessment of how to deliver aid, a senior Ethiopian official said.

Ethiopia's government and the Tigray one have filled the vacuum with propaganda. Each side has seized on the killings in Mai-Kadra to support its cause.

The conflict began after months of friction between the governments, which now regard each other as illegitimate. The Tigray leaders once dominated Ethiopia's ruling coalition, but Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sidelined them when he came to power in 2018.

Long-held tensions over land in western Tigray, where Mai-Kadra is located, between Tigrayans and Amhara have added fuel to the fire.

Amnesty International said it confirmed that at least scores, and likely hundreds, of people were killed in Mai-Kadra, using geolocation to verify video and photographs of the bodies. It also remotely conducted "a limited set of interviews."

But Mai-Kadra "is just the tip of the iceberg," Amnesty researcher Fisseha Tekle told an event on Tuesday as fears grow about atrocities elsewhere in Tigray. "Other credible allegations are emerging ... not only in Mai-Kadra but also" in the nearby town of Humera, the town of Dansha and the Tigray capital, Mekele.

In Mai-Kadra, witnesses told the visiting Ethiopian rights commission they saw police, militia and members of a Tigray youth group attack Amhara.

"The streets were still lined with bodies yet to be buried" days later, the commission said. One man who looked at identity cards of the dead as he cleared away the bodies told Amnesty International that many of them said Amhara.

But several ethnic Tigrayans who have fled blamed Ethiopian and allied Amhara regional forces for killings in the same town at the same time, saying some asked to see identity cards before attacking.

In some cases, they said they recognized the killers as their neighbors.

Samir Beyen, a mechanic, said he was stopped and asked if he was Tigrayan, then beaten and robbed. He said he saw people being slaughtered with knives, and dozens of rotting corpses.

"It was like the end of the world," he recalled. "We could not bury them because the soldiers were near."

Cut off from their homes, refugees now wait in Sudan in bare concrete houses or under shelters lashed together from plastic and branches, playing checkers with Coca-Cola bottle caps or stretching out on mats to sleep, seeking a brief escape from ghastly memories.

The AP has been unable to obtain permission to travel to the Tigray region and has been unable to independently verify the reports of the massacre. Neither Amnesty International nor the Ethiopian Human

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Rights Commission agreed to requests to speak with witnesses they interviewed.

The Ethiopian commission, an entity created under the country's constitution, called its findings preliminary. Its researchers were allowed by the federal government to visit Mai-Kadra, but when asked whether it was being allowed to also investigate other alleged atrocities, spokesman Aaron Maasho replied, "We're working on it."

The U.N. human rights office this week called for independent investigations into the conflict, but Ethiopian officials have rejected what they call interference, saying this week the government doesn't need a "babysitter."

To assume the government can't do such work itself "is belittling," senior Ethiopian official Redwan Hussein told reporters on Tuesday.

The prime minister has called the killings in Mai-Kadra "the epitome of moral degeneration" and even expressed suspicion that the perpetrators may have fled to Sudan and could be hiding among the refugees. Abiy offered no evidence, only pointing to the number of young men among the refugees — though roughly half are women.

The prime minister also has rejected allegations of abuses by the Ethiopian defense force, saying it "has not killed a single person in any city" during the conflict.

But the Tigray leader, Debretsion Gebremichael, blamed the "invading" federal forces for the killings, telling the AP that "we're not people who can commit this crime, ever."

The ethnic frictions and profiling must stop, the U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet warned this week, saying they are "fostering divisiveness and sowing the seeds for further instability and conflict" — in a region already rife with both.

Associated Press writers Samy Magdy in Cairo and Haleluya Hadero in Atlanta contributed.

Analysis: Senate 'gangs' show Biden what's possible, and not

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was about more than providing virus aid.

Day after day, night after night, the gang of a dozen or so senators met over pizza and Zoom calls, hammering out a framework for a \$900 billion-plus COVID-19 virus aid and economic relief package. Their goal was not only to break a stubborn impasse on the pandemic aid, but to show that the old ways of doing business in Washington — in good faith, across party lines, with give-and-take — could still succeed.

Their work interjected fresh momentum toward a year-end deal. The White House jumped in with a new proposal. Congressional leaders showed interest. The gridlock seemed to be breaking.

But problems quickly flared. Details proved vexing. And by week's end, the lawmakers involved in the bipartisan talks were admitting that the thorniest problem of all — whether companies, schools and others should be protected from virus-related lawsuits — was something they simply couldn't solve, at least not yet.

For President-elect Joe Biden, it's a clear indication that there are willing partners in Congress for the kind of consensus building he campaigned on. Yet it's also a cautionary tale just weeks before his inauguration, showing how difficult it will be to govern from the center at a time when members of Congress, and the country at large, find it hard to bridge the gulf between them.

It also showed just how broken Congress, particularly the Senate, has become.

"Everyone's frustrated," said Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., in an interview. "There are senators on both sides that are very frustrated that essentially the Senate has stopped functioning."

Biden has a track record of cutting deals in Congress, both as a former senator and as vice president to Barack Obama, and the new White House will be closely watched for its expected overtures to the moderates.

Democrats like Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., who is known to buck his party, and newly liberated Republicans freed of Trump and eager to deliver for constituents back home will have great sway in the new year.

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Because the House and Senate will both have slimmer majorities, that creates opportunities for individual lawmakers to gain power by crossing party lines to tip the vote tally. It also means Biden's administration will likely be forced to rely on Republicans in the House, if the majority Democrats splinter, and in the Senate, regardless of party control after the Jan. 5 runoff elections in Georgia.

The current COVID "gang" leaders, GOP Sen. Susan Collins of Maine and Democratic Sen. Mark Warner of Virginia, all but extended an invitation to the Biden administration.

"We felt the stakes were simply too high to allow partisan warfare to prevent us from delivering relief," the two senators wrote in an op-ed announcing the bipartisan framework. "The process, too, can serve as a template for progress on other difficult but vital issues in our closely divided Senate."

Yet, as the last week's negotiations unfolded, it became clear that party leaders still drive the decision making, the final signatories to any deal.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell signaled it was "unlikely" any compromise on the liability issue would be acceptable to Republicans, who hold the majority in the Senate.

Aligning with conservative Republicans, McConnell scoffed at "bailouts" for the states — even though some GOP senators would welcome the infusion of cash to pay police, firefighters, public health workers and others back home.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, backed by progressives, rejected the liability shield as unfair to workers who would have little recourse to sue their employers over working conditions during COVID.

"It's an unconscionable position — no relief for the American people unless corporations receive blanket immunity from lawsuits," Schumer said.

Washington cleared out for the weekend, hopes dimmed for a sweeping deal before Christmas.

Gangs often emerge in Congress, particularly the Senate, when there's a vacuum of leadership and lawmakers have pent-up energy to break through the standoffs and find a resolution.

During moments of crisis, the gangs usually succeed in focusing attention, building suspense as lawmakers huddle secretly, to develop that most elusive of Washington achievements, a bipartisan compromise.

But they don't always deliver solutions.

In 2005, the Gang of 14 bipartisan senators engineered an end to a standoff over Democratic efforts to block then-President George W. Bush's judicial nominees when all sides agreed to lower the temperature.

But the agreement fell apart by 2013 as tensions boiled over with the Republican blockade of Barack Obama's nominees. Fed up, the Senate majority leader at the time, Democrat Harry Reid, invoked the so-called "nuclear option" — a rules change that reduced the threshold for confirming many judicial and executive branch nominations to a 51-vote majority.

McConnell went further in 2017, deploying the "nuclear option" to allow Trump's Supreme Court picks to be confirmed the same way — what many of today's senators view as a breaking point for the Senate.

Congressional gangs were robust in 2013 as lawmakers tried to strike compromises with Obama.

The bipartisan Gang of Eight senators delivered a sweeping immigration overhaul, a hard-fought compromise that passed by a wide margin in the Senate — only to land with a thud in the House. It never became law.

Collins and other women led a gang that helped Congress ease out of the 2013 federal shutdown. And Collins helmed another gang during the 2018 shutdown that famously employed a "talking stick" so participants could take turns sharing ideas to end the standoff.

Former Senate aide Ryan Nickel sees gangs as the currency of the new Congress, as centrist Democrats and Republicans assert their desire to deliver achievements during in the Biden era.

"2021 can be the year of the talking stick caucus," said Nickel, now a Democratic strategist.

Others though, see the gangs as a symptom of a greater problem.

Rather than vigorously debate legislation on the Senate floor, leaders shield senators from taking tough votes — or votes on bills that would actually have wide bipartisan support.

It's become a procedural arms race, each side deploying the rules of the chamber to block action, resulting in the stalemates.

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Merkley is working with senators to envision a functioning Senate: What if the senators took votes on the COVID bill? On amendments to provide money to the states? On the liability protection for businesses and organizations? More unemployment benefits, money for hospitals and vaccines?

"At least in voting, our citizens would know where we stood," he said. "We wouldn't need a gang right now. We would have had a gang of 100."

EDITOR'S NOTE — AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro has covered Congress since 2010. Follow her at <https://twitter.com/LisaMascaro>

Iran executes exiled journalist who encouraged 2017 protests

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran on Saturday executed an exiled journalist over his online work that helped inspire nationwide economic protests in 2017, a little more than a year after authorities tricked him into traveling to Iraq where he was abducted.

Ruhollah Zam, 47, was one of several opposition figures successfully seized by Iranian intelligence operatives abroad in recent months as Tehran struggles under the weight of U.S. sanctions.

Kidnapping and executing Zam, who lived in Paris under what Iran described as French government protection, likely will further chill an already-scattered Iranian opposition across the West. It also comes as Iran tries to pressure France and other European nations over the collapsed atomic accord in the waning days of President Donald Trump's administration.

The execution drew immediate international condemnation.

Zam's "execution is a deadly blow to freedom of expression in Iran and shows the extent of the Iranian authorities' brutal tactics to instill fear and deter dissent," warned Diana Eltahawy of Amnesty International.

Iranian state television referred to Zam as "the leader of the riots" in announcing his execution by hanging early Saturday. In June, a court sentenced Zam to death, saying he had been convicted of "corruption on Earth," a charge often used in cases involving espionage or attempts to overthrow Iran's government.

Zam's website AmadNews and a channel he created on the popular messaging app Telegram had spread the timings of the 2017 protests and embarrassing information about officials that directly challenged Iran's Shiite theocracy.

Those demonstrations, which began at the end of December 2017 and continued into 2018, represented the biggest challenge to Iran's rulers since the 2009 Green Movement protests and set the stage for similar mass unrest in November of last year.

The initial spark for the 2017 protests was a sudden jump in food prices. Many believe that hard-line opponents of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani instigated the first demonstrations in the conservative city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran, trying to direct public anger at the president. But as protests spread from town to town, the backlash turned against the entire ruling class.

Soon, cries directly challenging Rouhani and even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could be heard in online videos shared by Zam.

Telegram shut down the channel over Iranian government complaints it spread information about how to make gasoline bombs. The channel later continued under a different name. Zam denied inciting violence on Telegram at the time.

The 2017 protests reportedly saw some 5,000 people detained and 25 killed.

Zam himself had fled Iran after the 2009 protests, heading first to Malaysia and then to France. While Iranian authorities have never described how Iran's Revolutionary Guard detained him, Amnesty said he was seized on a trip to neighboring Iraq — where the Guard has wielded deep influence since the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that toppled Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Zam's father, the reformist Shiite cleric Mohammad Ali Zam, seemed to confirm the Iraqi abduction in comments on Instagram on Saturday.

"I made a deal with God, I have no worries, these people brought me to Karbala, but did not allow me

to visit the shrine," the Instagram post quotes the younger Zam as saying. Karbala is home to the shrine of Imam Hussein, an important pilgrimage point for Shiites.

The post added: "I told him, 'Don't worry, Imam Hussein is in all visitors' hearts, he is with you.'"

The cleric said he only was allowed to visit Tehran's Evin prison on Friday to see his son after agreeing with authorities not to tell him his execution loomed. Iranian media did not acknowledge the post.

France previously has criticized his death sentence as "a serious blow to freedom of expression and press freedom in Iran." Reporters Without Borders, a group that campaigns for press freedoms, said Zam's hanging was a "new crime of Iranian justice."

Sherif Mansour of the Committee to Protect Journalists said Zam's execution had seen "Iranian authorities join the company of criminal gangs and violent extremists who silence journalists by murdering them."

"This is a monstrous and shameful act, and one which the international community must not let pass unnoticed," Mansour said.

Iran is one of the world's top executioners. The European Union called on Iran to stop its executions and "cease the practice of using televised confessions to establish and promote their guilt." Zam has been the subject of several state TV programs in which he gave apparently coerced confessions.

Zam is one of three opposition figures apparently detained in intelligence operations abroad. In late July, a California-based member of an Iranian militant opposition group in exile was abducted by Iran while staying in Dubai, his family has said.

Iran also is believed to have seized the former head of the Arab Struggle Movement for the Liberation of Ahwaz, a militant separatist group, while he was in Turkey. Iran has accused Farajollah Cha'ab of being behind a 2018 attack on a military parade that killed at least 25 people and wounded 70.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Biden's Homeland Security pick faces questions on 2015 probe

By BEN FOX and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The last time Alejandro Mayorkas faced Senate confirmation, not a single Republican voted for him because there was an open investigation into his management of the U.S. immigration agency under President Barack Obama.

Now, seven years later, Mayorkas is President-elect Joe Biden's groundbreaking nominee to lead the Department of Homeland Security, and that since-completed investigation has emerged as a potential stumbling block.

The Office of Inspector General's 2015 report criticized his handling of three politically connected applications to a program that grants U.S. visas to foreigners who make job-creating investments in the United States. Mayorkas has disputed the findings, and he never faced any sanctions, but Republican senators are bringing it up ahead of what could be a tight confirmation vote.

It's too soon to say whether the nomination of Mayorkas, who would be the first Latino and first immigrant to run DHS, is in jeopardy. But lawmakers such as Sen. Charles Grassley have expressed concern about the report, which concluded that Mayorkas created an appearance of favoritism and special access at Citizenship and Immigration Services when he was director from 2009 to 2013.

"That brand of leadership isn't good for agency culture or the security of our nation," the Iowa Republican told The Associated Press on Thursday.

It's an important moment for Homeland Security, the third-largest Cabinet agency. DHS became closely identified with President Donald Trump's political agenda, as it imposed new hurdles to restrict legal immigration, dispatched agents in tactical gear to protests over the summer without the consent of local authorities and employed controversial measures against illegal immigration, most notoriously the separation of children from their families at the southwest border as part of a zero-tolerance policy in 2018.

Under Biden, the Cuban-born Mayorkas is expected to direct a major reset of the agency's priorities, which he signaled in recent remarks to the American Business Immigration Coalition.

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"We must bring to an immediate end the inhumane and unjust treatment of immigrants," he said. "There is no more powerful and heartbreaking example of that inhumanity than the separation of children from their parents."

Supporters say Mayorkas's experience, which includes serving as a federal prosecutor, is an asset not a liability.

"He is a man of great integrity and principle, with an incomparable work ethic, who understands the complexities of this critical agency and the threats facing our country at this crucial moment," said Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., who chaired the Homeland Security Committee when Mayorkas was named deputy DHS chief in 2013.

Mayorkas may yet get some Republican support, which Biden may need if the Democrats don't win the two seats in the Georgia Senate runoff; Republicans only need to win one to maintain their control of the Senate.

John Rowe, a prominent GOP donor who co-chairs the business immigration coalition and favors a more welcoming attitude toward immigrants, said he planned to speak with several Republican senators to urge them to support Mayorkas.

"This is an easy vote," said Rowe, the former CEO of Exelon Corp. "Some of the other immigration votes are not that easy for Republicans who have to go home to primaries. No one is going to lose their seat because they vote to confirm Mayorkas."

A separate issue that could come up is his role in the 2001 pardon by President Bill Clinton of Carlos Vignali Jr., the son of a wealthy businessman and Democratic donor who was convicted of involvement in a cocaine trafficking ring. Mayorkas, then the U.S. attorney for Los Angeles, called the White House to ask about the status of the case at the request of the family. He explained later that the Justice Department had cleared the call but apologized for a "mistake." The issue did not block his confirmation to lead CIS in 2009 in a unanimous Senate vote.

The Biden transition team views neither issue as an impediment to confirmation. "While we fully expected disagreement with some members of the Senate, we're gratified by the overwhelmingly positive reaction and strong bipartisan acclaim that Alejandro has received," spokesman Sean Savett said.

Still, there is almost certainly to be more parsing of the inspector general's report, which was recently raised by Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., in an appearance on "Fox & Friends."

The report deals with three applications under what's known as the EB-5 visa program, which was created in the 1990s under President George H.W. Bush to promote economic development. It enables foreign citizens to get U.S. residency for themselves, their spouses and minor children if they make an investment that creates at least 10 jobs.

Investments can be pooled to create what are known as regional centers, which were the subject of whistleblower complaints at the heart of the report.

The report said Mayorkas intervened in an administrative appeal for an investment in an application by Gulf Coast Funds, which was run by Hillary Rodham Clinton's brother, Anthony Rodham, and whose board chairman was Democratic fundraiser and former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe.

It said he expedited the review of a Nevada casino project at the urging of former Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid, and directed CIS personnel to provide Reid's office with briefings on the status of the application.

Mayorkas also directed CIS to reverse the rejection of an application that would have funded Sony movie projects in the Los Angeles area after being contacted by former Democratic Pennsylvania Gov. Edward Rendell and others, the report said.

The report noted that all these actions were "legitimately within his purview" as director of CIS and said "we take no position on the wisdom of these actions," only the appearance.

Mayorkas pushed back hard in an unusually detailed 33-page response to the report and in congressional testimony.

The EB-5 investor program had been the subject of complaints from Republicans and Democrats that

long predated his tenure at CIS and he said he was working to address them, creating a new office to review the applications and ensure they met the economic requirements.

It was also not unusual for members of Congress to contact the agency about the EB-5 program. In fact, several prominent Republicans were in touch with Mayorkas on behalf of Gulf Coast Funds. He received many requests about other matters from both parties. As proof, he cited a letter from Grassley thanking him for his personal involvement helping a family from Iowa with an international adoption.

"I took a hands-on approach with the cases that warranted my personal involvement," he said in his rebuttal.

The report also noted that some of the people interviewed in the investigation described Mayorkas as "aggressive," with one saying that he would "cut them up, take them apart or put them in their place" if they disagreed with him. But Kenneth Palinkas, a senior official with the employee union at CIS, said he was widely liked by workers.

Mayorkas would invite him into his office and serve Cuban coffee as they discussed union issues, while previous directors wouldn't meet with him at all, Palinkas said.

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Pandemic forces 'virtual' Virgin of Guadalupe day in Mexico

By MARIA VERZA Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — For the first time in decades, Mexico's Roman Catholics were forced on Saturday to abandon what many consider the world's largest religious pilgrimage, in which millions visit Mexico City's Basilica of Guadalupe on Dec. 12.

The pilgrimage marks the day in 1531 when the Virgin of Guadalupe, patroness of Latin America's Catholics, is said to have appeared on the hillside behind the basilica. Millions come each year, many walking or biking for days from distant towns.

This year, church officials agreed to close the basilica to prevent the spread of COVID-19, and offered virtual services and candle-lighting to mark the day without gathering.

It was the first time the church has not welcomed huge throngs of the faithful since the modern basilica was being built in the 1970s, and since religious conflict in the 1920s shuttered an older basilica nearby.

Barricades and police blocked the entrance to the vast plaza in front of the basilica. Stores nearby were still selling religious images and candles, but there were few buyers.

Alejandro Castillo, 53, would normally be at the basilica on Dec. 12. But he was satisfied to be at home in his village of San Gregorio Azompa, about 75 miles (120 kilometers) east of Mexico City.

Castillo had managed to visit the basilica just before it closed Wednesday; authorities had encouraged people to come before the closure, to leave flowers or other offerings.

Castillo walked three days, carrying a huge portrait of the Virgin on his back; alongside walked his 11-year-old son.

"It had been years since I made it to the pews" in the vast building, he noted, "because there were always too many people."

"But this time they gave us permission," he said. "Thanks to the Virgin."

The faithful usually come carrying pictures of the Virgin, some advancing on their knees, many fulfilling promises they made in exchange for her help in difficult situations.

Pope Francis has granted an indulgence to Roman Catholics so that they do not have to physically visit the shrine.

Archbishop Carlos Aguiar Retes put it this way: "Let us allow the Virgin to visit us in our homes."

Instead, the church has set up video and internet links to watch the lighting of candles to the Virgin. The basilica is scheduled to reopen on Monday. But Mexico City is in the grips of what officials called a "coronavirus emergency," with rapidly rising infection rates and 78% of its hospitals full. About 18,600 people are confirmed to have died of COVID-19 in the city of nine million.

But people continue to approach the gates of the basilica.

Schoolteacher Jaqueline Castillo, who is not related to Alejandro Castillo, came to the basilica with a statue of the Virgin, hoping to get it blessed, but was unable to do so.

"We have to obey the instructions, it is sad but at the same time, it is right, what the authorities are doing," Castillo said. "They are looking out for our health, and that of everybody else."

For Alejandro Castillo and others, visiting the Virgin is more than a habit; it is an act of devotion. As a child, he said, he suffered abuse and beatings after he was separated from his family; when they were reunited, he promised the Virgin he would return each year. This year he did, even though it wasn't on

Dec. 12.

"I am very content," he reflected.

AP journalists Diego Delgado and Marco Ugarte contributed to this report.

Critics of Electoral College push for popular vote compact

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

SALEM, Ore. (AP) — When the Electoral College meets Monday, its detractors hope it marks the beginning of the end of a system that twice this century has vaulted the loser of the popular vote to the presidency.

This year's presidential race provides the latest motivation for change to supporters of the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. While Democrat Joe Biden scored a decisive win over President Donald Trump in both the popular vote and Electoral College, the race came down to narrow margins in a handful of swing states.

If the results had turned out differently in some of those states, Trump could have lost the popular vote for the second election in a row but gained the presidency because of the Electoral College system.

"It's an old, ugly mess that frankly should have been obviated some time ago," said Virginia House of Delegates member Mark Levine, a Democrat who introduced a bill that would have Virginia sign on to the National Popular Vote movement. It would compel member states to award their electoral votes to the winner of the nationwide popular vote.

Levine's measure passed the Virginia House earlier this year. Passage by the Senate would bring the movement 13 electoral votes closer to its goal.

So far, 15 states and the District of Columbia have signed on.

For presidential candidates, 270 represents the number of Electoral College votes needed to secure a win. The move toward a national popular vote also is aiming for that magic number. It already has secured 196 and aims to gain more next year. Advocates hope, perhaps unrealistically, that it will be in place by the next presidential election in 2024.

Under the current system, each state's electoral votes go to the candidate who won the popular vote in that state, with the runner-up getting nothing. Nebraska and Maine are the only exceptions.

National Popular Vote, the group pushing the compact, is focusing in 2021 on Virginia and eight other states: Arizona, Arkansas, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina and Oklahoma. The initiative has made progress in those states by passing at least one legislative chamber, but didn't clear the finish line, spokesman Patrick Rosenstiel said.

They have a combined total of 88 electoral votes, enough to surpass 270.

"We'll focus on any states that offer a credible chance of enactment between now and the 2024 presidential election," Rosenstiel said.

Success in those states is far from assured. In the modern era, the Electoral College has benefited Republican candidates — George W. Bush in 2000 and Trump in 2016 won the presidency after losing the popular vote. Of the states targeted next year, Republicans will control both houses of the legislature in Arizona, Arkansas, Michigan, North Carolina and Oklahoma, and one chamber in Minnesota.

Yet even in Nevada, where Democrats control the Legislature and governor's office, the issue is a hard sell.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak last year vetoed a measure supported by Democratic lawmakers that would have committed Nevada to the compact.

The Democratic governor said the compact "could diminish the role of smaller states like Nevada in national electoral contests."

Nevada has been a battleground state for several presidential election cycles, including this year. That brought campaign stops by Trump and Biden, attention they might not have lavished on Nevada's 3 million residents if the current system had not existed.

Under the Electoral College, each state's number of electoral votes equals the size of its congressional delegation. Wyoming, America's least populous state, has two senators and one representative, so it gets

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three. California, the most populous state, has 55.

To win the White House, a presidential candidate must collect at least half the total 538 electoral votes plus one – or 270. This system has delivered a split presidential verdict five times, with a candidate winning the presidency despite losing the popular vote.

The U.S. is the only modern democracy with such a system, according to the Pew Research Center. Most others elect their leader by national popular vote or the parliamentary system in which the winning party chooses the head of government.

Opponents say the U.S. system violates the one person-one vote principle, encourages candidates to ignore states that are either firmly Democratic or Republican, and gives disproportionate power to voters in just a few states.

But Electoral College supporters say it adheres to federalism by preserving the role of states in presidential elections.

If the movement to change the system reaches the 270 threshold, those supporters might sue on constitutional grounds. The Constitution says Congress must consent to interstate compacts. However, the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that some compacts don't require congressional consent.

"We believe Supreme Court precedents indicate that this additional step is not needed," National Popular Vote Chairman John Koza said in an interview. "Nonetheless, National Popular Vote is working to obtain support for the compact in Congress."

After Bush and Trump won the White House despite losing the popular vote, the push to change the system has become more partisan.

"That's why states that have Democratic majorities are more interested than states with Republican majorities," said Wendy Underhill, director of elections and redistricting at the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The 15 state legislatures that have passed a national popular vote bill since 2007 are all controlled by Democrats: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington.

The District of Columbia council, controlled by Democrats, also approved it, contributing three electoral votes from the nation's capital.

Over a decade ago, when President Barack Obama, a Democrat, was in office, it was at times a reverse partisan issue, Koza said.

A national popular vote measure, for example, passed the Republican-controlled New York Senate back then, but didn't get through the Democrat-controlled Assembly.

"This is an issue that people have a very short-term partisan way of looking at, and the Democrats felt that they had a lock on the White House," Koza said.

Legislatures in the Midwest and South have shied away from joining the compact. South Dakota's Legislature even passed a resolution this year condemning it.

"The current Electoral College system creates a needed balance between rural and urban interests and ensures that the winning candidate has support from multiple regions of the country," the resolution says.

State Rep. Tina Mulally, who introduced the resolution, said in an email that the Electoral College boosts the political influence of smaller states like South Dakota and protects the minority population.

A national popular vote, she said, would be "like two wolves and a sheep deciding what's for dinner."

Follow Andrew Selsky on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/andrewselsky>

Supreme Court rejects Republican attack on Biden victory

By NOMAAN MERCHANT, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has rejected a lawsuit backed by President Donald Trump to overturn Joe Biden's election victory, ending a desperate attempt to get legal issues rejected by state and federal judges before the nation's highest court and subvert the will of voters.

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Trump bemoaned the decision late Friday, tweeting: "The Supreme Court really let us down. No Wisdom, No Courage!"

The high court's order earlier Friday was a stark repudiation of a legal claim that was widely regarded as dubious, yet embraced by the president, 19 Republican state attorneys general and 126 House Republicans.

Trump had insisted the court would find the "wisdom" and "courage" to adopt his baseless position that the election was the product of widespread fraud and should be overturned. But the nation's highest court emphatically disagreed.

Friday's order marked the second time this week that the court had rebuffed Republican requests that it get involved in the 2020 election outcome and reject the voters' choice, as expressed in an election regarded by both Republican and Democratic officials as free and fair. The justices turned away an appeal from Pennsylvania Republicans on Tuesday.

On Monday, the Electoral College meets to formally elect Biden as the next president.

Trump had called the lawsuit filed by Texas against Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin "the big one" that would end with the Supreme Court undoing Biden's substantial Electoral College majority and allowing Trump to serve another four years in the White House.

In a brief order, the court said Texas does not have the legal right to sue those states because it "has not demonstrated a judicially cognizable interest in the manner in which another State conducts its elections."

Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas, who have said previously the court does not have the authority to turn away lawsuits between states, said they would have heard Texas' complaint. But they would not have done as Texas wanted — setting aside those four states' 62 electoral votes for Biden — pending resolution of the lawsuit.

Trump complained that "within a flash," the lawsuit was "thrown out and gone, without even looking at the many reasons it was brought. A Rigged Election, fight on!"

Three Trump appointees sit on the high court. In his push to get the most recent of his nominees, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, confirmed quickly, Trump said she would be needed for any post-election lawsuits. Barrett appears to have participated in both cases this week. None of the Trump appointees noted a dissent in either case.

The four states sued by Texas had urged the court to reject the case as meritless. They were backed by another 22 states and the District of Columbia.

Republican support for the lawsuit and its call to throw out millions of votes in four battleground states was rooted in baseless claims of fraud, an extraordinary display of the party's willingness to countermand the will of voters. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy of California and Minority Whip Steve Scalise of Louisiana were among those joining to support the action.

"The Court has rightly dismissed out of hand the extreme, unlawful and undemocratic GOP lawsuit to overturn the will of millions of American voters," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Friday night.

A few Republicans expressed concerns about the case. Many others remained silent even as Trump endlessly repeated claims that he lost a chance at a second term due to widespread fraud.

Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican who has previously criticized the president, applauded the court's decision.

"Since Election Night, a lot of people have been confusing voters by spinning Kenyan Birther-type, 'Chavez rigged the election from the grave' conspiracy theories, but every American who cares about the rule of law should take comfort that the Supreme Court — including all three of President Trump's picks — closed the book on the nonsense," Sasse said in a statement.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro said the court "saw through this seditious abuse of the judicial process."

"While these stunts are legally insignificant, their cost to our country — in misleading the public about a free and fair election and in tearing at our Constitution — is high and we will not tolerate them from our sister states or anyone else," said Shapiro, a Democrat.

The Texas complaint repeated false, disproven and unsubstantiated accusations about the voting in four states that went for Trump's Democratic challenger. The high court had never before been asked for such

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a dramatic remedy.

Two days after Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed his suit, Trump jumped into the high court case. Hours later, the president 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 backed the effort.

"If the Supreme Court shows great Wisdom and Courage, the American People will win perhaps the most important case in history, and our Electoral Process will be respected again!" he tweeted Friday afternoon. Trump had 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.

In a statement Friday, Paxton called the Supreme Court's decision "unfortunate."

Still, some of the top state Republican prosecutors who urged the court to get involved acknowledged that the effort was a long shot and sought to distance themselves from Trump's baseless allegations of fraud.

The case inflamed already high tensions over the election. West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey said his office staff received two death threats Thursday after he signed onto the brief supporting the case.

The lawsuit also divided officials in some states.

Montana Attorney General Tim Fox supported Texas' case, even though he said the suit was "belated" and its chances "are slim at best." Fox said the case raised "important constitutional questions about the separation of powers and the integrity of mail-in ballots in those defendant states."

But Gov. Steve Bullock, D-Mont., urged the court to reject the case. He said the fact that Texas is not suing Montana, which Trump won, even though the state similarly used mail-in ballots underscores that "this action is less about election integrity than it is about attempting to overturn the will of the electorate."

Trump's repetition of election-related falsehoods and conspiracy theories has taken hold among far-right media and much of his base. Many Republican voters in several states won by Biden have demanded that their elected officials find a way to invalidate the president-elect's victories.

The Republican Party of Texas on Friday evening issued a statement raising the far-fetched possibility of secession. "Perhaps law-abiding states should bond together and form a Union of states that will abide by the constitution," said party chairman Allen West, the former Florida congressman.

Even though the court's action seemed to be the end of the road for Trump's legal fights about the 2020 election results, the president's efforts may have a destabilizing effect long after he leaves office. Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, vowed Friday to keep fighting.

"Some litigation may continue, but it will not change election results," said Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine. "The delegitimization of the Biden presidency by Trump, and of elections generally, will reverberate for years to come. And that's a real tragedy."

Merchant reported from Houston and 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; Michelle Price in Las Vegas and Sophia Eppolito and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City.

Rising Latino voters could be force in Georgia Senate races

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

LILBURN, Ga. (AP) — As Georgia heads into two key runoffs that will determine control of the U.S. Senate, Democrats are hoping to count on Latino voters who helped tilt the state blue in November.

But President Donald Trump rattled Democrats by winning larger-than-expected shares of Hispanic votes in parts of the country, raising questions about how much Democrats can rely on the nation's largest minority group as a cornerstone of their coalition.

The January runoffs between Republican U.S. Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler and Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock will be the next test of strength in a state with a growing Latino population of more than 1 million.

Democrats want to make sure Latinos turn out again, emphasizing immigration and COVID-19 relief in

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their campaigns. Republicans want to cut Democrats' advantage in a youthful and rapidly growing community, reprising Trump's emphasis on a strong economy for working people and spurning what they describe as Democrats' embrace of socialism.

Increasing Latino interest and participation has been fed in part by an upswell of political organizing in Latino communities that has reached voters like Anayely Moreno, a Gainesville resident and the daughter of Mexican immigrants.

"I really grew up in a place where I didn't hear about politics," Moreno said "It wasn't common to talk about politics at home."

Moreno said the struggles of immigrants in her small city northeast of Atlanta, in a state where sentiment against illegal immigration has often been harsh, is the prime motivator driving her to the ballot box.

"We don't notice all the ways it affects every aspect of our lives," said Moreno, who volunteers with Georgia Familias Unidas, a group that offers COVID-19 assistance to families and encourages them to vote. "No matter what you're doing, our lives are affected by policy."

Moreno, at 24, is in the sweet spot for Georgia's emerging Latino politics. It's a young community, with the median age in the late 20s, according to census figures. Spanish speakers began arriving in large numbers in Georgia in the 1990s, drawn by the boom coinciding with the 1996 Atlanta Olympics.

More than a third of the community is younger than 18; about another third are adults in the country illegally, those who study the community say. Many of those who can vote are young adults, with about 20,000 Georgia Latinos turning 18 each year, according to census figures.

AP's Votecast survey found that 3% of Georgia's 5 million voters in November were Latino and 60% of them voted for Biden, versus 30% for Trump. Biden's 36,000-vote margin among Latinos was more than double his overall winning margin in the state.

Turnout of Latino citizens old enough to vote in Georgia increased from 33% in 2016 to 42% this year, according to an analysis by Emory University professor Bernard Fraga and Catalist, a liberal-leaning group that does voter analysis. Jonathan Robinson, a lead research scientist with Catalist, said that turnout among Latinos increased more than turnout statewide, calling it a "good sign" for voting in the Senate runoffs.

Latinos weren't solely responsible for the first Democratic presidential victory in Georgia since 1992. Also needed were a large number of Black voters, a chunk of white suburbanites who abandoned traditional Republican leanings and strong support from Asian voters. But Latino voters could be part of a coalition just big enough for Ossoff and Warnock to win.

"Georgia is no longer only Black and white. Georgia is multilingual and multiethnic," said Gigi Pedraza, executive director of Georgia's Latino Community Fund, which has helped mobilize Latino voters.

The change was on display Monday in Lilburn, a suburb in sprawling Gwinnett County. Ossoff and former U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development Julián Castro urged people to register and vote in a rally at Plaza Las Americas, a shopping center catering to Spanish speakers.

Biden romped in Gwinnett County as a Democratic tide swept in new officials, including a new sheriff who pledges to end a program that checks the status of arrested people and turns those here illegally over to Immigration and Customs Enforcement for deportation.

That's just one example of policies adopted by Republican officials to crack down on immigrants in the country illegally. Jerry Gonzalez, CEO of the Georgia Association of Latino Elected Officials, noted that current Republican Gov. Brian Kemp aired a television ad in 2018 saying he drove "a big truck in case I need to round up criminal illegals and take them home myself."

"Georgia is a hostile state toward immigrants," Gonzalez said, indicating it's hard for Republicans to break through to Latinos. "If you're talking in that level of rhetoric, then Latinos really don't have any interest in listening to anything else you're talking about."

Republicans aren't giving up, though. Jason Anavitarte was a national Latino adviser to Trump this year and won a state Senate seat northwest of Atlanta as a Republican. He said Trump's increasing share of the Latino vote nationally and in Georgia was not a "blip on the radar" but indicated that Trump's economic message appealed to the community.

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"Not all Latinos care about immigration," said Anavitarte, who is of Puerto Rican descent. "I think they care about what is directly impacting them in their home. They care about finding a job, what is impacting their kids' education."

The COVID-19 response is a key issue among Latinos, said Maria del Rosario Palacios, who founded Georgia Familias Unidas to give personal protective equipment to workers at chicken plants and elsewhere who can't work from home.

Palacios said she sees a lot of confusion over the additional election, a requirement Georgia imposes that can be baffling to inexperienced voters.

"Folks don't really understand there is a runoff," Palacios said. "They say 'No, no, no, I voted in November. I'm good.'"

Moreno shares that fear but said she's surprised by the level of engagement she sees and believes the election could be a chance for Latino political power to advance.

"I understand when some people feel like voting won't make a difference," Moreno said. "It's small steps that get us somewhere. More people came out to vote in November and that made a huge difference."

In a year dominated by pandemic, many other dramas unfolded

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

Not since World War II has a single phenomenon dominated the news worldwide as the COVID-19 pandemic has in 2020. In the United States, a tumultuous presidential election and a wave of protests over racial injustice also drew relentless coverage.

Overshadowed, to an extent, were other dramatic developments. Among them: China's crackdown on Hong Kong's democracy; an apocalyptic explosion in Beirut; the shocking helicopter-crash death of basketball icon Kobe Bryant and his daughter.

Some seemingly epic events early in the year now seem distant, like President Donald Trump's impeachment trial and the January announcement by Prince Harry and Meghan Markle that they were exiting their prominent roles in Britain's royal family. Just a few weeks later came the long-awaited Brexit, Britain's formal withdrawal from the European Union.

As most of the world battled COVID, armed conflicts broke out between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in Ethiopia's Tigray region. Afghanistan's seemingly endless war dragged on, even as the warring sides warily edged into peace talks. Massive protests challenged the ruling powers in Belarus and Thailand.

Due to past instances of sexual assault and sexual abuse, Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein received a 23-year prison sentence and the Boy Scouts of America filed for bankruptcy protection.

Some other major events of 2020:

Iran: The year ended as it began with tensions between Iran and the U.S. inflamed by the killing of a top official. On Jan. 3, a U.S. drone strike killed Revolutionary Guard Gen. Qassem Soleimani. Iran responded with a missile attack that injured dozens of U.S. troops in Iraq. In December, a mysterious attack near Tehran killed a nuclear scientist whom the U.S. and others had identified as organizing Iran's effort to seek nuclear weapons two decades ago. Iran blamed that attack on Israel.

Immigration: Throughout 2020, the Trump administration pushed to extend a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border, even as it implemented immigration policies that outraged human-rights advocates. The targets included unaccompanied children seeking refuge in the U.S.; hundreds were detained in hotels before being expelled. The administration also sought to suspend the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program that protects some young immigrants from deportation. But a federal judge ruled that new applications for the program must be accepted.

Hong Kong: China imposed a sweeping national security law in Hong Kong. The ensuing crackdown on dissent effectively voided China's pledge to allow the city to maintain rights promised for 50 years following the 1997 handover from British colonial rule. The arrests of leading opposition figures and the expulsion of local lawmakers -- prompting the entire opposition camp to resign -- led numerous countries to curtail legal cooperation with Hong Kong. The U.S. imposed travel bans and financial sanctions.

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Opioids: Purdue Pharma, the maker of OxyContin, pleaded guilty to three criminal charges, formally taking responsibility for its part in an opioid epidemic that has contributed to the deaths of more than 470,000 Americans over two decades. Purdue admitted impeding efforts to combat the addiction crisis. The pleas arose from a settlement that includes \$8.3 billion in penalties and forfeitures, but victims' advocates worried that Purdue's owners, the Sackler family, might emerge with their fortune largely intact.

Notable Deaths: For sports fans worldwide, 2020 was sadly bookended by the deaths of two popular superstars — basketball's Kobe Bryant, 41, and soccer's Diego Maradona, 60. Among those killed along with Bryant in the helicopter crash was his 13-year-old daughter Gianna, herself a promising athlete. Other revered figures who died included U.S. civil rights leader John Lewis, guitarist Eddie Van Halen, and actors Chadwick Boseman and Sean Connery. Many admirers of liberal U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg not only mourned her death, but deplored her replacement by a conservative, Amy Coney Barrett.

Beirut Explosion: Lebanon's capital was devastated in August by one of the largest non-nuclear explosions ever recorded. A fire detonated a stockpile of nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrates left to rot at a port warehouse. The explosion tore through Beirut, sucking in the air and blowing up homes as windows shattered for miles around. More than 200 people were killed and thousands injured, compounding the woes of a nation already beset by mass protests and economic meltdown.

France-Muslims: The October beheading of a teacher by an 18-year-old Chechen outside Paris, followed by the killing of three people in Nice by a Tunisian migrant, prompted France to declare its highest-level security alert. The attacks came amid a trial over the 2015 massacre at the satiric newspaper Charlie Hebdo, which had published cartoons of Islam's prophet. The teacher was beheaded for showing the cartoons to his class while discussing freedom of expression -- vigorously defended by President Emmanuel Macron. The caricatures and Macron's stance fueled calls from Muslim nations to boycott French products; and some French Muslims resented the security crackdown.

Hurricanes: It was such a historically busy hurricane season that forecasters had to turn to the Greek alphabet after running out of assigned names. In the U.S., Louisiana took the brunt of the onslaught: three hurricanes and two tropical storms. The worst to hit the state was Hurricane Laura, which swept ashore in August. In November, several Central American countries were ravaged by two Category 4 hurricanes. In Tennessee, an outbreak of tornadoes in March killed 25 people.

Israel-Diplomacy: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu scored a diplomatic coup in September by signing historic accords with the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain at the White House. It was Israel's first normalization deal with Arab countries in more than 25 years. Later, Sudan and Morocco also pledged warmer official relations with Israel. The moves enabled Netanyahu to deliver welcome accomplishments to his electorate while under fire for his handling of the coronavirus crisis and his ongoing corruption trial.

Wildfires: Thousands of wildfires raged throughout the western U.S., claiming dozens of lives, destroying thousands of homes, and bringing apocalyptic scenes of orange skies and hazardous air. Months before the usual start of the wildfire season, drought, extreme warm temperatures and winds gusting up to 100 mph fueled some of the most destructive blazes in the region's history. Scientists say climate change is responsible for more intense and frequent extreme events such as storms, droughts, flooding and wildfires -- including massive brush fires that raged for months in Australia.

Associated Press reporters Jon Gambrell in the United Arab Emirates, Christopher Bodeen in Beijing, Zeina Karam in Beirut, Elaine Ganley in Paris, Rebecca Santana in New Orleans, Josef Federman in Jerusalem and Olga R. Rodriguez in San Francisco contributed to this report.

Italy's staggering virus toll poses uncomfortable questions

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italy could soon reclaim a record that nobody wants — the most coronavirus deaths in Europe — after the health care system again failed to protect the elderly and the government delayed imposing new restrictions.

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This wasn't supposed to happen. Italy was the first country in the West to be slammed by COVID-19 and, after suffering a huge wave of death in spring, brought infections under control.

Italy then had the benefit of time and experience heading into the fall resurgence because it trailed Spain, France and Germany in recording big new clusters of infections. Yet the virus spread fast and wide, and Italy has added 28,000 dead since Sept. 1.

"Obviously there needs to be some reflection," Guido Rasi, former executive director of the European Pharmaceutical Agency, told state TV after Italy reported a pandemic-high record of 993 deaths in one day. "This number of nearly 1,000 dead in 24 hours is much higher than the European average."

Italy added another 761 victims Friday, bringing its official total to 63,387, just shy of Britain's Europe-leading 63,603 dead, according to Johns Hopkins University. Both numbers are believed to greatly underestimate the real toll, due to missed infections, limited testing and different counting criteria.

Still, Italy could overtake Britain despite having 6 million people fewer than the U.K.'s 66 million, and would trail only the much larger U.S., Brazil, India and Mexico. According to the Hopkins tally, Italy also has the most deaths per 100,000 population among the most affected countries.

Public health officials argue that Italy has the world's second-oldest population after Japan, and the elderly are the most vulnerable to the virus.

The average age of Italian victims has hovered around 80. In addition, 65% of Italy's COVID-19 dead had three or more other health problems before they tested positive, such as hypertension or diabetes, according to Italy's Superior Institute of Health.

But that doesn't explain the whole picture. Germany has a similarly old demographic and yet its death toll is one-third of Italy's despite its larger population of 83 million. Germany recorded its highest daily number of coronavirus victims Friday — 598 — but has only 21,000 dead overall.

Analysts point to Germany's long-term higher per-capita spending on health care, which has resulted in greater ICU capacity, better testing and tracing capabilities and higher ratios of doctors and nurses to the population. But Germany also imposed an earlier, lighter lockdown this fall and is now poised to tighten it.

"If you can act sooner, even a bit lighter in the measures, they work better than acting harshly a bit later or too late," said Matteo Villa, research fellow at the Institute for International Political Studies, a Milan-based think tank.

Italy, he said, waited too long after infections started ticking up in September and October to impose restrictions and didn't reinforce its medical system sufficiently during the summertime lull.

"If you look at France and the U.K., you can see Italy did fare much worse," he said. "And if you look at a comparable population with similar demographics, which is Germany, Italy did a lot worse."

With another wave of infections feared to be just around the corner with Christmas visits and the winter flu season, many are wondering how many more will die.

Doctors have blamed systemic problems with Italy's health care system, especially in hardest-hit Lombardy, for failing to respond adequately. They have cited the growth of private hospitals in Lombardy in recent years at the expense of public ones. Brain drain and bureaucratic obstacles have resulted in fewer doctors going into practice, while general practitioners have complained of a lack of support despite being the backbone of the system.

Nearly 80,000 Italian health care workers have been infected and 255 doctors have died.

"We asked for a lockdown at the start of November because the situation inside hospitals was already difficult," said Dr. Filippo Anelli, head of the country's doctors' association. "We saw that it worked in the spring and allowed us to get out from under COVID. If this had been done, probably today the numbers would be coming down."

But the Italian government resisted re-imposing a nationwide lockdown this fall, knowing the devastating impact on an economy that was just starting to come back to life after the springtime shutdown.

Instead, on Nov. 3 the government divided the country into three risk zones with varying restrictions. But by then infections had been doubling each week for nearly a month and hospitals were already overwhelmed in Milan and Naples.

Italy also went into the pandemic poorly prepared. It had fewer ICU beds than the average of developed countries. And in recent weeks, investigative news reports have noted that Italy hadn't updated its influenza pandemic preparedness plan since 2006 — which could help explain its critical shortage of protective equipment early on and its chaotic initial response to the pandemic.

A World Health Organization report, which was posted and then immediately taken down from the WHO website, noted that Italy's 2006 plan was merely "reconfirmed in 2017" without being updated. The report said the plan was "more theoretical than practical" and that when COVID-19 hit, all hell broke loose.

"Unprepared for such a flood of severely ill patients, the initial reaction of the hospitals was improvised, chaotic and creative," said the report.

The U.N. health agency said it removed the report because it contained "inaccuracies and inconsistencies," and then decided not to republish it because it developed other ways to assess countries' responses.

Italy also ranked 31st — between Indonesia and Poland — in a 2019 survey of 195 countries compiled by the Global Health Security Index assessing abilities to respond to a pandemic or other health care crisis. Italy scored particularly poorly in emergency response, preparedness, and communications with health care workers during a crisis.

Government officials admit they were caught unprepared but have strongly defended their response to the resurgence as scientifically sound and proportional to prevent the economy from collapsing. Domenico Arcuri, the government's virus commissioner, said Thursday that the November restrictions were flattening Italy's infection curve.

"Daily infections are coming down, hospital admissions are coming down, the number of people who unfortunately are admitted to intensive care (is) coming down," Arcuri said.

That is small comfort to Marcella Polla, who announced the death of her 90-year-old aunt on Facebook Dec. 6, saying she caught the virus in a hospital in October after complications following an angioplasty.

"My aunt was tough, made of Trentino fiber," Polla wrote in explaining the extraordinary photo she posted of her aunt, holding herself up on a set of gymnastics rings this year. "I want to remember her like this, even though the thought of her and so many others dying alone and then being put in a body bag torments me."

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

Flamethrower drone incinerates wasp nests in China

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A drone has been converted into a flying flamethrower in central China in a fiery campaign to eradicate more than 100 wasp nests.

Blue Sky Rescue, a volunteer group that conducts search and rescue and other emergency work, have teamed up with villagers in Zhong county near the city of Chongqing.

They raised 80,000 yuan (\$12,200) to buy a drone and equip it with a gasoline tank and an arm-length nozzle.

Videos released by Blue Sky show a recent mission by the six-arm drone. It hovers above a hive as large as a suitcase before swooping down. The drone operator flips the ignition switch, and the drone spits bursts of fire onto the hive.

"The burning ashes of the wasp's nest gradually peeled off and fell, and the surrounding residents applauded and praised the rescue team," said an article on a local news app run by state-owned Chongqing TV.

The article quotes a resident thanking Blue Sky for helping the village: "Now we don't have to worry about being stung by a wasp."

Blue Sky said it has destroyed 11 hives so far. There are more than 100 to go.

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John Wall back on floor, NBA opens preseason in empty arenas

By The Associated Press undefined

John Wall was back on the floor for the first time in nearly two years. DeMarcus Cousins played for the first time since the 2019 NBA Finals.

And the NBA champion Los Angeles Lakers were home, with nobody there to watch.

The NBA preseason — a truncated 49-game, nine-day sprint — opened Friday with a five-game slate, action returning to NBA arenas for the first time in exactly nine months. Coaches debuted with their new teams: Stephen Silas with Houston, Tom Thibodeau with New York, Billy Donovan with Chicago and Tyrone Lue with the Los Angeles Clippers. Rookies, such as No. 4 pick Patrick Williams of the Bulls and No. 8 pick Obi Toppin of the Knicks, got their first NBA minutes.

As will be the case in most buildings, at least to start the season, almost nobody was at any of these games. With the coronavirus pandemic ongoing and case numbers still rising, the era that started for the NBA with the suspension of last season on March 11 — the night that Utah's Rudy Gobert tested positive — resumed with the league and its teams erring on the sides of caution and safety.

"It's different, for sure," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said before his team faced the Clippers inside a very empty Staples Center.

Well, some things were different.

Coaches wore masks. Detroit showed old videos of actual fan interactions — with the disclaimer that they were taped previously — during some timeouts. Bench seating areas were all spaced out, nobody next to one another.

"The atmosphere will be obviously significantly different than what guys are used to in an arena," Orlando coach Steve Clifford said. "And I think that's going to be one of the valuable aspects of playing these four exhibition games. Just like in the bubble, we had to get used to a different-type environment and I think these four games will hopefully allow us to see what the regular season is going to be like in these big arenas also."

So, yes, much was different.

Other things — like Wall's explosion to the basket — were just like normal.

Wall's first basket since December 2018 came on the first possession of Houston's preseason, when he got to the rim for an easy score in his Rockets debut, one that came after his recovery from heel and Achilles injuries.

The Rockets' next basket? Wall set up Cousins for a 3-pointer, the center's first basket since Game 6 of the 2019 finals with the Warriors, two months before he tore his ACL and missed last season.

Reigning NBA scoring champion James Harden wasn't playing for the Rockets, still not cleared to be back on the floor with the team that he hasn't practiced with yet and apparently no longer wants to be with. LeBron James and Anthony Davis, who were last seen on the floor together when the Lakers topped the Miami Heat in the NBA Finals in the Walt Disney World bubble — less than two months ago — were among the regulars who got the champs' preseason opener off.

There are seven more games Saturday.

Friday's games:

KNICKS 90, PISTONS 84

At Detroit, R.J. Barrett scored 15 points and Toppin finished with 11 points and seven rebounds in his debut as the Knicks won their preseason opener.

Julius Randle scored 11, while Elfrid Payton and Nerlens Noel each scored 10 for New York.

Svi Mykhailiuk and Saddiq Bey led the Pistons with 14 points apiece. None of Detroit's five starters — all playing between 15 and 22 minutes — reached double figures, and they shot a combined 8 for 34.

MAGIC 116, HAWKS 112

At Atlanta, Nikola Vucevic had 18 points and 11 rebounds and all five Orlando starters reached double figures.

Dwayne Bacon had 14 points, Evan Fournier had 13, Aaron Gordon scored 12 and Markelle Fultz added 10 for the Magic, who also got 10 off the bench from Michael Carter-Williams.

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De'Andre Hunter scored 18 for the Hawks, who got 14 points apiece from John Collins and Danilo Gallinari, 14 rebounds from Clint Capela and 13 points from Cam Reddish. Trae Young shot just 2 for 9 for Atlanta. ROCKETS 125, BULLS 104

At Chicago, Wall had 13 points and nine assists in 19 minutes and the Rockets led wire-to-wire.

Bruno Caboclo had 17 points for Houston, which led by as many as 32. Gerald Green and Eric Gordon scored 16 apiece, Cousins had 14 points in 15 minutes and Ben McLemore added 10 for the Rockets — who had a 35-0 edge in points off turnovers until the final moments.

Coby White scored 15 for the Bulls. Lauri Markkanen added 13 for Chicago, Williams had 12 in his NBA debut, Noah Vonleh and Zach LaVine each added 12 and Tomas Satoransky finished with 11.

LAKERS 87, CLIPPERS 81

At Los Angeles, Talen Horton-Tucker scored 19 points and Kyle Kuzma had 18 for the Lakers.

Montrezl Harrell had 13 points and 12 rebounds against his former team and Dennis Schroder added 10 points for the Lakers. Paul George had 10 for the Clippers and Kawhi Leonard managed three in 14 minutes.

Both teams shot exactly 30 for 84 from the field, and none of the Clippers' starters logged even 15 minutes.

TRAIL BLAZERS 127, KINGS 102

At Portland, Carmelo Anthony had 21 points in 23 minutes for a Trail Blazers team that had to close its practice facility earlier in the week over coronavirus concerns.

Harry Giles had 18 points and 14 rebounds against his former team. CJ McCollum and Gary Trent Jr. also scored 18 apiece for the Blazers, while Damian Lillard scored 15 and Derrick Jones Jr. had 15 on 6-of-7 shooting in his Portland debut.

Buddy Hield had 23 points and Harrison Barnes scored 16 for the Kings, who gave up 35 points in the first nine minutes. De'Aaron Fox scored 10.

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

Analysis: The election is over; Trump's attacks will linger

By JULIE PACE AP Washington Bureau Chief

WASHINGTON (AP) — The 2020 presidential election is over. But President Donald Trump's baseless efforts to undermine it, and the consequences of those undemocratic actions, will linger in America for far longer.

It is increasingly clear that there is no fact, no piece of evidence and no court ruling that will dissuade Trump from trying to mislead Americans about President-elect Joe Biden's victory. And Trump has hardly been alone in that effort; numerous Republicans have stood with him or stood by silently, including 126 GOP members of the House who backed a bid to get the Supreme Court to invalidate Biden's victory in four key states.

The court emphatically rejected the case Friday night.

Trump responded on Twitter late Friday, "The Supreme Court really let us down," but he vowed to "fight on!"

The actions of Trump and his allies have exposed a striking reality about America: Many lawmakers in one of the nation's two major political parties are either willing to back efforts to overturn a free and fair election or unwilling to speak out against such a campaign.

That lays the predicate for politicians to question the integrity of any election if the results don't go a party or a candidate's way, a dangerous notion that is likely to further erode Americans' trust in government and test the durability of the nation's democratic institutions.

With the sitting president leading the way and friendly media outlets standing by to amplify his claims, the result is that millions of Americans will likely remain convinced Biden's victory was illegitimate and the election was fraudulent. According to a Quinnipiac University poll out this week, 77% of Republicans believe there was widespread fraud in the November election and about 60% say they consider Biden's

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victory illegitimate.

In reality, Biden won 306 Electoral College votes, the same number Trump carried four years ago in a victory he deemed a landslide. Biden also outpaced Trump by more than 7 million votes nationwide.

"Since election night, a lot of people have been confusing voters by spinning Kenyan Birther-type, 'Chavez rigged the election from the grave' conspiracy theories," said Sen. Ben Sasse of Nebraska, one of the only Republican lawmakers to weigh in after Friday's high court ruling. "But every American who cares about the rule of law should take comfort that the Supreme Court — including all three of President Trump's picks — closed the book on that nonsense."

Yet Sasse's condemnation of the baseless conspiracies promulgated by Trump also hinted at their staying power.

Long before he became president, Trump was the chief proponent of the lie that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, not the United States, and was ineligible to serve as president. There was ample evidence to the contrary, yet the lie lingered for years, fueling animosity toward Obama among some GOP voters and making it more difficult for Republican leaders to work with him.

In his waning days in the White House, Trump is now relying on a similar playbook against Biden, who will be sworn in Jan. 20. His election attacks have frozen many Republicans, leaving them unwilling to acknowledge Biden's victory and suggesting they may see little political incentive to work with him once he's sworn in, despite the historic pandemic and economic uncertainty gripping the country.

Even Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, who served alongside Biden in the Senate for decades and struck deals with him when the Democrat was serving as Obama's vice president, has refused to plainly state that Biden won and Trump lost.

"The election fraud hoax will go down as one of the most embarrassing and dishonorable episodes in American political history, and countless Republican officials went along with it and promoted it," said Rep. Justin Amash, a Republican-turned-independent from Michigan and a frequent critic of the president and his former party.

Some of Trump's key allies were unbowed after Friday's Supreme Court ruling. Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer and a force behind many of his attempts to overturn Biden's victory in court, continued to insist without evidence that the election had been "stolen."

"I think this is going to be a terrible, terrible thing in American history," Giuliani said Friday night on Fox News.

Trump has lashed out at the election for weeks with little regard for reality. Judges across the country have swiftly rejected lawsuits filed by his campaign and other Republicans. Even Attorney General William Barr told The Associated Press in an interview that his department had seen no evidence of fraud that would change the outcome of the election.

Still, more Republicans rallied behind Trump's efforts this week in a brazen attempt to get the Supreme Court to cast aside the will of voters. More than 120 House Republicans, including Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California, added their support to a lawsuit that made false and disproven accusations about voting in Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — all states Biden won. The case was also backed by 19 Republican state attorneys general.

The brief order from the court rejecting the case signaled that the justices would not be drawn into a blatantly partisan effort to subvert the election results.

Attention now turns to Monday's formal voting of the Electoral College, a milestone some Republicans have suggested they are waiting on before recognizing Biden's victory. Others in the party appear to be trying to keep stoking anger among GOP voters ahead of a pair of runoffs in Georgia in early January that will determine control of the Senate.

Yet there are signs that the endgame for others could put the nation on an even more treacherous path. Shortly after the Supreme Court ruling on Friday, Allen West, the chairman of the Texas Republican Party, all but called for states to secede.

"Perhaps law-abiding states should bond together and form a Union of states that will abide by the

constitution," West wrote.

Editor's Note: Julie Pace has covered the White House and politics for the AP since 2007. Follow her at <http://twitter.com/jpaceDC>

Supreme Court rejects Republican attack on Biden victory

By NOMAAN MERCHANT, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Friday rejected a lawsuit backed by President Donald Trump to overturn Joe Biden's election victory, ending a desperate attempt to get legal issues rejected by state and federal judges before the nation's highest court and subvert the will of voters.

Trump bemoaned the decision late Friday, tweeting: "The Supreme Court really let us down. No Wisdom, No Courage!"

The high court's order was a stark repudiation of a legal claim that was widely regarded as dubious, yet embraced by the president, 19 Republican state attorneys general and 126 House Republicans.

Trump had insisted the court would find the "wisdom" and "courage" to adopt his baseless position that the election was the product of widespread fraud and should be overturned. But the nation's highest court emphatically disagreed.

Friday's order marked the second time this week that the court had rebuffed Republican requests that it get involved in the 2020 election outcome and reject the voters' choice, as expressed in an election regarded by both Republican and Democratic officials as free and fair. The justices turned away an appeal from Pennsylvania Republicans on Tuesday.

On Monday, the Electoral College meets to formally elect Biden as the next president.

Trump had called the lawsuit filed by Texas against Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin "the big one" that would end with the Supreme Court undoing Biden's substantial Electoral College majority and allowing Trump to serve another four years in the White House.

In a brief order, the court said Texas does not have the legal right to sue those states because it "has not demonstrated a judicially cognizable interest in the manner in which another State conducts its elections."

Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas, who have said previously the court does not have the authority to turn away lawsuits between states, said they would have heard Texas' complaint. But they would not have done as Texas wanted — setting aside those four states' 62 electoral votes for Biden — pending resolution of the lawsuit.

Trump complained that "within a flash," the lawsuit was "thrown out and gone, without even looking at the many reasons it was brought. A Rigged Election, fight on!"

Three Trump appointees sit on the high court. In his push to get the most recent of his nominees, Justice Amy Coney Barrett, confirmed quickly, Trump said she would be needed for any post-election lawsuits. Barrett appears to have participated in both cases this week. None of the Trump appointees noted a dissent in either case.

The four states sued by Texas had urged the court to reject the case as meritless. They were backed by another 22 states and the District of Columbia.

Republican support for the lawsuit and its call to throw out millions of votes in four battleground states was rooted in baseless claims of fraud, an extraordinary display of the party's willingness to countermand the will of voters. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy of California and Minority Whip Steve Scalise of Louisiana were among those joining to support the action.

"The Court has rightly dismissed out of hand the extreme, unlawful and undemocratic GOP lawsuit to overturn the will of millions of American voters," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Friday night.

A few Republicans expressed concerns about the case. Many others remained silent even as Trump endlessly repeated claims that he lost a chance at a second term due to widespread fraud.

Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican who has previously criticized the president, applauded the court's decision.

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"Since Election Night, a lot of people have been confusing voters by spinning Kenyan Birther-type, 'Chavez rigged the election from the grave' conspiracy theories, but every American who cares about the rule of law should take comfort that the Supreme Court — including all three of President Trump's picks — closed the book on the nonsense," Sasse said in a statement.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro said the court "saw through this seditious abuse of the judicial process."

"While these stunts are legally insignificant, their cost to our country — in misleading the public about a free and fair election and in tearing at our Constitution — is high and we will not tolerate them from our sister states or anyone else," said Shapiro, a Democrat.

The Texas complaint repeated false, disproven and unsubstantiated accusations about the voting in four states that went for Trump's Democratic challenger. The high court had never before been asked for such a dramatic remedy.

Two days after Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed his suit, Trump jumped into the high court case. Hours later, the president 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 backed the effort.

"If the Supreme Court shows great Wisdom and Courage, the American People will win perhaps the most important case in history, and our Electoral Process will be respected again!" he tweeted Friday afternoon. Trump had 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.

In a statement Friday, Paxton called the Supreme Court's decision "unfortunate."

Still, some of the top state Republican prosecutors who urged the court to get involved acknowledged that the effort was a long shot and sought to distance themselves from Trump's baseless allegations of fraud.

The case inflamed already high tensions over the election. West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey said his office staff received two death threats Thursday after he signed onto the brief supporting the case.

The lawsuit also divided officials in some states.

Montana Attorney General Tim Fox supported Texas' case, even though he said the suit was "belated" and its chances "are slim at best." Fox said the case raised "important constitutional questions about the separation of powers and the integrity of mail-in ballots in those defendant states."

But Gov. Steve Bullock, D-Mont., urged the court to reject the case. He said the fact that Texas is not suing Montana, which Trump won, even though the state similarly used mail-in ballots underscores that "this action is less about election integrity than it is about attempting to overturn the will of the electorate."

Trump's repetition of election-related falsehoods and conspiracy theories has taken hold among far-right media and much of his base. Many Republican voters in several states won by Biden have demanded that their elected officials find a way to invalidate the president-elect's victories.

The Republican Party of Texas on Friday evening issued a statement raising the far-fetched possibility of secession. "Perhaps law-abiding states should bond together and form a Union of states that will abide by the constitution," said party chairman Allen West, the former Florida congressman.

Even though the court's action seemed to be the end of the road for Trump's legal fights about the 2020 election results, the president's efforts may have a destabilizing effect long after he leaves office. Trump's personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, vowed Friday to keep fighting.

"Some litigation may continue, but it will not change election results," said Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Irvine. "The delegitimization of the Biden presidency by Trump, and of elections generally, will reverberate for years to come. And that's a real tragedy."

Merchant reported from Houston and 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; Michelle Price in Las Vegas and Sophia Eppolito and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City.

As he rails on election, Trump largely mum on toll of virus

By NANCY BENAC Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has been highlighting lots of really big numbers this week: New highs for the stock market. The 100-plus House members backing a lawsuit challenging his election loss. The nearly 75 million people who voted for him.

All the while, he's looked past other staggering and more consequential figures: The record numbers of coronavirus deaths, hospitalizations and new cases among the citizens of the nation he leads.

On Friday, Trump's team blasted out a text with this strong, high-minded presidential message: "We will not bend. We will not break. We will never give in. We will never give up."

But it was not a rallying cry to help shore up Americans sagging under the toll of a pandemic that on Wednesday alone killed more Americans than on D-Day or 9/11. It was part of a fundraising pitch tied to Senate races in Georgia and to Trump's unsupported claims that Democrats are trying to "steal" the presidential election he lost.

Of Trump's tweets over the past week, 82 percent have been focused on the election and just 7 percent on the virus — almost all of those related to forthcoming vaccines — according to Factba.se, a data analytics company. Nearly a third of the president's tweets on the election were flagged by Twitter for misinformation.

As he talks and tweets at length about the election he is futilely trying to subvert, the president is leaving Americans without a central figure to help them deal with their grief over loved-ones' deaths and the day-to-day danger of the pandemic that still rages. His strategy is to focus totally on the shiny object coming soon — the prospect of a vaccine.

Friday night, the the Food and Drug Administration gave the final go-ahead to a vaccine from Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, launching emergency vaccinations in a bid to end the pandemic. But Trump's three-minute internet address hailing the vaccine made no mention of the toll the virus has taken.

Calvin Jillson, a presidential historian at Southern Methodist University, said Trump has proven himself unable or unwilling to muster the "normal and natural, falling-off-a-log simple presidential approach" that is called for in any moment of national grief or crisis.

"He simply doesn't seem to have the emotional depth, the emotional reserves to feel what's happening in the country and to respond to it in the way that any other president -- even those who've been fairly emotionally crippled -- would do," Jillson said.

Trump did convene a summit this week to highlight his administration's successful efforts to help hasten the development of coronavirus vaccines and prepare for their speedy distribution. And he spent part of Friday pressing federal authorities to authorize use of the first-up vaccine candidate from Pfizer.

At his summit, the president put heavy emphasis on the faster-than-expected development of the vaccines, calling it "an incredible success," "a monumental national achievement," "really amazing" and "somewhat of a miracle." He's also claimed credit, though Pfizer developed its vaccine outside the administration's "Operation Warp Speed."

In a passing nod to the pandemic's toll, Trump promised the coming vaccines would "quickly and dramatically reduce deaths and hospitalizations," adding that "we want to get back to normal." But it will be months before most Americans have access to a vaccine.

Asked what message he had for Americans suffering great hardship as the holidays approach and the virus only gets worse, Trump's answer had an almost clinical tone.

"Yeah, well, CDC puts out their guidelines, and they're very important guidelines," he said, "but I think this: I think that the vaccine was our goal."

To focus otherwise would undercut Trump's goal of minimizing the national pain of the virus' toll and his claims that the danger will soon vanish.

Trump's successor, Joe Biden, on Friday answered that approach with a promise for greater presidential leadership. Of the virus, he said: "We can wish this away, but we need to face it."

Jeff Shesol, a presidential historian and former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton, said Trump's failure

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to express empathy was a "personal pathology manifesting itself as political strategy."

"It's not simply that he has decided not to express concern or sorrow, it's that he does not feel the sorrow," Shesol said.

Ari Fleischer, who served as White House press secretary to President George W. Bush, said Trump has approached the virus in a "very mechanical, focus-on-the-vaccine kind of way" when people are also hungering for an emotional connection. That's hurt Trump politically, but it's true to his persona, Fleischer added.

"The president is a blunt force more than he's an empathetic force," Fleischer said. "To his credit, he doesn't pretend. He is who he is. Most politicians would fake it."

The White House did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

It's not just Trump who is fazed by how best to acknowledge the toll of the virus.

The issue led to an unusually personal argument on the air Thursday at Fox News Channel, the favorite network for many of Trump's supporters. Marie Harf, a commentator on the midday show "Outnumbered," noted that 43 minutes into the show the previous day's record-setting number of COVID deaths hadn't been mentioned.

"We cannot lose sight of the tragedy that is unfolding every day in this country, in large part because people want to go about like normal and they don't want to wear masks," she said.

The show's host, Harris Faulkner, called Harf's remark offensive. "Keep your judgment someplace where you know you can fact-check it, because you can't see my heart."

Late-night TV hosts, too, took note of the scant acknowledgement of the unfolding tragedy.

In a lengthy monologue Thursday night, NBC "Late Night" host Seth Meyers faulted Trump and Republicans for continuing to focus on trying to overturn the long-settled election "as thousands of Americans die every day from a pandemic they clearly don't care about."

Associated Press writer David Bauder in New York and data journalist Nicky Forster contributed to this report.

Pandemic threatens India's children with child labor rising

By BISWAJEET BANERJEE and SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

LUCKNOW, India (AP) — A boy who cried out when he was beaten for complaining of stomach pains drew attention from a passerby, who alerted police in the central Indian city of Agra.

Officers broke a padlock on the gate of the illegal shoe factory where the boy was working and found a dozen children, aged 10-17.

With classrooms shut and parents losing their jobs in the pandemic, thousands of families are putting their children to work to get by, undoing decades of progress in curbing child labor and threatening the future of a generation of India's children.

In rural India, a nationwide lockdown imposed in March pushed millions of people into poverty, encouraging trafficking of children from villages into cities for cheap labor. The pandemic is hampering enforcement of anti-child labor laws, with fewer workplace inspections and less vigorous pursuit of human traffickers.

"The situation is unprecedented," said Dhananjay Tingal, executive director of the Bachpan Bachao Andolan, a children's rights group whose founder, Kailash Satyarthi, won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014.

"These children are made to work 14-16 hours a day and if they refuse to work they are beaten. One beating sends the message down the group, which suits the owner," said Tingal.

Tingal's organization has rescued at least 1,197 children between April and September across India. In the same period last year, it helped 613.

Childline, a nationwide helpline for children in distress, received 192,000 distress calls between March and August, most of them related to cases of child labor. It handled 170,000 such calls in the same period of 2019.

The 13-year-old boy who was working in the illegal shoe factory in Agra cannot be identified by name

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because Indian law forbids naming suspected victims of child labor and trafficking.

He was working 12-14 hours a day attaching the rubber soles of shoes with glue in a small cramped room, with little food and water when police rescued him and other children in September.

He was sent home to Bahraich, a rural town in India's heartland state of Uttar Pradesh, some 460 kilometers (285 miles) from Agra, with help from the Children's Welfare Committee, a government body that provides care and protection for children in need.

But with schools closed and his father struggling to feed his four children, the boy went back to work, this time on a farm in his village.

In India, children under 14 are not allowed to work except in family businesses and farms. They are also barred from dangerous workplaces such as construction sites, brick kilns and chemical factories.

The country has made serious gains in combatting child labor, but more than 10 million Indian children are still in some form of servitude, according to UNICEF.

At the height of the pandemic, which has infected more than 9.5 million Indians and killed more than 138,000, the 13-year-old's father, Sukhai Ram, a landless farmer from the lower end of India's unforgiving caste system, was jobless and worried.

One day, he met a man who promised to give Ram's son a job paying about \$60 a month. Ultimately, the family only got one month's pay for the two months the boy worked there before he was rescued.

"I was swayed by those words and allowed him to take my son to the city," Ram said.

In many cases, families know the child traffickers, said Surya Pratap Mishra, a children's rights activist.

In some Uttar Pradesh villages, traffickers distributed free food to impoverished families during the pandemic lockdown, which lasted 68 days. Having earned the confidence of the villagers, they offered to give their children jobs in big cities.

"As the villagers knew these people, they agreed and sent their children with them," said Mishra.

Many did not return for months and were sent home only after being rescued by the authorities and nonprofit groups. Some have not yet been found.

In July, India's Home Ministry redoubled its fight against the resurgence of child labor, issuing guidelines for urgently setting up Anti Human Trafficking Units in every district. Many Indian states have flouted that advisory.

Ajit Singh, a child rights activist in Uttar Pradesh, said the government's efforts to protect children since the pandemic began have been abysmal.

Most of India's elementary and middle schools are still closed because of the pandemic, affecting more than 200 million children. Teachers visit families to check in with students, but online learning is beyond the reach of millions of families that can't afford smartphones or laptops.

One recent morning in a suburb of the capital, New Delhi, Mohammad Shahzad watched with concern as his 14-year-old son shouldered a heavy bag of sand at a construction site.

"Keep your body stiff. Else it'll fall," Shahzad shouted as the boy, a seventh-grader, headed barefoot into the building. At least four other children were working alongside their parents.

With schools closed, the boy will keep working, Shahzad said.

"There is already very little work. If he won't help us in these trying times, we won't have enough to eat," he said.

Sheikh Saaliq reported from New Delhi.

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By NANCY BENAC Associated Press

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The White House did not respond to a request for comment for this story.

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Associated Press writer David Bauder in New York and data journalist Nicky Forster contributed to this report.

US executes Louisiana truck driver who killed daughter, 2

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

TERRE HAUTE, Ind. (AP) — The Trump administration continued its unprecedented series of post-election federal executions Friday by putting to death a Louisiana truck driver who severely abused his 2-year-old daughter for weeks in 2002, then killed her by slamming her head repeatedly against a truck's windows and dashboard.

Alfred Bourgeois, 56, was pronounced dead at 8:21 p.m. Eastern time at a federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana. His lawyers had argued he had an IQ that put him in the intellectually disabled category, saying that should have made him ineligible for the death penalty.

In his last words, Bourgeois, strapped to a gurney, offered no apology and instead struck a deeply defiant tone, insisting that he neither killed nor sexually abused his baby girl.

"I ask God to forgive all those who plotted and schemed against me, and planted false evidence," he said. He added: "I did not commit this crime."

Later, the girl's relatives released a joint statement calling Bourgeois "a monster."

"None of us thought she would return from (visiting Bourgeois) in a casket," it said. "It should not have taken 18 years to receive justice for our angel."

Bourgeois was the 10th federal death-row inmate put to death since federal executions resumed under President Donald Trump in July after a 17-year hiatus. He was the second federal prisoner executed this week, with three more executions planned in January.

The last time the number of civilians executed federally was in the double digits in a year was under President Grover Cleveland, with 14 in 1896.

As a lethal injection of pentobarbital began flowing through IVs into both of his arms, Bourgeois tilted his head to look at his spiritual adviser in a corner of the death chamber clutching a Bible. Bourgeois gave him a thumbs-up sign, and his spiritual adviser raised his thumb in reply.

Seconds later, Bourgeois peered up toward the glass dividing him from the media and other witnesses in adjoining rooms, and then grimaced and furrowed his eyebrows. He began to exhale rhythmically, and his stomach started to quiver uncontrollably. After five minutes, the heaving of his stomach stopped and his entire body became still. He did not move for about 20 minutes before he was pronounced dead.

Bourgeois had met with his spiritual adviser earlier Friday as he sought to come to terms with the pos-

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sibility of dying, one of his lawyers, Shawn Nolan, told The Associated Press hours before the execution. He said Bourgeois had been "praying for redemption."

Bourgeois took up drawing in prison, including doing renditions of members of his legal team. Nolan said he had a good disciplinary record on death row.

The series of executions under Trump since Election Day, the first in late November, is also the first time in more than 130 years that federal executions have occurred during a lame-duck period. Cleveland also was the last president to do that.

Bourgeois' lawyers said the apparent hurry by Trump, a Republican, to get executions in before the Jan. 20 inauguration of death-penalty foe Joe Biden, a Democrat, deprived their client his rights to exhaust his legal options.

The Justice Department gave Bourgeois just 21 days notice he was to be executed under protocols that slashed the required notice period from 90 days, Nolan said.

"To rush these executions during the pandemic and everything else, makes absolutely no sense," he said.

On Thursday, Brandon Bernard was put to death for his part in a 1999 killing of a religious couple from Iowa after he and other teenage members of a gang abducted and robbed Todd and Stacie Bagley in Texas. Bernard, who was 18 at the time of the killings, was a rare execution of a person who was in his teens when his crime was committed.

Reality TV star Kim Kardashian West had appealed to Trump to commute Bernard's sentence to life, citing, among other things, remorse Bernard expressed over years.

Bourgeois' crimes stood out as for their brutality.

According to court filings, he gained temporary custody of the child, referred to in court papers only as "JG," after a 2002 paternity suit from a Texas woman. He was living in Louisiana with his wife and their two children.

Over the next month, Bourgeois repeatedly whipped the girl with an electrical cord, burned her feet with a cigarette lighter and hit her in the head with a plastic baseball bat — then refused to seek medical treatment for her. Prosecutors said he sexually abused her, too.

Her toilet training enraged Bourgeois and he sometimes forced her to sleep on a training toilet.

It was during a trucking run to Corpus Christi, Texas, that he killed the toddler. Angered that a toilet-training pot tipped over in his truck cabin, he grabbed her inside the truck by her shoulders and slammed her head on the windows and dashboard four times.

When she lost consciousness, Bourgeois' wife pleaded for him to get help and he told her to tell first responders she was hurt falling from the truck. She died the next day in a hospital of brain injuries.

After his 2004 conviction, a judge rejected claims stemming from his alleged intellectual disability, noting he didn't receive that diagnosis until after his death sentence.

Bourgeois' lawyers didn't argue that he should have been acquitted or should not have been handed a stiff sentence, just that he shouldn't be executed, Nolan said.

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

Diverse TV holiday season includes all-Asian Lifetime movie

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

In one scene from the Lifetime TV movie, "A Sugar & Spice Holiday," a co-worker says to Suzy, an Asian American architect in Los Angeles: "I didn't know if Christmas was a big deal where you're from."

Retorts Suzy: "I'm from Maine."

A lot of viewers of a cozy Christmas film might just shrug off the insinuation that Suzy is somehow not American. But for an Asian audience, that brief exchange is a knowing reminder that microaggressions don't take a holiday. They especially haven't in the wake of the pandemic, which has triggered anti-Asian racism and terms like "Chinese virus" and "kung flu."

"I think it's great timing for us for this movie to be coming out now during the pandemic with the per-

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ception of the Asian culture and the 'flu' and all," Canadian actor Jacky Lai, who plays Suzy, told The Associated Press. "I really do hope that this (movie) — with our faces — is able to hopefully be welcomed by people into their homes and see us as just your American/Canadian friends."

"A Sugar & Spice Holiday," premiering Sunday, may be the first feel-good TV Christmas flick to feature a mostly Asian ensemble. It's one of several projects where cable channels are demonstrating a desire for inclusion this yuletide season. The shift comes a year after the Hallmark Channel dropped an ad that included a same-sex couple. The fallout pointed to an overall diversity problem in the genre with not just the LGBTQ community, but communities of color. Recent months of racial unrest only added to the conversation within the entertainment industry about representation.

Tia Maggini, vice president of Lifetime Original Movies, says it was a coincidence that screenwriter Eirene Donohue, who is Asian American and had worked with the network before, came to them with the story pitch.

"It was exciting to be presented with this particular point of view that has been long overdue for the Christmas movie genre," Maggini said in a statement. Most important: The movie itself was actually funny and "full of Christmas heart."

Indeed, the rom-com has all the warm, familiar holiday movie tropes. Suzy returns to the small town where she grew up for Christmas, is persuaded to revive her baking skills for a local gingerbread house competition and is assisted by her former high school crush (Tony Giroux).

Her father is played by veteran actor Tzi Ma. Despite a year filled with high profile film roles in "The Farewell" and "Mulan," Ma didn't hesitate to join a Lifetime movie.

"It was the first time a Chinese American family was featured on a Christmas story," Ma said in an email. "Lifetime has a tremendous Asian American following. It's a way to say thank you to them."

In Hollywood, it can often feel like studios only cast Asians in narratives where there's some kind of hardship or East-meets-West struggle. And with TV holiday movies, they're almost nonexistent. Meanwhile, there are white actors who have made a baker's dozen of them. Like any other group, Giroux says, Asians deserve to see themselves in lighthearted fare regularly.

"I think it's so important to have all sorts of stories with any culture — for them to have exposure to the stories of struggle but it's such a delight to see something lighter, to see aspects of culture that aren't surrounded with times of difficulty," Giroux says.

Giroux, who is Canadian, is also looking forward to queuing up a movie where his grandparents can see themselves.

"I'm really excited for them to see a story that covers part of their story. My grandparents immigrated here from China in the '50s," Giroux says. "That's why being part of this project is telling a story that I'm really a part of."

Lai grew up loving romantic comedies. She remembers unexpectedly getting emotional watching "Crazy Rich Asians," the first major Hollywood studio film with an all-Asian cast in 25 years.

"You hear people say there hasn't been a movie like this in 25 years. You hear those things. But it's not until I sat in the theater and watched someone who looked like me on screen who wasn't a ninja or a nerd but someone just like me. I remember the way it felt," Lai says. "I am so excited that there's another movie like that and hopefully we bring joy and open some minds with this movie and more opportunities."

The movie is lovingly sprinkled with Chinese American nuances on script and screen. These include a photo of Suzy's deceased grandma flanked by incense sticks and the entire family eating with chopsticks. And it is definitely the only Christmas movie to feature both gingerbread and stinky tofu, a beloved Chinese dish known for its pungent smell.

"I love that we were able to kind of include a lot of nice details. ... It's really a romantic comedy where the characters happen to be Asian American," says Jennifer Liao, the director. "It's nice to make an Asian American movie that's not necessarily completely frontloaded with having to carry the weight of cultural identity issues and things like that."

"Sugar & Spice" is not the only holiday movie expanding the definition of who can lead these kinds of flicks. A handful of networks, including Lifetime and Hallmark, have a Christmas-themed movie on their

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slate featuring a same-sex pairing. Tony winner Ali Stroker, who uses a wheelchair, stars in Lifetime's "Christmas Ever After."

Does Liao feel pressure as "the first" even on such an innocuous project to bring in a sizable audience? "I feel like the pressure is more to deliver something that I and everybody else (who) worked on (this) can be proud of. That was really No. 1," Liao says.

Lai doesn't see the point of getting caught up in things like ratings.

"I think that it is really, really nice to hear when someone says 'I got to see someone who looks like me on screen.' That will never get old," Lai says. "We get more responses like that — for me, the movie did its purpose."

Terry Tang reported from Phoenix and is a member of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/ttangAP>

Vets groups demand Wilkie's dismissal after scathing audit

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Four of the nation's biggest veterans groups on Friday called for the immediate dismissal of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie following a scathing government audit that found he had acted unprofessionally if not unethically in the handling of a congressional aide's allegation of sexual assault at a VA hospital.

Veterans of Foreign Wars joined Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans and AMVETS in saying Wilkie had breached the trust of veterans. In the final weeks of the Trump administration, they said they had lost all confidence that he can effectively lead the department, which is responsible for the care of nine million veterans.

"The accountability, professionalism and respect that our veterans have earned, and quite frankly deserve, is completely lost in this current VA leadership team," said B.J. Lawrence, executive director of VFW, the nation's oldest veterans group.

"Our veterans cannot wait until Jan. 20, 2021, for a leadership change," he said. "Secretary Wilkie must resign now."

An investigation by the Veterans Affairs' inspector general on Thursday concluded that Wilkie repeatedly sought to discredit Andrea Goldstein, a senior policy adviser to Democratic Rep. Mark Takano, who is chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, after she alleged in September 2019 that a man at the VA medical center in Washington, D.C., had physically assaulted her.

The inspector general found that Wilkie's disparaging comments about Goldstein, a Navy veteran, as a repeat complainer as well as the overall "tone" he set influenced his staff to spread negative information about her while ignoring known problems of harassment at the facility.

Wilkie and other senior officials had declined to fully cooperate with the investigation by VA Inspector General Michael Missal. For that reason, Missal said he could not conclude whether Wilkie had violated government policies or laws, allegedly by personally digging into the woman's past. Wilkie denied wrongdoing.

"We've had our concerns about Wilkie's leadership throughout the pandemic and this IG report really cements the fact that the VA is not being led with integrity," said Jeremy Butler, chief executive of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. "That calls for an immediate change."

The report on Thursday drew widespread concern from lawmakers from both parties about VA's leadership, with Takano the first to call for Wilkie's resignation. Concerned Veterans for America, a conservative group who supported Wilkie when he became VA secretary in 2018, chided Wilkie and his team, stressing that "VA leaders should always put the veteran and the integrity of the institution ahead of themselves."

AMVETS national commander Jan Brown said she found it unacceptable that VA would dismiss known problems facing women who receive care at its facilities.

"Women veterans already hesitate to use VA services for a number of reasons and we need a Secretary who will make our community feel welcomed," she said. "We strongly disapprove of any VA official that took part in the scheme to wreck the credibility of a victim."

The case of Goldstein, who agreed to be publicly identified, was ultimately closed by the inspector general's office and Justice Department earlier this year due to a lack of enough evidence to bring charges.

Wilkie is President Donald Trump's second VA secretary after David Shulkin was fired in 2018. A former Pentagon undersecretary, he presided over the nation's largest hospital system that has seen continuing improvement and veterans' satisfaction since a 2014 scandal involving lengthy waiting times for medical appointments.

Wilkie, however, has taken flak from conservatives for restricting veterans' access to private care for many months during the pandemic, a move they said rendered Trump's core agenda of enhancing VA "Choice" ineffective. Wilkie also drew fire from IAVA and other groups for embracing the president's unsubstantiated claims that hydroxychloroquine was safe for veterans to freely take for the treatment and prevention of COVID-19.

"VA can and must do better," said Randy Reese, executive director of Disabled American Veterans' Washington headquarters.

President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to rebuild trust in the VA when he takes office on Jan. 20. He has selected Denis McDonough, who served as President Barack Obama's White House chief of staff, to be VA secretary.

Viral spread: Americans paying the price for Thanksgiving

By CARLA K. JOHNSON and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

With some Americans now paying the price for what they did over Thanksgiving and falling sick with COVID-19, health officials are warning people — begging them, even — not to make the same mistake during the Christmas and New Year's season.

"It's a surge above the existing surge," said Ali Mokdad, a professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle. "Quite honestly, it's a warning sign for all of us."

Across the country, contact tracers and emergency room doctors are hearing repeatedly from new coronavirus patients that they socialized over Thanksgiving with people outside their households, despite emphatic public-health warnings to stay home and keep their distance from others.

The virus was raging across the nation even before Thanksgiving but was showing some signs of flattening out. It has picked up steam since, with new cases per day regularly climbing well over 200,000.

The dire outlook comes as the U.S. stands on the brink of a major vaccination campaign against COVID-19, with the Food and Drug Administration giving the final go-ahead Friday to use Pfizer's formula against the scourge that has killed over 290,000 Americans and infected more than 15.8 million.

White House chief of staff Mark Meadows had pressed FDA chief Stephen Hahn to grant authorization by the end of the day or face possible firing, according to two administration officials speaking on condition of anonymity.

President Donald Trump, who has been fuming at the FDA for not moving faster on the vaccine, called the agency a "big, old, slow turtle" on Twitter, adding: "Get the dam vaccines out NOW, Dr. Hahn. Stop playing games and start saving lives."

Hahn has said he would be guided by "science, not politics."

COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. have climbed to a seven-day average of almost 2,260 per day, about equal to the peak seen in mid-April, when the New York City area was under siege. New cases are running at about 195,000 a day, based on a two-week rolling average, a 16% increase from the day before Thanksgiving, according to an Associated Press analysis.

In Washington state, contact tracers counted at least 336 people testing positive who said they attended gatherings or traveled during the Thanksgiving weekend. More are expected.

The virus could still be incubating in someone who was exposed while traveling home the Sunday after Thanksgiving; the end of that two-week incubation period is this Sunday.

Zana Cooper, a 60-year-old cancer survivor in Murrieta, California, tested positive for COVID-19 after attending a Thanksgiving dinner with her son's girlfriend's family. At the dinner, the girlfriend's father, who

had recently traveled to Florida, wasn't feeling well and went to bed early.

Cooper learned the following Sunday that he tested positive.

"My first reaction was the f-word. I was so mad," she said. "I was upset. I was angry. I was like, 'How dare you take my life in your hands?'"

She has had fever and headaches, a runny nose and bloodshot eyes, and in recent days it has become more difficult to breathe and she has been using an inhaler. She said she believes she brought the virus home to her daughter and two grandchildren, who live with her and are now ill with what a doctor diagnosed as COVID-19.

In Philadelphia, a woman in her 20s gathered with 10 relatives on Thanksgiving, though she didn't feel well the day before. She later tested positive for COVID-19. Her family started developing symptoms, and seven members tested positive, said Dr. Thomas Farley, Philadelphia's health commissioner.

The next round of festivities could yield even more cases. Wall-to-wall holidays started this week. Hanukkah began Thursday evening and ends Dec. 18, followed by Christmas, Kwanzaa and New Year's Eve.

"This is not the time to invite the neighbors over for dinner. This is not the time to start having parties," said Dr. Joshua LaBaer, an Arizona State University researcher.

In parts of New York state, contact tracers are regularly hearing from the newly infected that they attended Thanksgiving festivities, said Steuben County Public Health Director Darlene Smith. Still unknown is how many they will infect and how many eventually will need a bed in intensive care, she said.

"It's the domino effect," Smith said.

Harry and Ashley Neidig, of Shepherdstown, West Virginia, tested positive for COVID-19 last week. They said they believe they contracted it from someone at their jobs as security officers but didn't know of their possible exposure before they celebrated Thanksgiving with both sides of the family.

On the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, Ashley Neidig, 25, noticed she couldn't smell a menthol-scented body scrub. After the couple got tested, they contacted their families to warn them. Some were awaiting test results, and so far no one else has had any symptoms, said Harry Neidig, 24.

"We feel bad because ... we definitely should've put a heavier weight into our decision to go," he said. "We should have told our family, 'Hey, given the nature of our job, we can't quarantine like other people in an office job.'"

He added: "You might want to take another look before you go somewhere for Christmas."

The surge around the country has swamped hospitals and left nurses and other health care workers exhausted and demoralized.

"Compassion fatigue is the best word for what we're experiencing," said Kiersten Henry, an ICU nurse practitioner at MedStar Montgomery Medical Center in Olney, Maryland. "I feel we've already run a marathon, and this is our second one. Even people who are upbeat are feeling run down at this point."

While some hospitals are scrambling to find beds and convert storage rooms and other places for use in treating patients, they are also dealing with dire staff shortages.

"We know how to make new beds," said Dr. Lew Kaplan, a critical care surgeon at the University of Pennsylvania's Perelman School of Medicine. "We don't know how to make new staff."

AP data journalist Nicky Forster in New York and Associated Press writer Marion Renault in Rochester, Minn., contributed to this report.

White House threatens FDA chief's job over vaccine approval

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hours before the Food and Drug Administration authorized the first COVID-19 vaccine late Friday, a high-ranking White House official told the agency's chief he could face firing if the vaccine was not cleared by day's end, two administration officials said.

The FDA granted emergency use for the vaccine produced by Pfizer Inc. and its German partner BioNTech. The decision kicks off a massive vaccination effort to help defeat the pandemic. President Donald

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Trump said late Friday that Pfizer had "passed the gold standard of safety" and hailed the vaccine as "one of the greatest scientific accomplishments in history."

But the move followed tense discussions between White House chief of staff Mark Meadows and FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn, according to a senior administration official who was familiar with the call but was not authorized to discuss private conversations.

The chief of staff told Hahn his job was in jeopardy if the emergency use authorization was not issued before Saturday, said a second administration official familiar with the conversation.

Earlier in the day Hahn had issued a statement indicating the agency was working rapidly to clear the vaccine.

Friday's threat marked the latest attempt by the Trump administration to override government scientists working to combat the deadly pandemic. Even with an FDA decision expected within hours, Trump and his deputies proved unwilling to let regulators work through their careful review, which includes drafting safety warning labels and instructions for physicians.

It was unclear whether authorizing the vaccine Friday night will meaningfully expedite its rollout.

Trump tweeted directly at Hahn earlier Friday, complaining that FDA "is still a big, old, slow turtle." Trump has publicly bashed the pace of the FDA's vaccine review process.

"Get the damn vaccines out NOW, Dr. Hahn," Trump tweeted Friday. "Stop playing games and start saving lives."

Hahn disputed characterizations of his conversation with Meadows.

"This is an untrue representation of the phone call with the Chief of Staff," Hahn said in a statement. "The FDA was encouraged to continue working expeditiously on Pfizer-BioNTech's EUA request. FDA is committed to issuing this authorization quickly, as we noted in our statement this morning."

The FDA said earlier Friday that it "will rapidly work" to grant emergency use of the vaccine.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's school of public health, called the pressure an "unforced error" by the White House that could chip away at public confidence in a vaccine.

"It creates a veneer of political meddling," Jha said. "Every time you see the president get involved, you see vaccine confidence drop by 10%."

Hahn and other top health officials have been working for months to boost public confidence in the government's vaccine effort, which will eventually need to reach most Americans to suppress the virus.

Recent polls show only about half of all Americans are ready to roll up their sleeves for a shot. Many have safety concerns and want to wait and see how the initial rollout fares. But concerns that a vaccine was rushed due to political pressure could further undermine the unprecedented vaccination effort.

"The last thing this process needs now is to undermine the public's faith in the vaccine with political pressure to hurry up an already rushed process with threats of firings," said Carl Tobias, law professor at the University of Richmond in Virginia.

Jha added that FDA officials don't need the added pressure. "They already feel the weight of what's happening in our country," he said.

Trump's frustration with the FDA has been mounting, particularly as other countries have beaten the U.S. in issuing emergency approvals for the vaccine. Meadows issued the ultimatum to Hahn at Trump's direction, a senior administration official said.

The FDA decision — when it comes — will kickstart an unprecedented vaccination campaign needed to eventually defeat the virus, now blamed for nearly 300,000 deaths in the U.S. And the agency's greenlight of the vaccine was virtually assured after Thursday's positive vote by agency advisers.

The FDA's review is critical to assuring the safety and effectiveness of a vaccine that will eventually be given to many millions of Americans..

Among the final issues facing FDA scientists are whether to authorize the shot for use in pregnant women and teenagers, who were not extensively studied in Pfizer's trial.

The agency's careful approach is unique around the world in that the FDA actually reanalyzes all company data to verify its accuracy. That's different from the abbreviated process used by the U.K. and other countries, which rely on summary data produced by manufacturers.

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Hahn has stated for months that "science, not politics" would determine when the agency gives the vaccine the go-ahead.

More than 150 FDA staffers have been working in shifts over nights, weekends and the Thanksgiving holiday to review tens of thousands of pages of Pfizer's application.

Hahn told The Associated Press earlier this week that his agency had already teed up authorization by prefilling all the necessary legal paperwork.

"We're doing everything we can to cut down on the red tape, which I think is really important," Hahn told the AP.

Trump has been livid with the FDA for not moving faster to approve the shots, blaming the fact that a vaccine was not available before the Nov. 3 election for his loss. Trump also has leveled unfounded claims that drug companies deliberately delayed vaccine development to hinder his reelection chances, though there is no evidence to suggest that took place.

As he has refused to accept his loss to Democratic President-elect Joe Biden, Trump also has told close confidants that he believes the vaccine is still being slow-walked in a bid to undermine his efforts to challenge the results.

If the vaccine were shipped out sooner, he has argued, it would rally public opinion to his side.

Lemire reported from Wilmington, Del. Associated Press writer Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

AP source: Cuomo among contenders for attorney general pick

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo is one of several contenders under consideration by President-elect Joe Biden for the role of attorney general, a person with knowledge of the search process said Friday.

The other three contenders at the moment include outgoing Alabama Sen. Doug Jones, federal appeals court judge Merrick Garland and former Deputy Attorney General Sally Yates, said the person, who cautioned that no decision had been reached and no announcement was expected imminently.

The person was not authorized to discuss the search process by name and spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

The AP reported earlier in the week that Jones, who lost his Senate seat last month, and Garland, who was spurned by Republicans four years ago for a spot on the Supreme Court, had emerged as the two front-runners in the search process.

Spokespeople for Cuomo did not immediately return emails seeking comment Friday.

It was not clear to what extent the disclosure this week that federal prosecutors were investigating the finances of Biden's son, Hunter, might have scrambled the attorney general search process since the person who is ultimately picked would inherit the probe, assuming it remains active next month.

It was also not immediately clear how seriously Cuomo was being considered or how any nomination of him would be greeted by either Republicans, given Cuomo's antagonistic relationship with President Donald Trump, or by civil rights activists who have encouraged Biden to build a diverse cabinet.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, who was among advocates who met with Biden on Tuesday on the subject of diversity and civil rights, told reporters he had encouraged Biden to select a Black attorney general but gave him room to select someone of another race as long as they had a background in civil rights.

Cuomo has been asked in recent weeks about his interest in the attorney general spot. Just this week, he said in a public radio interview in New York, "I have no intention to run for president or vice president, or go to the administration." But he said the attorney general job "is really critical, especially now."

A former state attorney general and Housing and Urban Development secretary in the Clinton administration, Cuomo has been governor of New York since 2011 and has been the public face of the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Follow Eric Tucker at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

U.S. marshal calls his post-shooting remarks 'premature'

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press/Report for America

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A U.S. marshal said Friday that his description of the fatal shooting of a Black man by a white sheriff's deputy as justified was premature and based on insufficient information.

U.S. Marshal Peter Tobin said he made statements based on "insufficient information" he received before the beginning of an official investigation into the Dec. 4 killing of Casey Goodson J r. by a Franklin County Sheriff's deputy.

"It was premature for me to provide any opinion, conclusion, or other information about the facts of the incident," Tobin, U.S. marshal for the Southern District of Ohio, said in a late afternoon statement that came just minutes before hundreds gathered in downtown Columbus to protest Goodson's death.

Tobin for the first time also distanced the U.S. Marshals Service from Deputy Jason Meade, saying Meade's work on behalf of a Marshals fugitive task force had ended when the shooting happened.

"The officer was acting on his own and in his independent authority as a Franklin County Sheriff's Deputy within his home jurisdiction when he encountered Mr. Goodson, and throughout the subsequent incident leading to Mr. Goodson's death," Tobin said.

Messages were left for Meade's attorney and for the Franklin County Sheriff's Office. Columbus police and the U.S. Justice Department are investigating the shooting.

Earlier Friday, Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther criticized Tobin, saying he was wrong to make that initial statement.

"His words were inappropriate, uninformed and damaged the public's trust in the investigation," Ginther said in a statement.

Hundreds walked from the Franklin County Sheriff's Office south of downtown to the Statehouse and a few blocks north Friday night. Many carried signs saying "Justice for Casey."

"For his life to be taken, so tragically, and in such a senseless manner — we have to fight for justice because we know it's us against them," Tamala Payne, Goodson's mother, told the crowd.

"And they always win — but they're not going to win on this one," she said. "Because his mama refuses to let it happen."

Protests were also expected Saturday.

Protesters' First Amendment rights will be protected, said Columbus Police Chief Thomas Quinlan in a statement. The division was criticized for overreacting to protesters during May and June rallies over racial injustice and police brutality.

"You have my personal commitment that we are here to facilitate a safe, peaceful opportunity for all voices to be heard," Quinlan said in the statement.

Officers' body cameras will be activated to ensure transparency and all officers' badge numbers will be visible, he said.

Last week, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine announced the creation of a new, statewide standard for Ohio police departments to follow when dealing with mass protests, in reaction to problems that arose at numerous protests statewide this spring. The police should restrict the fewest freedoms possible, limit the use of force, target only harmful behavior, and use predictable and unbiased tactics.

No video of the fatal shooting of Goodson has emerged. The Franklin County Sheriff's Office does not provide officers with body cameras, and the deputy's SWAT vehicle did not have a dash-mounted camera.

The lack of images will make investigators' jobs harder in an age when video of such shootings is commonplace, criminal justice experts said.

"It becomes really hard to know what exactly went down when the only person who can provide an account has a vested interest in presenting him or herself as having acted in a justified way," said Justin Nix, a criminal justice professor at the University of Nebraska-Omaha.

The public now expects video because of a distrust of police accounts, said Michael Benza, a Case West-

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ern Reserve University criminal law professor. In the 2014 killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, for example, a security camera video disproved the initial police report and showed Rice being shot seconds after an officer's car arrived.

"Jurors, and more importantly, the public expect to see video because they no longer trust what law enforcement or investigators say happened," Benza said.

Attorneys and relatives of Goodson, 23, said he was killed by Meade as he walked through the front doorway of his grandmother's Columbus house.

Preliminary autopsy results showed Goodson died from multiple gunshot wounds to his torso. Two 911 callers reported hearing multiple gunshots that day.

Meade's attorney, Mark Collins, disputes the family's account and said Goodson pointed his gun at Meade, a 17-year veteran of the sheriff's office.

Meade had been assigned to the task force that had just finished an unsuccessful search for a fugitive on Dec. 4. Goodson was not a subject of that search.

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

EXPLAINER: Dismissed election case pushed debunked claims

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

The elections lawsuit pushed by President Donald Trump and dismissed Friday by the U.S. Supreme Court was filled with claims that failed to withstand basic scrutiny.

The high court on Friday threw out a complaint filed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton that directly attacked four other states that President-elect Joe Biden won: Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Widely expected by legal experts to fail, the lawsuit still drew the support of 18 Republican attorneys general and 126 Republican members of Congress, including House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy.

Together, Trump and his allies argued that the high court should set aside all four states' votes, allowing Republican-led state legislatures to swing the election to the president. That would have been something that has never occurred in U.S. history.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel warned before the court's ruling that if Texas had won, "It is the end of democracy in the United States of America, and that is not hyperbole. It's just a fact."

The Supreme Court dismissed the case without addressing most of the lawsuit's allegations. Here is a look at some of the claims made in the case and how those claims had already been debunked.

THE LAWSUIT CLAIMS: Texas has a right "to demand that all other States abide by the constitutionally set rules in appointing presidential electors to the electoral college." It says other states are harmed when one state "violates federal law to affect the outcome of a presidential election."

THE FACTS: The Supreme Court dismissed the case on this issue. It said in a brief order that Texas "has not demonstrated a judicially cognizable interest in the manner in which another State conducts its elections."

Legal experts said Texas had no right to bring the case in the first place because it doesn't get a say in how other states run their elections and has not suffered any real harm. And even if it did have a legitimate case, it was brought too late, experts say.

"Texas does not have standing in federal court to vindicate the voting rights of other states' voters — much less standing to undercut the rights of those voters," Lisa Marshall Manheim, a professor at the University of Washington Law School, wrote in an opinion piece for The Washington Post.

Some Texas Republicans agreed. U.S. Rep. Chip Roy tweeted he would not join the case because "I believe the case itself represents a dangerous violation of federalism & sets a precedent to have one state asking federal courts to police the voting procedures of other states."

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THE LAWSUIT CLAIMS: The four states that Texas is suing “usurped their legislatures’ authority and unconstitutionally revised their state’s election statutes.”

THE FACTS: Trump and his allies have lost many cases making the argument that only state legislatures could modify election practices during the coronavirus pandemic. This lawsuit rehashes arguments already rejected by courts siding with officials who acted under their respective state laws.

For example, the lawsuit alleges that Pennsylvania “unconstitutionally did away” with “statutory signature verification requirements.” But the Pennsylvania Supreme Court unanimously ruled in October that state law makes it clear only that the ballot envelope requires the voter’s signature, but not a matching signature.

Among the states that changed voting practices without legislative action this year is Texas, which extended early voting by six days due to the pandemic.

THE LAWSUIT CLAIMS: Given Trump’s lead in the four states “as of 3 a.m.” the morning after the election, Biden’s chances of winning all four was “less than one in a quadrillion.”

THE FACTS: What sounds like a statistically significant figure isn’t grounded in what experts before the election predicted: In-person votes counted more quickly would likely favor Trump and mail-in votes counted later would favor Biden.

Democrats for months pushed voters to submit mail-in ballots that would be counted later, while Trump attacked mail-in voting as fraudulent even though he voted by mail in Florida. Republican legislative leaders in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin all resisted pleas from election officials to update the laws to allow for a speedier count.

The idea that Trump would have large initial leads came as no surprise and does not prove any malfeasance or fraud happened.

THE LAWSUIT CLAIMS: There are “facts for which no independently verified reasonable explanation yet exists.”

THE FACTS: Each of the listed “facts” has an independently verified explanation.

A laptop and thumb drives were stolen on Oct. 1 from a city warehouse in Philadelphia. A spokesman for the city elections commission said then, “We are confident that this incident will not in any way compromise the integrity of the election.” The local district attorney said days later that police found the theft was unrelated to the election, according to the Philadelphia Inquirer.

There was briefly a tabulation problem that involved a few thousand votes in Republican-leaning Antrim County, Michigan. But it wasn’t caused by voting machines. “There was no malice, no fraud here, just human error,” County Clerk Sheryl Guy said.

And Milwaukee’s chief elections official, Claire Woodall-Vogg, did leave behind one flash drive with absentee vote tallies when she was delivering a batch of flash drives to the local elections commission, according to the Wisconsin State Journal. Woodall-Vogg said she called a team member and a police officer delivered the last drive. Despite what the lawsuit says, Woodall-Vogg said the drive was “never left unattended.”

Paper apologizes for endorsing congressman backing overturn

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — A Florida newspaper apologized Friday for endorsing the reelection of a Republican congressman who supported a lawsuit that tried to have the Supreme Court overthrow the will of the voters in the presidential election.

The Orlando Sentinel in an editorial said “to its horror,” U.S. Rep. Michael Waltz was one of 126 Republican representatives who supported a Texas lawsuit filed with the U.S. Supreme Court that wants to deprive President-elect Joe Biden of his victory in last month’s election and give a second term to President Donald Trump. The Supreme Court rejected the lawsuit Friday night.

The Sentinel’s editorial board had endorsed its local congressman’s successful bid for a second term.

“We had no idea, had no way of knowing at the time, that Waltz was not committed to democracy,” the

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paper wrote Friday. Nine other Florida representatives also signed on to the lawsuit.

The lawsuit claimed Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin's voting laws created "unconstitutional irregularities" that have "cast doubt" on the 2020 outcome and "the integrity of the American system of elections."

A majority of voters in the four states chose Biden, flipping their results from 2016 and giving him his margin of victory in Monday's upcoming Electoral College vote. Texas had wanted those results discarded.

The lawsuit rested on numerous unfounded claims that had been rejected in dozens of lawsuits, including by judges appointed by Trump. Attorney General William Barr told The Associated Press last week there is no evidence of fraud that would have changed the election result.

"During our endorsement interview with the incumbent congressman, we didn't think to ask, 'Would you support an effort to throw out the votes of tens of millions of Americans in four states in order to overturn a presidential election and hand it to the person who lost, Donald Trump?'" the Sentinel wrote. "Our bad."

It said such questions will be asked in the future, particularly of Republicans.

Waltz, the first Army Green Beret elected to Congress, told the Daytona Beach News Journal, "For those who are saying this is threatening democracy, I think ignoring them (voting irregularities) or sweeping them under the rug is bad for our democracy and restoring the confidence by working through these issues is what's good for a democracy."

The Sentinel replied: "If Waltz was paying attention, he would understand those alleged irregularities haven't been ignored by the courts, nor by the states, nor by the Department of Justice. They simply haven't stood up to scrutiny."

Trump, Congress avert shutdown, buy time for COVID-19 talks

By LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump signed a temporary government-wide funding bill into law on Friday, averting a federal shutdown at midnight and buying Congress time for on-again, off-again talks on COVID-19 aid.

The short-term measure passed the Senate just hours earlier by a unanimous voice vote without much drama and sent senators home for the weekend without a clear picture of what awaits next week. The bill sets a new deadline of midnight next Friday. The House passed the bill Wednesday.

The talks are stalled but there is universal agreement that Congress won't adjourn for the year without passing a long-delayed round of pandemic relief. An emerging \$900 billion aid package from a bipartisan group of lawmakers hit a rough patch after Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., swung against the effort. Still, negotiations are ongoing and pressure remains intense.

The House has recessed for a few days, with leaders warning members to be prepared to return to Washington to vote on the year-end deals.

Negotiators on a separate \$1.4 trillion omnibus spending bill appeared to be moving in a positive direction, said the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Sen. Richard Shelby, R-Ala. This bill would serve as a vehicle to carry any year-end virus assistance.

"I'm hopeful we're going to get there on both the omni and the COVID package," McConnell said.

Fixing the impasse over the COVID-19 aid package is a Capitol Hill head-scratcher and hard feelings are plentiful. But discussions over issues such as aid to schools are trending well, leadership aides in both parties say.

Trump has renewed a push for a fresh round of stimulus checks for Americans, proposing \$600 per individual rather than the \$1,200 that was sent out this spring. Cost concerns are responsible for the smaller amount.

Sending direct cash payments to households was not included in the bipartisan proposal or a lower cost plan from Senate Republicans that has failed twice. The idea of another round of cash but has been embraced by some of the president's fiercest critics — including Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

"We're not going to go home for the Christmas holidays unless we make sure that we provide for the

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millions of families in this country who are suffering," Sanders said.

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.

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 for businesses and universities that is McConnell's top GOP priority but that most Democrats oppose.

The bipartisan 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. Democrats oppose the plan in part because of the administration's refusal to back the partial restoration, to \$300 per week, of bonus pandemic jobless benefits that lapsed in August.

Biden: Cabinet picks from Obama era mean 'bold new thinking'

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden on Friday introduced a series of key picks for his new government that drew heavily from the Obama administration, saluting their "deep experience" while insisting he could rely on them for "bold new thinking."

Appearing with Biden were his choice for director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, Susan Rice, who served as President Barack Obama's national security adviser and U.N. ambassador; and Denis McDonough, Obama's White House chief of staff, now nominated as veterans affairs secretary.

His choice for agriculture secretary, Tom Vilsack, served in the same post for Obama for eight years.

Biden's selection for housing chief, Ohio Rep. Marcia Fudge, had been championed by some leading African American members of Congress and civil rights activists for agriculture secretary, in an effort to overhaul how the government combats hunger nationwide. Biden seemed to acknowledge that, saying she could "do many jobs beyond the one I'm asking her to do."

He was unapologetic in repeatedly noting how long he'd known many of the selections.

"Some are familiar faces. Some are new in their roles. All are facing new circumstances and challenges. That's a good thing," Biden said during an event at a theater in downtown Wilmington, Delaware. "They bring deep experience and bold new thinking. Above all, they know how government should and can work for all Americans."

Relying too heavily on Obama administration veterans has already begun to draw some grumbling from members of Biden's own party, however. Obama was first elected on promises to move beyond partisan politics, but saw some major policy goals crash into an uncooperative Congress, especially after Republican gains in the 2010 midterms.

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Some progressives feel the Obama team should have been bolder in its efforts to remake government and worry that Biden will fall into the same trap.

Mark Riddle, a Democratic strategist who founded a pro-Biden Super PAC during the 2020 presidential campaign, said there is no danger in relying too heavily on "all star" former Obama administration leaders. But he advised Biden's team to prioritize controlling the coronavirus pandemic enough to spur economic growth, rather than having arguments over social policies that might allow congressional Republicans to more easily block sweeping policy initiatives.

"The success or failure of the administration out of the box is going to be, Do they focus on jobs?," Riddle said. "If we come out of the box on jobs, jobs, jobs, I feel great. If we are about a bunch of other, say, progressive ideals, we could be right back where we were."

Biden called Vilsack "the best secretary of agriculture I believe this country's ever had," and Vilsack, former governor of the farming state of Iowa, talked about bringing assistance to rural areas. But he also pledged Friday to ensure that every child nationwide has "access to safe, affordable, nutritious food."

Fudge said that under her direction the Department of Housing and Urban Development will ensure people know "that their government cares about them."

McDonough has been tasked with running a large agency that has presented organizational challenges for both parties over the years. Biden noted how he had traveled to Iraq and Afghanistan and had a deep understanding of veterans' issues and the sacrifices of those who serve in the military and their families.

"I have given Denis a clear mission: fight like hell — fight like hell — for veterans and their families," the president-elect said.

Rice, who was once thought to be a finalist to become Biden's running mate before he settled on Kamala Harris, is set to have wide ranging sway over the incoming administration's approach to immigration, health care and racial inequality. She worked closely with Biden when he was Obama's vice president and won't require Senate confirmation — which could have faced stiff Republican opposition.

"She's going to elevate and turbocharge a revitalized domestic policy council," Biden vowed.

Katherine Tai, who is chief trade counsel for the House Ways and Means Committee, is Biden's pick for U.S. trade representative. Tai, like those in line to head agencies, requires Senate approval.

Rice and Fudge are African American and Tai is Asian American, reflecting Biden's promise to choose a diverse Cabinet that reflects the makeup of the country.

Biden said his choices "have different backgrounds and lived experiences."

"And," he said "they all reflect the very best of our nation."

ICC prosecutor ready to open investigation into Ukraine

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — The International Criminal Court's prosecutor said Friday that a preliminary probe has found "a reasonable basis at this time to believe" that crimes against humanity and war crimes have been committed in Ukraine which merit a full-scale investigation.

The six-year preliminary probe by prosecutors at the global court looked at allegations of crimes starting with the brutal crackdown on pro-European Union protests in 2013-14, the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the drawn-out conflict in eastern Ukraine. Fighting there between Ukrainian forces and separatist rebels has killed more than 14,000 people in the last six years.

Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said the suspected crimes and the failure of courts in Ukraine and Russia to successfully prosecute them mean that the next step for ICC prosecutors will be to request authorization from judges to open a formal investigation. She did not give a timeframe for that to happen.

Ukraine is not a member of the court but has twice accepted its jurisdiction, asking it first to investigate the crackdown on protesters in 2013-2014 under former president Viktor Yanukovich and later extending the jurisdiction to cover conflicts in Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Russia is not a member of the court and does not accept its jurisdiction.

Without going into details of the alleged crimes, Bensouda said in a statement that her preliminary investigation found three "clusters of victimization;" crimes committed during hostilities, during detentions

and crimes committed in Crimea.

"My Office furthermore found that these crimes, committed by the different parties to the conflict, were also sufficiently grave to warrant investigation by my Office, both in quantitative and qualitative terms," Bensouda said.

The ICC is a court of last resort that only takes cases when member states do not or cannot prosecute them in domestic courts.

Earlier Friday, Bensouda whose term as prosecutor at the ICC is drawing to a close, said she also was ready to seek authorization for a full-scale investigation into the conflict between Nigerian forces and the Boko Haram extremist group.

She said that with her office stretched financially and facing the challenge of working amid the global coronavirus pandemic "we will need to take several strategic and operational decisions on the prioritization of the Office's workload, which also duly take into account the legitimate expectations of victims and affected communities as well as other stakeholders."

Senate sends Trump defense bill he has vowed to veto

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Friday approved a wide-ranging defense policy bill, sending it to President Donald Trump, despite his threat to veto the bill because it does not clamp down on big tech companies he claims were biased during the election.

The 84-13 vote mirrored an earlier, overwhelming margin in the House, suggesting that both chambers have enough votes to override a potential veto.

The Senate vote had been expected Thursday but was delayed after Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky objected to the measure, saying it could limit Trump's ability to draw down U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Germany.

Congress has approved the bill, known as the National Defense Authorization Act, for nearly 60 years in a row. The current version affirms 3% pay raises for U.S. troops and authorizes more than \$740 billion in military programs and construction.

Trump has vowed to veto the bill unless lawmakers impose limits on social media companies he claims were biased against him during the election. Trump has also said he wants Congress to strip out a provision of the bill that allows renaming of military bases such as Fort Benning and Fort Hood that honor Confederate leaders.

Paul said Friday that his main point in filibustering the bill "was to point out that the president should have the prerogative to end a war, not just to start wars."

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, hailed the bill's passage, calling it "the most important bill we'll do all year."

The defense authorization law "is what the Constitution tells us we have to do" in Congress, Inhofe said. "We must protect freedom, democracy and peace, and support our troops. I look forward to it becoming law before the end of the year."

The bill's approval was never in doubt, although Paul's actions cast uncertainty on the timing. Paul said Friday that "neoconservatives" such as Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., "are inconsistent in saying they want ... to give the commander-in-chief powers to begin war, but then they want to restrain and hamstring a president from ending a war. I think it's a pretty important principle to discuss so we did hold things up for a day."

Two amendments addressing troop deployment could create "535 commanders-in-chief in Congress," Paul said, hampering the president's ability to draw down troops in Afghanistan and Germany. 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 Cheney and Democratic Rep. Jason Crow of Colorado, an Afghanistan veteran, 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 Sen.

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Mitt Romney, R-Utah, 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 called Paul's actions "inexcusable" and charged that he was risking delay of hazardous duty pay to hundreds of thousands of service members and blocking Congress from completing its greatest duty: providing for the nation's defense.

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 it was important for Congress to continue a nearly 60-year streak of passing the National Defense Authorization Act.

"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. "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 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 White House said in a policy statement that "Section 230 facilitates the spread of disinformation online and is a serious threat to our national security and election integrity. It should be repealed."

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 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.

"The administration respects the legacy of the millions of American servicemen and women who have served with honor at these military bases, and who, from these locations, have fought, bled and died for their country," the White House statement said.

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

"I think we can override the veto, if in fact he vetoes," said House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md. "I hope he does not veto. I hope he reconsiders."

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.

Romney called Trump's plan to remove thousands of U.S. troops from Germany "a grave error" and "a gift to Russia" that undermines the mutual commitment of Europe and the U.S. to deter Russian and Chinese aggression.

Alarm as Ethiopia returns refugees who fled Tigray fighting

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — In a development the United Nations called "disturbing," Ethiopia on Friday said it is returning thousands of refugees who ran from camps in its Tigray region as war swept through, putting them on buses back to the border area with Eritrea, the country the refugees originally fled.

The news came as the United States said it believes Eritrean troops are active in Ethiopia, a "grave development." A State Department spokesperson in an email cited credible reports and said "we urge that any such troops be withdrawn immediately."

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The U.N. refugee chief, Filippo Grandi, said that "over the last month we have received an overwhelming number of disturbing reports of Eritrean refugees in Tigray being killed, abducted and forcibly returned to Eritrea. If confirmed, these actions would constitute a major violation of international law." He said his agency has met with some refugees in the capital, Addis Ababa, and he again urged unhindered humanitarian access to Tigray.

Ethiopia said its recently completed military offensive against the now-fugitive Tigray regional government "was not a direct threat" to the 96,000 "misinformed" Eritrean refugees — even as aid groups said four staffers had been killed in the fighting, at least one in a refugee camp.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres this week said Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner, "guaranteed to me that (Eritrean forces) have not entered Tigrayan territory." But Tigray residents have asserted that gunfire came from the direction of Eritrea as the conflict began.

Eritrea, described by rights groups as one of the world's most repressive countries, is a bitter enemy of the fugitive Tigray government.

The U.N. refugee agency said it hadn't been informed in advance of the Eritrean refugees' return. "We received alarming messages from Eritreans living abroad and when we looked into them, ascertained that several hundred refugees had been put on buses this morning to be returned to the Tigray region," it said.

Any forced return, it said, "would be absolutely unacceptable."

Given the trauma that refugees say they witnessed in Tigray, they should be protected elsewhere, the agency said. It said the refugee camps have had no access to food or other supplies for more than a month.

The International Organization for Migration said it was "extremely concerned" about the refugees' "forced" return and denied it was involved, saying Ethiopia took over one of its transit centers in the capital, Addis Ababa, on Dec. 3.

Aid groups say thousands of Eritrean refugees had fled to Addis Ababa and the Tigray capital, Mekele. Ethiopia said their "unregulated movement" makes it difficult to ensure their security.

Their camps are now stable and under "full control," Ethiopia said, adding that food delivery there "is under way."

But communication and transport links to Tigray remain so challenging that the International Rescue Committee said it was still trying to confirm details around the killing of a colleague in the Hitsats refugee camp in Shire town, the base of aid operations.

Separately, the Danish Refugee Council said three staffers who worked as guards at a project site were killed last month. It was not clear where, but the group also supports the Eritrean refugees.

"Sadly, due to the lack of communications and ongoing insecurity in the region, it has not yet been possible to reach their families," the group said.

"Now, more than ever, it is a matter of urgency to cease all hostilities," the European Union's commissioner for crisis management, Janez Lenarcic, said while condemning the killings.

Tigray remains largely sealed off from the world five weeks after fighting erupted between Ethiopia's government and the Tigray one following a months-long power struggle. The governments regard each other as illegitimate, the result of months of friction since Abiy took office in 2018 and sidelined the once-dominant Tigray People's Liberation Front.

Thousands of people are thought to have been killed in the fighting that began Nov. 4 and has threatened to destabilize the Horn of Africa.

Ethiopia rejects "interference" as fighting reportedly continues, while the U.N. has pleaded for neutral, unfettered access. "Food rations for displaced people in Tigray have run out," the U.N. humanitarian office tweeted.

"Every day that we don't have access is a day lost. Every day that we don't have access is a day that increases the suffering of civilians," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters, and he referred questions to Ethiopia's side.

Ethiopia says it is responsible for ensuring the security of aid efforts — though the conflict and related ethnic tensions have left many Tigrayans wary of government forces.

On Friday, Ethiopia said it had begun delivering aid to areas in Tigray under its control, including Shire

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and 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," the prime minister's office said, noting only "sporadic gunfire" remained.

Some 6 million people live in Tigray. 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.

This week, Ethiopia 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 they were trying to go where they weren't allowed.

Meanwhile, nearly 50,000 Ethiopians have fled to Sudan and more are still arriving.

"The recent groups coming from areas deeper inside Tigray are arriving weak and exhausted, some reporting they spent two weeks on the run inside Ethiopia as they made their way to the border," U.N. refugee spokesman Babar Baloch told reporters. "They have told us harrowing accounts of being stopped by armed groups and robbed of their possessions."

Without access in Ethiopia, he said, "we are unable to verify these disturbing reports."

Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations contributed.

VIRUS TODAY: Health experts warn against holiday gatherings

The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— With some Americans now paying the price for what they did over Thanksgiving, health officials are warning people — begging them, even — not to make the same mistake during the Christmas and New Year's season.

— Gov. Andrew Cuomo has ended indoor dining indefinitely in New York City as coronavirus cases and hospitalizations climb. As of Monday, only takeout orders and outdoor dining will be allowed in one of the world's great cuisine capitals.

— The head of the Food and Drug Administration says his agency has told Pfizer that it "will rapidly work" to grant emergency use of its COVID-19 vaccine following a positive recommendation by government advisers.

THE NUMBERS: Deaths in the U.S. have climbed to almost 2,260 per day on average, about equal to the peak seen in mid-April. New cases are running at about 195,000 a day, based on a two-week rolling average, a 16% increase from the day before Thanksgiving, according to an Associated Press analysis.

QUOTABLE: "The social and economic impact of the pandemic is enormous and growing. No vaccine can undo the damage that has already been done." — U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, speaking Friday as the world faces its biggest recession in eight decades amid a rise in extreme poverty and a threat of famine.

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT: The pandemic is a "wake-up call" for governments to invest more in health care, said Adar Poonawalla, CEO of the Serum Institute of India, the world's largest manufacturer of vaccines.

ON THE HORIZON: Drugmakers GlaxoSmithKline and Sanofi said Friday that their potential COVID-19 vaccine won't be ready until late next year because they need to improve its effectiveness in older people.

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

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

By The Associated Press undefined

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A look at false and misleading claims circulating as the United States moves closer to approving a COVID-19 vaccine and distribution is underway in the United Kingdom. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

—
No evidence that COVID-19 vaccine results in sterilization

CLAIM: The head of research at Pfizer says the COVID-19 vaccine causes female sterilization because it contains a spike protein known as syncytin-1.

THE FACTS: The Pfizer and BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine does not contain the protein syncytin-1, which is important for the creation of placenta. The head of research at Pfizer made no such claim. Social media users are sharing a screenshot from an article titled "Head of Pfizer Research: Covid Vaccine is Female Sterilization" to claim the vaccine results in sterilization of women. Information in the article, carried by the blog "Health and Money News," is attributed to Michael Yeadon, a retired British doctor who left Pfizer nine years ago. The article says "the vaccine contains a spike protein called syncytin-1, vital for the formation of human placenta in women." It goes on to say "the vaccine works so that we form an immune response AGAINST the spike protein, we are also training the female body to attack syncytin-1, which could lead to infertility in women of an unspecified duration." Posts carrying the false information shared a petition filed by Yeadon and Wolfgang Wodarg, a German physician, to the European Medicines Agency that demanded that clinical trials of the Pfizer vaccine be stopped in the European Union until more safety and efficacy data can be provided. In the petition, the two acknowledge that there is no indication "whether antibodies against spike proteins of SARS viruses would also act like anti-Syncytin-1 antibodies." But they go on to say "if this were to be the case this would then also prevent the formation of a placenta which would result in vaccinated women essentially becoming infertile," the petition says. Yeadon said he is not saying there is a guaranteed problem between the vaccine and fertility, but asked if the vaccine makers would be sure there would not be a problem. Pfizer spokeswoman Jerica Pitts confirmed to The Associated Press that their vaccine candidate has not been found to cause infertility. "It has been incorrectly suggested that COVID-19 vaccines will cause infertility because of a shared amino acid sequence in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 and a placental protein," she said in an email. "The sequence, however, is too short to plausibly give rise to autoimmunity." Experts also say there is no evidence that the Pfizer vaccine would result in sterilization of women. Rebecca Dutch, chair of University of Kentucky's department of molecular and cellular biochemistry, said in an email that while syncytin-1 and the spike protein broadly share some features, they are quite different in the details that antibodies recognize. Aside from the fact that COVID-19's spike protein and syncytin-1 are viral fusion proteins that cause membrane fusion, they are not related at all, Dutch said. Additionally, the vaccine being developed by Moderna, like the one being developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, relies on messenger mRNA, which tells the body how to make the spike protein and trains the immune system to identify the real virus. They do not contain syncytin-1.

—Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

—
No evidence ivermectin is a miracle drug against COVID-19

CLAIM: The antiparasitic drug ivermectin "has a miraculous effectiveness that obliterates" the transmission of COVID-19 and will prevent people from getting sick.

THE FACTS: During a Senate hearing Tuesday, a group of doctors touted alternative COVID-19 treatments, including ivermectin and the anti-malaria medication hydroxychloroquine. Medical experts have cautioned against using either of those drugs to treat COVID-19. Studies have shown that hydroxychloroquine has no benefit against the coronavirus and can have serious side effects. There is no evidence ivermectin has been proven a safe or effective treatment against COVID-19. Yet Dr. Pierre Kory, a pulmonary and critical care specialist at Aurora St Luke's Medical Center in Milwaukee, described ivermectin as a "wonder drug" with immensely powerful antiviral and anti-inflammatory agents at the hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. Clips of Kory's comments on ivermectin during the hearing were shared widely on social media with one clip receiving more than 1 million views on YouTube.

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Ivermectin is approved in the U.S. in tablet form to treat parasitic worms as well as a topical solution to treat external parasites. The drug is also available for animals. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health have said that the drug is not approved for the prevention or treatment of COVID-19. According to the FDA, side effects for the drug include skin rash, nausea and vomiting. Dr. Amesh Adalja, an infectious disease expert at Johns Hopkins University, said most of the research around ivermectin at the moment is made up of anecdotes and studies that are not the gold standard in terms of how to use ivermectin. "We need to get much more data before we can say this is a definitive treatment," he said. "We would like to see more data before I recommend it to my patients." Kory told the AP that he stands by the comments he made at the hearing, saying that he was not trying to promote the drug but the data around it. In June, Australian researchers published the findings of a study that found ivermectin inhibited the replication of SARS-CoV-2 in a laboratory setting, which is not the same as testing the drug on humans or animals. Following the study, the FDA released a letter out of concern warning consumers not to self-medicate with ivermectin products intended for animals. "It is a far cry from an in vitro lab replication to helping humans," said Dr. Nasia Safdar, medical director of infection prevention at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Hospital. The discussion about the drug in the Senate hearing has some experts worried that Americans will start buying up ivermectin out of desperation. Despite a majority of evidence showing hydroxychloroquine is not an effective COVID-19 treatment, there was a rush on that drug earlier this year after President Donald Trump called it a cure. That depleted supply for those who needed the medication to treat lupus and other conditions. "If there is one thing we have learned in the pandemic is that we cannot jump the gun as far as determining or making assumptions about the effectiveness of potential agents," Safdar said.

—Beatrice Dupuy

First to get COVID-19 vaccine in UK were not 'crisis actors'

CLAIM: The first two recipients of the COVID-19 vaccine in Britain are "crisis actors." The image of the first person who was vaccinated on Dec. 8 was published in October, long before the vaccine was approved. The same nurse was photographed administering the vaccine to two people, in two locations 20 miles apart.

THE FACTS: After Margaret Keenan, 90, and William Shakespeare, 81, became the first two people to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech shot outside of a clinical trial, multiple false posts surfaced on social media suggesting that they were hired actors. Britain was the first country in the world to deliver the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to the general public. At University Hospital Coventry on Dec. 8, nurse May Parsons first administered the vaccine to Keenan, and then to Shakespeare. One Twitter post falsely claimed that an image of Keenan being vaccinated first appeared on CNN in October: "Excuse me, but how is the exact same person who's the 'first to get vaccinated' today...also in a CNN photo wearing the exact same clothes, in the exact same chair, and getting a shot back in October? Which one of these lying stories did you want us to pretend is true?" the post had over 6,000 retweets. The post compares two screenshots. One shows a BBC story dated Dec. 8 featuring an image of Keenan receiving the vaccine. The second screenshot shows an Oct. 22 CNN article about COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. The CNN article includes an image from a video that shows Keenan receiving her shot. But that is because when viewing some articles on CNN.com, a video player automatically plays the latest news reports related to the topic. CNN readers who navigated to the October article this week were shown the recent video from the Dec. 8 vaccination on the same page. Another post falsely claims that the nurse shown vaccinating Keenan and Shakespeare is not a real nurse because she was photographed in two different hospitals. "Busy nurse today working in Coventry and Stratford Upon Avon at the same time," read the post, which featured photos of Keenan and Shakespeare being vaccinated by the same woman. "Crisis actors. I'm really hoping people start to wake up because we are headed into a fight for our lives..." wrote one Facebook user who shared the post. In reality, Parsons vaccinated both Keenan and Shakespeare at University Hospital Coventry. It appears social media users misconstrued news reports noting that the hospital is 20 miles away from Stratford-

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Upon-Avon, the birthplace of dramatist and poet William Shakespeare.

Posts falsely claim COVID-19 virus has not yet been isolated

CLAIM: Scientists have not isolated the COVID-19 virus, so a vaccine is not possible.

THE FACTS: The virus was first isolated by Chinese authorities on Jan. 7, according to the World Health Organization. A virus is isolated when a specimen is collected from an infected patient to be grown and studied. Virus isolation is critical for diagnosis of diseases and in the development of vaccines. Following news that test results showed COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna to be more than 90 percent effective, Facebook and Instagram users began sharing a post suggesting that the COVID-19 virus was never isolated, making it impossible to create a vaccine. The posts say, "if no one has isolated the virus then what's in the vaccine??" over a photo that appears to show a doctor holding a vial of the COVID-19 vaccine. According to WHO officials, its office in China was first informed about the virus in December of 2019. The virus was then isolated on Jan. 7 by Chinese authorities. China later shared the genetic sequence of the virus on Jan. 11. The genetic sequence has allowed for diagnostic and vaccine development, said Glenn Randall, a professor in the department of microbiology at the University of Chicago. "The CDC isolated the virus from the first known infected US patient Jan. 20," Randall said in an email. "It then was grown and distributed to qualified research laboratories."

—Beatrice Dupuy

Dominion machines didn't 'flip' votes in Ware County, Georgia

CLAIM: Forensic tests completed on Dominion Voting Systems equipment show that dozens of votes cast for President Donald Trump in Ware County, Georgia, were "switched" or "flipped" to count for Joe Biden, who has been declared the winner in the presidential election.

THE FACTS: Social media users are misrepresenting a minor error in Ware County's initial vote tally as evidence of election fraud, even as local elections officials confirm nothing is awry. An election worker made a small tabulation error on election night involving 37 votes out of about 14,000 cast for president, according to Ware County Elections Supervisor Carlos Nelson. Election officials caught the error during an internal audit and corrected it during a full hand recount of paper ballots, Nelson said. A machine recount requested by Trump resulted in the same numbers as the hand recount, giving officials confidence in those results. There was never an issue with the Dominion technology used for vote tabulation, Nelson said. And the 37-vote shift did not influence the election results in Ware County, where Trump won with about 70% of votes. "There was no vote flipping," Nelson told the AP. "The system worked like it should." However, the advocacy group Voter GA misrepresented that reality in a Dec. 3 press release, saying it had "confirmed the Dominion Democracy Suite 5.5 system" caused 37 votes to be "swapped" from Trump to Biden in Ware County. Over the weekend, other social media users and conservative websites picked up on the false theory that a Dominion algorithm switched votes to Biden in Ware County. Jody Hice, a Republican congressman from Georgia, also spread the false information, tweeting that a "forensics examination" in Ware County found votes were switched. "This is one machine in one county in one state," read the tweet shared more than 17,000 times. "Did this happen elsewhere? We need to know! EXAMINE ALL THE MACHINES!" In fact, a forensic audit completed on a random sample of Dominion machines in Georgia found "no signs of cyber attacks or election hacking," according to the Georgia secretary of state's office. Voting machines that Ware County used during the 2020 election are secured in storage, according to Nelson, and couldn't have been accessed for the so-called "forensic examination" social media users have referenced. A statement released by the Cybersecurity & Infrastructure Security Agency, a federal agency that oversees U.S. election security, says there's no truth to claims that any voting system "deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised" in the 2020 election. Dominion also denies claims that it somehow used an algorithm to manipulate votes, saying the company's systems do not support "fractional" or weighted voting, and that it "is technologically impossible to 'see' votes being counted in real-time and/or to 'flip' them." Gabriel Sterling, a top official in the Georgia secretary of state's office,

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called Hice's post "flat out disinformation." "Ware County has accounted for all its equipment," he said in a tweet. "There are no vote flipping machines." A spokesperson for Hice did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

—Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in Seattle contributed this report.

School bus in Arizona held surplus office equipment, not voting machines

CLAIM: Photos show an abandoned school bus full of voting machines discovered in Buckeye, Arizona.

THE FACTS: The bus was full of office equipment purchased at a surplus sale, not voting machines, according to an investigation by the Buckeye Police Department and the Arizona attorney general's office. It was not abandoned; the driver of the bus was in the vehicle, according to an employee at the gas station where the photos were taken. On Dec. 3, an employee at a gas station off State Route 85 in the Phoenix suburb of Buckeye called the police about a suspicious-looking school bus full of large machinery parked on the property. The Buckeye Police Department arrived within 15 minutes, quickly determining that the bus contained printers bought at a surplus sale. "The guy was legitimate," an employee at the gas station confirmed in an interview with The Associated Press. "It was just printers and blank paper." However, a passerby who came across officials investigating the bus didn't get that memo. Instead, he took pictures of the bus and the equipment inside, posting the images on social media with false claims the bus was abandoned and harboring voting equipment. "This morning I stopped at the shell market on Buckeye road just east of hwy 85 for coffee!" the post read. "The place was crawling with police and investigators! Turns out the bus broke down in the early hours of the morning. No driver around but the police were called for suspicious vehicle. Turns out to have 2006 Nevada plates. They opened the back doors and the bus is completely packed with voter machines! WTF!!!" His post and several others containing the same photos quickly gained traction on Facebook, together amassing more than 10,000 shares over the weekend. Some social media users went even further with their claims, saying the bus held "missing AZ voter machines" and suggesting the photos be shared with Trump's legal team. The spread of misinformation prompted the Buckeye Police Department to publish a statement confirming the facts of the investigation. "Both the Buckeye Police Department and an investigator from the Attorney General's office responded to this 'suspicious bus,' the statement read. "It was determined the bus was full of office equipment purchased at a surplus sale, complete with invoices and receipts. The information in the original post is inaccurate. Thank you, as always, for your support." A spokesperson with the department told the AP that the equipment was purchased at a surplus sale out of Yuma County, Arizona. In response to inquiries about some of the bus windows being "blacked out," the spokesperson said that covering windows is "not uncommon for people who buy old school buses and convert them for other uses."

—Ali Swenson

Photo shows poll worker in Pennsylvania, not Georgia state senator

CLAIM: Image captures Democratic state Sen. Elena Parent of Atlanta counting votes.

THE FACTS: This week, social media users shared a screenshot from a video of a woman counting ballots at the Allegheny County elections warehouse on Nov. 7 and wrongly identified the poll worker as Parent. The posts came on the heels of a hearing last week, where Parent, a member of the state's Senate Judiciary Committee, countered claims of voting fraud in Georgia. The image of the poll worker was shared on Facebook and Twitter, with posts erroneously questioning why the state senator would be involved in vote counting. "State Senator Elena Parent of Georgia is seen here counting ballots in Pa? Not sure that's lawful Senator..." wrote a user on Facebook on Dec. 6. The Facebook user posted footage of the poll worker alongside a photo of Parent at the state Senate hearing to suggest they were the same person. The post had over 3,000 shares. "Elena Parent, Democratic Senator, why are you opening ballots and in counting rooms? I didn't know a senator's job description was to work in election counting rooms?" wrote another Twitter user on Dec. 5. Parent told the AP she was targeted on social media due to her role in the hearing. "These discredited claims are being made because I told the truth to Trump's legal

team during the election hearing: No 'evidence' was being presented to Georgia State Senators that was new and there is no evidence of widespread fraud in Georgia's November election," Parent told the AP in an email. "The allegations are false. I am not depicted in the video or stills," Parent explained. "I have not been to Pennsylvania anytime in 2020 and I have never counted ballots in a state or local election."

—Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

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Utah senator blocks national museums for Latinos, women

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A lone senator from Utah has singlehandedly blocked the bipartisan approval of two new national museums to honor American Latinos and women, arguing that "last thing we need is to further divide an already divided nation."

Republican Sen. Mike Lee objected Thursday to the creation of the two proposed Smithsonian museums, stalling two projects that have been in the making for decades and enjoy broad bipartisan support. Senate approval would have sent the legislation approving the Latino museum to President Donald Trump for his signature. The Senate was attempting to pass the measures by voice vote, which requires every senator's consent.

The dispute on the Senate floor came amid the impasse over a new coronavirus relief bill and highlighted the difficulty of achieving even widely supported goals in the polarized Congress. Lawmakers could still find a way to move forward on the creation of the museums, including by adding the bills to a must-pass spending package, but doing so could further complicate passage of that legislation.

Lee's move came after his Republican colleagues had spoken in favor of the efforts. Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who authored the legislation to create the National Museum of the American Latino with New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez, a Democrat, said just before Lee's objection that it was an effort 25 years in the making.

"Many Americans simply aren't aware of the vast contributions made by these men and women who have come before us, and one critical way we can right this wrong is by providing a home for their stories in the nation's capital," Cornyn said.

Objecting, Lee countered that point, saying the creation of museums that celebrate individual groups "weaponizes diversity."

"Especially at the end of such a fraying, fracturing year, Congress should not splinter one of the national institutional cornerstones of our distinct national identity," Lee said, adding that such national division "has turned our college campuses into grievance pageants and loosed Orwellian mobs to cancel anyone daring to express an original thought."

Lee similarly objected to legislation by Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, to create a national women's museum. Collins said it was a "sad moment" and that she had hoped the bills would move before the end of the year. She said she would not give up the fight.

"Surely, in a year where we are celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage, this is the time, this is the moment," Collins said.

Lee said he sees an exception for museums dedicated to American Indians and African Americans that already sit on the National Mall. He said those groups were "essentially written out of our national story and even had their own stories virtually erased" by the U.S. government, therefore it is "uniquely appropriate that the federal government provide the funding to recover and tell those communities' specific stories today at dedicated museums in the specific context of having been so long excluded."

Livid, Menendez pointed to a 1994 internal examination by the Smithsonian — the impetus for the effort

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to create the museum — that described “willful neglect” on the part of the institution toward Hispanic and Latino culture.

“We have been systematically excluded, not because this senator said so but because the Smithsonian itself said so,” Menendez said.

Despite bleak 2020, celebrities make effort to brighten year

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Yes, 2020 may seem like a complete fail with all the constant bad news and tragic moments. It’s been filled with gloom and doom(scrolling), but some celebrities and those inspired by them have tried to brighten a bleak year.

Some like singer Dolly Parton donated money to fight the coronavirus, John Krasinski put a spotlight on good news at a crucial time and DJ D-Nice played music to dance away your anxiousness about the unfolding pandemic.

Here are a few examples of those efforts to make 2020 a little better for others.

DOLLY’S VACCINE DONATION

In April, shortly after the coronavirus was declared a pandemic, country music icon Dolly Parton donated \$1 million toward researching the virus at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tennessee. The singer’s donation was used to help fund the development of Moderna’s vaccine, the second experimental COVID-19 drug to yield extraordinarily strong early results during trials. Parton didn’t stop there. She starred in Dolly Parton’s “Christmas on the Square,” playing an angel in the Netflix musical. She also put out new holiday music, “A Holly Dolly Christmas” with a same-titled TV special where she sang hymns, holiday pop classics and tunes from her new album, and shared her personal and faith-based Christmas memories. And if that wasn’t enough, she had time to help Cyndi Lauper’s annual concert to combat youth homelessness, too.

SERENADE TO NEIGHBORS

In the second week of France’s lockdown, Paris-based opera singer Stephane Senechal serenaded his neighbors with renditions of the French national anthem. He along with musicians — professional and amateur — sang from their balconies or windows to uplift neighbors. During France’s second lockdown, Senechal was back at his window, sharing his strong vocals a couple times a week.

CLUB QUARANTINE

During the pandemic’s early stage, DJ D-Nice created a virtual remedy for anyone dealing with the lockdown blues. He hosted Homeschool at Club Quarantine on his Instagram Live, where he spun popular tunes on the turntables at his home. His sets started with just a few hundred viewers — mainly friends — then blossomed to hundreds of thousands. An array of celebs even tuned in: from Rihanna and Janet Jackson to Jimmy Fallon and Mark Zuckerberg. Michelle Obama and Oprah Winfrey popped in for a listen, and even Stevie Wonder tried to use the “join” feature to be on screen with D-Nice and interact with him.

DANCING IN THE RAIN

Anthony Mmesoma Madu gained fame through a simple cellphone video of him performing the pirouette without shoes in the drizzling rain in Nigeria earlier this year. The 11-year-old Nigerian boy thought the footage would be used for a common film study session, but the video spread on social media thanks to his trainer, Daniel Ajala, who posted it. By the end of August, the video garnered more than 20 million views on social media including by actors Viola Davis and Cynthia Erivo. Impressed by his dancing, Erivo decided to sponsor Madu’s training and helped bring the video to the attention of the New York-based American Ballet Theater, who offered him a scholarship.

FASHION’S FRONT-LINE GEAR

When COVID-19 initially spread throughout the U.S., it resulted in a face mask shortage. Fashion designer Christian Siriano met the shortage with his own solution. After seeing the cases skyrocket, the “Project Runway” star tweeted New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo about doing his part. Siriano and his team pivoted

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from crafting gowns to making masks. He reassigned his 10 seamstresses in New York to produce thousands daily for health care workers on the frontlines. Separately, actors Nicole Ari Parker and her husband Boris Kodjoe gave away thousands of face masks to essential workers and first responders during the pandemic. Parker's apparel company, Gymwrap, turned its attention from making headbands to crafting masks for the couple's Help Our Heroes campaign. For every Gymwrap mask sold, they donate masks to frontline and essential workers who need them.

SING TO FATHER

In March, Israeli opera singer Irit Stark brought comfort to her father who had been quarantined in his apartment for two weeks in Tel Aviv. Stark along with her son stopped by her father's home for an improvised performance of "Habanera" from Georges Bizet's opera "Carmen." Stark's father looked on from his second-story balcony, and some neighbors were brought to tears. He called her performance "absolutely refreshing."

VERZUZ SERIES

A friendly competition between music producers Swizz Beatz and Timbaland on social media started off to entertain homebound fans during the pandemic. But their platform eventually evolved into a place where some of music's biggest stars could compete against each other in the same fashion. The two Grammy-winning legends created the "Verzuz" series, which faces off two musicians in a song-against-song battle on Instagram Live. The series has grown from a novel event to bridging music's past and present. Some of the most epic battles have included John Legend vs Alicia Keys, Erykah Badu vs. Jill Scott, Gladys Knight vs Patti LaBelle, Gucci Mane vs Jeezy, Brandy vs Monica and Snoop Dogg vs DMX. An April battle between Babyface vs. Teddy Riley ended abruptly due to audio issues but was completed another night.

GLORIA ESTEFAN HELPS HEALTH WORKERS

Gloria Estefan took action to help those in need. The singer and husband Emilio Estefan's restaurant Estefan Kitchen served up homemade meals for health care workers in Miami. For a month, the restaurant prepared, packaged and delivered to workers in what Gloria Estefan said was a "small way of thanking you." She also participated in a star-studded benefit virtual concert to honor nurses on Thanksgiving. The concert called Nurse Heroes Live, which was co-produced by Emilio Estefan, was a benefit that provided money for a variety of programs including scholarships for nurses and their children.

WALLER-BRIDGE'S SUIT

"Fleabag" creator and actor Phoebe Waller-Bridge auctioned off her Golden Globes suit for Australia bushfire relief. She placed her Ralph & Russo pantsuit up for auction, calling it an "incredible piece of art." The tuxedo was praised as one of the fashion hits of the red carpet. She shared the news in the press room after accepting her award for best actress in a comedy or musical television series. An anonymous buyer bought the suit for \$27,000.

SOME GOOD NEWS

John Krasinski wanted to create a place where people could smile. In late March, the actor tweeted to his 2.6 million-plus followers using the hashtag #SomeGoodNews, asking them to share feel-good stories that recently brought a smile to their face. He received thousands of heartwarming videos. His idea became so popular that Krasinski created a YouTube web series, "Some Good News," focusing on positive and inspiring stories. He produced eight free episodes including an "Office" reunion, a "Hamilton" performance, a virtual prom and online graduations. His channel garnered more than 2.5 million subscribers before he sold the web series to CBS.

ROSIE RAISES CASH FOR BROADWAY

Rosie O'Donnell brought her talk show "The Rosie O'Donnell Show" back for one night to raise more than \$600,000 for virus victims. O'Donnell hosted the March streaming special. It featured numerous appearances from Broadway, including Kristin Chenoweth, Gavin Creel and Gloria Estefan. The money went to The Actors Fund to help those in need during the pandemic.

ALL IN CHALLENGE

In April, Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio united to offer a fan the chance to win a walk-on part in Martin Scorsese's upcoming film, "Killers of the Flower Moon," — starring both actors — as part of Michael

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Rubin's online charity auction, the All In Challenge. The challenge coordinated offers by celebrities and athletes to raise funds to feed those in need during the pandemic. Beneficiaries included America's Food Fund, launched by DiCaprio and others to help ensure people have reliable access to food.

WAITITI'S CELEB READING

Filmmaker Taika Waititi led a celebrity read-along of Roald Dahl's novel "James and the Giant Peach." He teamed up with the Roald Dahl Story Company to raise money for Partners in Health, a medical and social justice organization fighting COVID-19 and supporting public health systems in vulnerable areas around the world. Those joining Waititi included Meryl Streep, Chris and Liam Hemsworth, Cate Blanchett, Ryan Reynolds, Mindy Kaling, Benedict Cumberbatch, Lupita Nyong'o, Billy Porter, Sarah Paulson, and Camilla, the Duchess of Cornwall, all reading and performing characters in the story from their homes.

Tokyo Games sponsors pay \$3.3 billion, but more still needed

By YURI KAGEYAMA and STEPHEN WADE Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Domestic sponsors already have contributed a record \$3.3 billion to help pay for the Tokyo Olympics. That's at least twice as much as any previous games.

But it's still not enough.

Now they're being asked to pay millions more to cover some of the soaring costs of the one-year postponement.

This comes as Japanese businesses are battered by the COVID-19 pandemic, raising doubts about re-investing in an Olympics that may be short on fans but long on pandemic-related rules to discourage tourists, sightseeing and spending.

"We are in the process of asking for additional sponsorship (payments) from our partners," organizing committee CEO Toshiro Muto said last week as he detailed why the postponement will cost organizers and Japanese taxpayers an extra \$2.8 billion. "The sponsors have expressed the willingness to contribute to the games next year. But they have not specified an amount."

None of the nearly 70 domestic sponsors is saying "no"— at least publicly — to an Olympics backed by Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga and driven by Japan's powerful advertising conglomerate Dentsu Inc., the official marketing agency for the Tokyo Olympics.

Dentsu helped land the Olympics, lined up the sponsors and stands to profit with the Olympics opening on July 23, 2021.

Little arm-twisting may be needed to keep sponsors on board. Harmony and consensus are valued in Japan, and this stretches to the corporate world. It's best illustrated by this Japanese saying: The nail that sticks up gets hammered down (Deru kugi wa utareru).

Pulling off the Olympics is viewed as a national project, a matter of honor and saving face. Doubts expressed behind the scenes are unlikely to trickle to the surface. Some sponsors might offer additional "in-kind" payments — contributions not made in cash — but there has been little open dissent and few contract details made public. In the end, any shortfall is likely to be made up by taxpayers.

Among the domestic sponsors is Japanese airline ANA, which posted losses of \$1.8 billion through the first half of the fiscal year, and travel agency JTB, with losses of \$750 million in the same period.

Also on board is the financial services company Nomura, both Narita and Haneda airports, food makers such as Kikkoman and Ajinomoto, and the SkyTree tower. The Japanese media, charged with covering the Olympics, also are on in droves including top newspapers Mainichi, Nikkei, Yomiuri and Asahi.

The Associated Press contacted a dozen sponsors and almost all refused to comment. A Tokyo Gas spokesperson said organizers had advised against speaking to the media.

One of few on-the-record comments came from instant noodle maker Nissin, which has registered 63% profit growth recently as people stuck at home turn to quick meals.

"We will continue with our preparation toward a safe and secure Olympics while paying heed to further developments," spokesman Tomonao Matsuo said. He said no decision had been made on the renewal.

The Tokyo Olympics have become very expensive. A University of Oxford study says they are the most

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costly Summer Games on record.

The official cost of putting on the Tokyo Olympics is \$12.6 billion in the latest budget. But a government audit last year said it was probably twice that much, and this was before the added cost of the delay. This is all public money except for \$5.6 billion from the privately funded organizing committee budget. Domestic sponsors make up about 60% of this income.

Polls in Japan show wavering support for holding the Olympics in the midst of a pandemic, which IOC President Thomas Bach tried to counter last month in Tokyo in meetings with organizers, politicians and sponsors. Though Japan has controlled the pandemic relatively well, new infections in Tokyo hit a one-day record of 602 on Thursday. About 2,400 deaths in the country have been attributed to COVID-19.

The squeeze on cash-strapped sponsors is only half the story. The other half revolves around Dentsu Inc. In essence, through unrivaled connections in business, politics and media, Dentsu helped land the Olympics and then profited by lining up billions in domestic sponsorships. These are distinct from the 14 long-term International Olympic Committee sponsors, which include three prominent Japanese brands — Panasonic, Toyota, and Bridgestone.

Analysts estimate Dentsu gets a 15% commission for signing up sponsors and possibly more if it handles the advertising work.

Dentsu officially came aboard with the organizing committee after the Switzerland-base IOC awarded Tokyo the Olympics in 2013. But Dentsu was involved before that.

Dentsu has acknowledged that it advised the Tokyo bid committee about possible “consultants” just weeks before the IOC vote in Buenos Aires, Argentina. One consultant Dentsu evaluated as “extremely competent” was the Singapore-based Black Tidings Co., which received about \$2 million from the Tokyo bid committee.

In an ongoing probe, French investigators believe the \$2 million was channeled through the Singapore consultant to buy the votes of IOC members. Tsunekazu Takeda, an IOC member and head of the Japanese Olympic Committee at the time, quit last year. He denied any wrongdoing but acknowledged signing off on the payment.

Similar bribery allegations surround the IOC’s awarding of the 2016 Olympic to Rio de Janeiro.

The IOC itself pays relatively little to hold the Olympics. It generates about three-quarters of its income from selling broadcast rights and relies on the host nation’s public coffers for the staging. The latest Tokyo organizing committee budget shows IOC contributions of \$1.3 billion. This is about 10% of the official costs but a far smaller percentage if outlays are being underestimated.

Dentsu declined to comment for this article, saying it was only a go-between for the companies and the Tokyo organizing committee.

The Japanese agency has longstanding relationships with the powers in world sports: FIFA, the governing body of world soccer; FINA, the world swim body; World Athletics, the track and field governing body.

Haruyuki Takahashi, a former Dentsu executive, is reported to have been paid millions by Tokyo’s bid committee for lobbying IOC members. He’s also a member of the Tokyo organizing committee’s executive board. IOC President Bach was asked in Tokyo about the reported payments of \$8 million to Takahashi.

“With regard to Mr. Takahashi, we received confirmation that there was no infringement on the IOC rules,” Bach said.

Dentsu returned to profitability after losses last year, which came mainly from its overseas operations, and has recorded 10 billion yen (\$96 million) profit for the first three quarters of this year.

“The agency clearly was, and still is, a media powerhouse,” said Bob Dorfman, a creative director and sports marketing analyst at Baker Street Advertising, who has worked at Dentsu. “My Dentsu pin was like a badge of honor. Wearing it earned me instant respect and influence.”

Jeff Kingston, who teaches Japanese politics at Temple University in Tokyo, described Dentsu as a king-maker. The company’s name is almost never mentioned in public by Tokyo Olympic officials, nor by top politicians or the IOC.

“Dentsu’s influence is pervasive from the newsroom to the prime minister’s office,” Kingston wrote in an

email. "It is a driving force to keep the Olympics on track despite the grave risks."

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Yuri Kageyama is on Twitter <https://twitter.com/yurikageyama>

Stephen Wade is on Twitter <https://twitter.com/StephenWadeAP>

Five years on, signs that Paris climate accord is working

By SETH BORENSTEIN and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

The forecast for global warming is looking a little less bleak in the long term, but not so rosy in the short term.

With numerous countries pledging to clean up their act and projected temperature rises now smaller than they once were, scientists and diplomats say the outlook for mid-to-late century is not as gloomy as it was when the historic 2015 Paris climate accord was signed.

But they caution that impacts of warming already are hitting Earth harder than scientists predicted. And they say the use of coal, oil and natural gas that fuels climate change is not dropping as much as needed, despite cheaper renewable energy.

On Saturday, exactly five years after the Paris climate agreement was struck, world leaders will gather virtually to both celebrate progress and chart the next steps.

The summit, hosted by the France, the United Kingdom and the UN, is designed to press leaders to ramp up their ambitions for the coming years and make good on past commitments.

More than 100 countries — and even more companies, states and cities — have pledged to achieve net zero carbon emissions by the middle of the century. Most of those promises aren't yet official targets of the Paris pact, which is geared toward goals by 2030.

The European Union, as a group the world's third largest emitter, Friday beefed up the continent's 2030 carbon cut targets from 40% to 55% of 1990 emission levels.

The United States government, which under President Barack Obama was instrumental in forging the accord, won't be present Saturday. The Trump administration pulled the U.S. out of the Paris agreement. President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to rejoin and put the U.S. on a track to stop adding more carbon to the atmosphere than can be removed by 2050.

The climate change landscape has changed in five years, and UN officials credit both cold, hard economics and a push from an idealistic younger generation. But Swedish teen environmentalist Greta Thunberg on Thursday blasted world leaders for setting "distant hypothetical targets" while "speeding in the wrong direction."

Carbon pollution barely rose globally from 2018 to 2019, then dropped 7% this year because of the pandemic, although it'll likely rise again. Wind and solar power costs dropped so fast that renewable energy is often cheaper than dirtier fossil fuels.

Such developments, however, are tempered by the reality that poor, sometimes low-lying countries already face existential threats from rising seas and other impacts of climate change.

"I'm alarmed by the growing evidence of accelerating climate destruction and injustice," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told The Associated Press in an email. "But I'm also optimistic by the growing coalition to achieve net zero emissions ... This is a tribute to the resilience of the Paris Agreement."

In 2015, Climate Action Tracker, a group of scientists who scrutinize emission pledges and translate them into temperature projections, said the world was on path to 3.6 degrees Celsius (6.5 degrees Fahrenheit) of warming since pre-industrial times — far beyond the Paris goals for limiting global temperature rise.

Now the group says the world is currently heading to 2.9 degrees of warming (5.2 Fahrenheit) — but if the 127 nations pledging to go to net-zero carbon emissions actually do it, warming would only be 2.1 degrees (3.8 degrees Fahrenheit). That's just shy of one of the Paris goals.

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"In the last five years, we moved from totally catastrophic to still-catastrophic climate change, which is the 2.9 degrees. But it is definitely much better than it used to look," said the tracker's Niklas Hohne, a German scientist with the New Climate Institute.

This year — with record Atlantic storms, wildfires in Australia, America and the Amazon, and Arctic warming — is on track to be in the top two or three warmest on record. After this year is finished, the 10 hottest years on record will all have been in the last 16 years.

Getting countries to turn promises into action remains a challenge, as does fixing the rules for the global trade in carbon emissions that will be key to reducing emissions efficiently and tackling inequality, U.N. chief Guterres said.

"Globally the top 1% of income earners emit more than twice the combined share of the poorest 50% of the global population," said U.N. Environment Programme policy and planning chief Ann Olhoff. For the world to reach the most stringent Paris goal, she said, "The richest 1%" would need to cut their emissions to one-thirtieth of what it is now.

But Christiana Figueres, the former U.N. climate chief who was a driving force at the Paris negotiations, said the undercurrents have shifted since 2015 — evidenced by the decisions of major investors, such as New York's public pension fund, to stop funding fossil fuel power.

"We're moving faster than we ever were and will continue to increase the speed," said Figueres. "So am I optimistic? Yes, by choice and by evidence."

Follow AP's climate coverage at <https://www.apnews.com/Climate>

On Twitter follow Seth Borenstein: @borenbears and Frank Jordans: @wirereporter .

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.

Another delay granted for Harvey Weinstein extradition

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — Convicted former movie producer Harvey Weinstein will remain in a New York prison for now after his lawyers and prosecutors agreed Friday to postpone efforts to send him to California to face sexual assault charges.

Weinstein appeared via video from prison before Erie County Court Judge Kenneth Case, who, because of the worsening pandemic, agreed to postpone Weinstein's extradition hearing until April 9.

Seated at a table at the maximum-security Wende Correctional Facility east of Buffalo, Weinstein, wearing a maroon polo shirt and face mask, spoke only briefly in response to a series of questions from the judge. He waved his hand and shook his head in objection to a news station's request to allow a television camera in the courtroom. The judge kept the camera out but allowed media to record the video proceedings.

"We're not looking for publicity, judge," Weinstein's attorney, Norman Effman, said.

Weinstein, 68, is serving a 23-year prison sentence after being convicted in New York City earlier this year on charges of rape and sexual assault against two women.

He faces similar charges involving five women in California, stemming from alleged assaults in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills from 2004 to 2013.

Because Weinstein is imprisoned in New York, a judge must sign off on transferring him to the custody of Los Angeles authorities to be tried there.

Effman cited Weinstein's health in supporting the continued delay of the extradition proceedings originally scheduled for August.

Weinstein survived a bout with the coronavirus in March at the prison. His lawyers said he experienced symptoms of COVID-19 again in mid-November but did not test positive for the disease at that time.

"Obviously, the pandemic has become worse rather than better," Effman said. "The issues pertaining to

transportation of someone from New York to California, and specifically with respect to Mr. Weinstein's own very serious health conditions, remains the same."

The Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office agreed to the first delay because of the pandemic as well.

Associated Press writer Michael Sisak contributed to this report.

In Arizona, Trump's false claims have torn open a GOP rift

By JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey spent much of Donald Trump's presidency trying not to provoke confrontation with the president or his fervent defenders. He almost made it through.

But when state law required Ducey to certify Arizona's presidential election results and sign off on Trump's defeat last week, four years of loyalty wasn't enough to protect him from the president. "Republicans will long remember!" Trump tweeted in anger at the governor.

Since then, the episode has spiraled into a public and politically damaging dispute between Ducey and influential Trump loyalists in his own party. Those who believe Trump's unproven claims of fraud and support his effort to undermine the will of voters say Ducey betrayed his party. His defenders have dismissed the critics as "nuts."

The rift may be a preview of the lasting political impact of Trump's campaign to subvert the election results. As the president's baseless claims gain traction with many GOP voters, Republican officeholders will be asked to take sides — back Trump or acknowledge the reality that Democrat Joe Biden won an election with no proven claims of widespread fraud. Their choices could have long-term consequences for their own political futures.

"He's in a no-win situation on many fronts," said Doug Cole, a Republican political consultant and adviser to past governors, of Ducey, who is widely believed to be eyeing a bid for Senate or even the White House.

Ducey is one of two GOP governors who have faced Trump backlash after certifying Biden's win in their states. GOP Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia also signed off on Trump's loss and refused to endorse Trump's attempts overturn the results. Trump has lashed out in response.

But many other GOP governors and lawmakers have dodged questions about whether Biden is the winner, with some suggesting they're waiting until Jan. 6, when Congress is due to approve the Electoral College vote.

It didn't take long for Ducey to find himself at the center of a schism. Trump called Ducey while the governor was in the process of signing the certification of Arizona's election results in front of television cameras. The governor quickly pulled his phone from his suit jacket as it played the presidential anthem, "Hail to the Chief," silenced it and set it on the table. He later returned Trump's call but declined to tell reporters what they discussed.

Hours after, Trump began his tirade against Ducey on Twitter, which seemed to open the floodgates for his staunchest supporters.

Kelli Ward, the firebrand chair of the Arizona Republican Party said she was "disgusted" with Ducey and addressed him on Twitter with an acronym meaning "shut the hell up."

Ducey clapped back in a news conference: "The feeling's mutual...Practice what you preach."

Ducey's advisers opened up on the governor's critics on Twitter. His chief of staff, Daniel Scarpinato, called Rep. Andy Biggs, an Arizona Republican who leads the conservative Freedom Caucus, "nuts" and "a permanent resident of Crazytown." Ducey's former chief of staff, Kirk Adams, asked a state lawmaker who's pushing to overturn the election results, "Have you considered counseling? It can help."

On Wednesday, Biggs published an online op-ed declaring, "Gov. Ducey Has Harmed the Republican Party's Cause."

Barrett Marson, a Republican political consultant, doesn't think Ducey's problem with the conservative GOP base will last.

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"Donald Trump's tweets come and go," said Marson, who previously worked for a Ducey-aligned political action committee to elect Republican legislators. "The governor has been a supporter of the president's agenda, his economic policies and so forth. This one hiccup won't fray that relationship going forward."

After avoiding Trump during the 2016 campaign, Ducey came to embrace him, even when Trump's policies were problematic for Ducey's allies in the Arizona business community. When Trump would muse about closing the southern border, a potentially devastating move in a state with strong economic ties with Mexico, Ducey backed him.

And as Arizona became a pivotal swing state in the 2020 contest and Trump made constant visits, Ducey was always by his side with effusive praise. The president returned the favor by touting Ducey's handling of the coronavirus, which he called a model for other states.

But he also warned just days before the election that his support would only go so far.

"We're doing well Doug? We're doing good?" Trump said at a rally in conservative Bullhead City. "I'm gonna be so angry at you Doug if I don't get there."

Since Biden's narrow victory in Arizona, Ducey has never lent credence to the conspiracy theories lobbed by the president, his attorneys and allies alleging fraud. Still, he waited three weeks before acknowledge Biden's victory, which he did only when pressed repeatedly by an interviewer. He's challenged those questioning the election results to present their evidence in court.

Ducey's estrangement from portions of his party base began earlier this year when he ordered the closure of businesses to preserve hospital capacity and protective gear as the spread of the coronavirus intensified. But he maintained the president's strong backing until now.

Barred by term limits from running again for governor, Ducey faces a crossroads in his political future. Observers in Arizona have long speculated on what he wants to do next. Trump's loss deprives him of the chance to seek an administration job in Washington.

He could run for the U.S. Senate against newly elected Democrat Mark Kelly but would almost certainly face a primary challenge from the right, especially if his relationship with Trump remains strained.

"Short term, we know that when the president sours on anyone ... there's a group of Republicans out there that, wherever the president goes, they will go," said Mike Noble, a Phoenix pollster and former GOP political consultant. "The question is going to be whether or not those folks stick to that."

Retailers urge shoppers to buy early amid shipping crunch

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO and JOSEPH PISANI AP Retail Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — A number of retailers, including J.C. Penney, Lowe's and Kohl's, are telling shoppers they need to place their online orders soon or else pay expedited shipping fees if they want to get their packages delivered in time for the holidays.

The earlier-than-usual deadlines come as more people turn to online shopping during the pandemic, creating a logjam for shipping companies as well as delivery delays. For some retailers, like H&M and Lego, the deadlines have passed.

Jason Goldberg, chief commerce strategy officer at Publicis Communications, part of Publicis Groupe SA, estimates that a majority of retailers have pushed up deadlines by at least a day or two, and about a quarter by at least a week. Meanwhile, behemoths like Walmart, Target and Best Buy haven't had to make big changes because they've already transformed their stores into shipping hubs for online orders. That makes them less dependent on major carriers' national networks.

"Everyone knows there is going to be a problem 10 days from now, but we just don't know how big it's going to be," said Rob Hahn, chief operating officer at Whitebox, a fulfillment service for retailers. "So everyone is being conservative, and everyone is trying to pull forward that purchase behavior."

The earlier deadlines could drive more last-minute shoppers into physical stores at a time when coronavirus cases are spiking. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says holiday shopping in crowded stores is a "higher risk" activity.

Ken Perkins of RetailMetrics, says he doesn't expect "a massive crush," but he believes customer traf-

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fic will be heavier than what stores have seen so far during the season. Shoppers will also turn more to curbside pickup in the days before Christmas.

The warnings on earlier deadlines are needed, said Moody's Charlie O'Shea, because if an item arrives late, frustrated shoppers blame the retailer — not the shipping company. And retailers can ill-afford to lose business at a time when many people have already cut back on their spending.

Robin Gorman Newman, a theater producer from Great Neck, New York, ordered a few gifts online during Thanksgiving weekend, including an eyeglass case from Anthropologie. She just learned that the eyeglass case was out of stock and needed to be back-ordered.

"I had gifts earmarked for particular people," Newman said. Now, she says, "I will be happy if everyone gets their gifts this month." But she said she won't be going back to stores to pick up goods as virus cases surge.

Retailers' shipping networks were already strained when shoppers dramatically shifted their spending online during the early part of the pandemic — a savior for many who were afraid of going out.

But now, with the pandemic getting worse and everyone shopping for the holidays at the same time, those networks are strained even further. Online volume is expected to triple compared to last year's holiday season. Satish Jindel, president of ShipMatrix, which analyzes shipping package data, predicts 7 million packages a day could face delays from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

Goldberg says the shipping problem is so acute that even Amazon, which has its own shipping network, could run out of capacity, sending shoppers to places like eBay. Amazon hasn't released a holiday shipping deadline yet, but said in a statement that it will be delivering packages up until Christmas Eve.

Jindel says that the three major carriers — FedEx, UPS and the U.S. Postal Service — have been holding up fairly well given the huge spike in volume, although on-time delivery declined the final week of November. Collectively, the on-time delivery was 94.2% during the Nov. 22 to Nov. 28 period, Jindel says.

However, the U.S. Postal Service has been taking packages that UPS and FedEx won't take and has seen a decrease in on-time delivery, says Convey Inc., which specializes in delivery tracking.

Carriers have been slapping surcharges and putting limits on how many packages retailers can ship each day. According to a report in the Wall Street Journal last week, UPS notified drivers across the U.S. to stop picking up packages at six retailers, including L.L. Bean, Hot Topic, Newegg and Macy's last week.

"UPS continues to work closely with our largest customers to steer volume to capacity and ensure the UPS network is reliable for all customers," UPS said in a statement to The Associated Press late last week. "This collaboration includes specific capacity allocations last weekend and throughout the holiday season."

The holiday shipping crunch has been particularly hard on small retailers that badly need the last two weeks before Christmas to make up for a loss of sales when they were forced to close at the beginning of the pandemic. But online-only small businesses are also feeling the strain.

Lisa Pawlik is CEO and co-founder of a recently launched Austin, Texas-based startup VoChill, which makes personal wine glass chillers. She says her distributor, inundated with a backlog of orders, told her to set the ordering deadline for Dec. 11. She plans to do her own packing and shipping of the items with her family's help.

"We are a new brand, and I am not going to give up my customers' experience," Pawlik said.

Sara Skirboll, a shopping expert at deals site RetailMeNot, said some of the delays are happening at warehouses, where it's taking longer to get orders out the door to be shipped. Shoppers should read the fine print, she said, because even if a store is promising two-day shipping, it could take days before it leaves the warehouse.

Compounding the problem is the fact that there is less space available on tractor trailers that move goods from warehouses to distribution centers.

Isaac Larian, CEO of MGA Entertainment, the maker of the popular LOL dolls, says he had 200 containers, or at least \$15 million worth of merchandise, stuck at the Los Angeles port for three weeks.

The toys have since been cleared, but he says, "it's too late for Christmas."

This story has been corrected to show that the CEO of VoChill is Lisa Pawlik, not Pawlic.

AP ROAD TRIP: An immigrant's struggles to survive in Vegas

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The casino has been closed for months. The hotel rooms are empty. Out front, the three-story sign that once beckoned to gamblers with \$1.99 margaritas now advertises a food bank in the parking lot every Thursday.

"8 a.m. until all food is distributed," says the sign at the Fiesta Henderson.

It wasn't supposed to be like this in America.

"I came here to conquer the United States, to say 'This is the place where I want to be, where I'll build my empire,'" says Norma Flores, a Mexican immigrant who spent two decades working as a waitress at the Fiesta before COVID-19 descended and she lost her job.

Right now, her empire is a concrete block house crowded with six grandchildren, most of them doing school online. She dreads when she overhears a teacher asking what students had for their lunches and snacks. She rarely has enough food for both.

To be an immigrant in Las Vegas is to see the coronavirus economy at its worst.

Visitors to the area plummeted by more than 90 percent in a little over a month as the pandemic spread. The state's unemployment rocketed to 28 percent, the worst in the nation and a level not seen even during the Great Depression. Every day, thousands of cars lined up at emergency food distribution centers, the lines stretching for block after block, past pawn shops and casinos and law offices.

Across the U.S., immigrant workers suffered disproportionately after COVID-19 struck. But their outsized presence in Las Vegas' hospitality industry, where they form the working-class backbone of countless hotels, casinos and restaurants, meant a special kind of devastation.

At night, Flores often lies awake, worrying about paying the rent, buying gas, getting enough food. Like millions of other people across the U.S., her unemployment benefits run out the day after Christmas. She's terrified her family could end up homeless.

"I'm scared I might wake up tomorrow and I won't have anything," she says, sitting outside her little house.

A block away, traffic rumbled past on the six-lane road that cuts through town. "I'm scared to be there, you know?"

Three of us -- a reporter, a photographer and a videographer -- came to Vegas on The Associated Press' road trip across America, a journey that has taken us to nearly a dozen states, talking to people who are wrestling with the seismic shifts of 2020.

A single line in a newspaper article brought us here: More than half the members of Las Vegas' powerful Culinary Workers Union were still unemployed more than eight months into the pandemic. Most of its members are racial minorities or immigrants.

For decades, the working-class neighborhoods that circle Las Vegas called out to foreigners. Beckoned by an ever-growing city with a seemingly endless appetite for workers, they came from Ethiopia and India and the Philippines and dozens of other countries. But they mostly came from Latin America, especially Mexico.

They changed Las Vegas, and Nevada.

One in five of the state's residents are immigrants, according to the American Immigration Council, and one in six are native-born citizens with at least one immigrant parent.

Now those working-class immigrant neighborhoods, where languages spill over one another in countless dirt yards, are home to armies of unemployed housekeepers and cocktail waitresses and small business owners.

There's the Filipino hairdresser let go by his salon and desperate for money to get his diabetes medicine, and the Cambodian who had to shut down his little restaurant. There's the Honduran housekeeper running out of money.

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There's Olimka Luna, who came from a small Mexican city and spent 20 years in a Las Vegas casino, first as a dishwasher and then as a cook, before being laid off in March and fired in May. Today, her focus is purely on her house, and the \$1,300 monthly mortgage payment.

"We are not going to lose our house," she says. Then she repeats herself: "We are strong and we are not going to lose it."

And there's Norma Flores.

Flores, 54, hasn't worked since March, when Nevada's casinos were ordered closed as the pandemic spread. While many casinos reopened in June, hers did not. She gets \$322 a week in unemployment after taxes, but is helping support a son, a daughter and six grandchildren who moved in with her as the state's economy collapsed.

Her life has become an ongoing battle with the mathematics of personal finance for the impoverished. Is there enough money for the \$831 rent? How late will the landlord allow her to be? How much food is left in the refrigerator? Can she afford some sort of treat for the kids?

She calculates to the dollar how much money she has left until the next check arrives.

But sometimes, her heart makes that calculation.

On a chilly autumn afternoon, as Flores stands at a supermarket cash register, the cashier asks if she wanted to donate to a food bank run out of a nearby church.

"Not today," Flores said.

She reaches into her big red purse, pulls a handful of notes, and carefully counts out \$17 for her groceries. Then she looks at what she has left -- and hands the cashier \$1 for the food bank.

It's a kind of payback -- she often gets help from that charity.

"I'm going to help them, because other people need them too," she says.

Las Vegas sells itself on fantasies of wealth, luxury and sex, and even the most cynical first-time visitor can come here expecting at least a hint of James Bond playing baccarat in Monte Carlo.

That would be a mistake.

Vegas feels more like a mixture of endless mall and Disney-ish resort set to the music of amplified slot machines. Gamblers wear jeans and shorts, not tuxedos.

A rumpled reporter fits right in.

"Loosest slots in Vegas!" says a sign on one casino window. "20 percent off for locals," says a billboard for a marijuana dispensary. "Free vibe with every purchase!" says another billboard, for a sex shop.

But this less-than-glamorous world has lifted tens of thousands of people into the middle class, particularly those who manage to get a union job.

The average member of the Culinary Union earns \$25 an hour when benefits are included.

For a time, that middle-class life was nearly in Flores' grasp.

Thirty years ago, she left factory work in a small Mexican city to follow her then-husband to the U.S. She found a job in the Henderson casino, first working as a server in a cafe and later in a buffet restaurant. Eventually, they had six children.

But then her marriage unraveled. "I found out a lot of bad things," she says, and leaves it at that. They split up 13 years ago.

She bought a house, though that didn't last very long. After being shifted to a job where she no longer got tips, she couldn't afford the mortgage.

She can still tell you the exact monthly amount: \$1,935.

Seven years ago, she moved into a one-story rental made of concrete blocks and covered with peeling white paint.

In March, as the pandemic spread, she was laid off. Then, in May, she was fired along with many of her co-workers. Most of her children, working in casinos across the area, also lost their jobs.

The house looks like a bunker. The blinds are nearly always drawn. The sound of traffic is unrelenting. The clothes washer is outside, covered by an overhang just off the side door, and shelves are piled with

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the children's clothes.

She doesn't let the kids wander far so they play in the dirt back yard, which is partially fenced in with old bed springs.

The hotel-casino where she long worked as a waitress, a mid-market complex that advertises itself as being "the best value for your gaming dollar," is just a couple minutes down the street.

But that doesn't matter anymore.

"I feel so much pain to have lost my job, to not be able to pay my bills like I used to," she says. "I feel powerless."

Quietly, she began to cry: "We don't want to depend on unemployment. We want to be called back to work."

Things have gotten better in Las Vegas since the springtime shutdowns. Casinos were allowed to reopen in June, though some remain shut because of the lack of business. Visitors to the city reached nearly 1.9 million in October, far higher than in April but still down 49% from a year earlier.

Unemployment in the Las Vegas region stood at 14.8% in September, the highest in the nation for large metropolitan areas and nearly twice the national average.

Still, to a newcomer there seems to be plenty of people at the casinos, even if the occasional fishnet-stocking-clad dealer is doing nothing more than staring into the distance. And there are always people walking along the Strip.

But to the initiated, the city is deathly quiet.

Las Vegas thrives on crowds, with people jammed shoulder-to-shoulder from the sidewalks to casinos to restaurants. Before COVID, eating at one of the city's best-known buffets, the 600-seat Bacchanal at Caesars Palace, could easily mean waiting an hour or more.

These days, the Bacchanal is closed and across the city, hotel rooms that normally go for \$300 a night can now be had for \$90.

Those discounted rooms are a bad sign for people like Flores. There aren't enough gamblers to get them back to work. And though she has no great love of the tourists - "I don't think they know how hard we work" -- she yearns for their return.

"If they don't come to play," she says, "we don't have money."

Pollstar: Live events industry lost \$30B due to pandemic

By MESFIN FEKADU AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Due to the global coronavirus pandemic, concert trade publication Pollstar puts the total lost revenue for the live events industry in 2020 at more than \$30 billion.

Pollstar on Friday released its year-end report, explaining that the live events industry should have hit a record-setting \$12.2 billion this year, but instead it incurred \$9.7 billion in losses. The company added that the projected \$30 billion figure in losses includes "unreported events, ancillary revenues, including sponsorships, ticketing, concessions, merch, transportation, restaurants, hotels, and other economic activity tied to the live events." Those losses accounted for more than \$8 billion.

In March hundreds of artists announced that their current or upcoming tours would need to be postponed or canceled because of the pandemic. While a small number of performers have played drive-in concerts and others have held digital concerts, the majority of artists have not played live in 2020.

With just a few months on the road, Elton John's "Farewell Yellow Brick Road Tour" tops the year's Top 100 Worldwide Tours list with \$87.1 million grossed between Nov. 30 through March 7. John's tour ranked No. 2 last year with \$212 million grossed.

Celine Dion came in second this year with \$71.2 million, followed by Trans-Siberian Orchestra (\$58.2 million), U2 (\$52.1 million) and Queen + Adam Lambert (\$44.6 million). Post Malone, Eagles, Jonas Brothers, Dead & Company and Andrea Bocelli rounded out the Top 10.

"It's been an extraordinarily difficult year for the events industry, which has been disproportionately impacted by the coronavirus. As painful as it is to chronicle the adversity and loss our industry and many of our colleagues faced, we understand it is a critical undertaking toward facilitating our recovery, which is thankfully on the horizon," Ray Waddell, president of Oak View Group's Media & Conferences Division, which oversees Pollstar and VenuesNow, said in a statement Friday.

"With vaccines, better testing, new safety and sanitization protocols, smart ticketing and other innovations, the live industry will be ramping up in the coming months, and we're sure that at this time next year we'll have a very different story to tell."

EXPLAINER: What's in store when the Electoral College meets

By JESSICA GRESKO and MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Voters cast their ballots for president more than a month ago, but the votes that officially matter will be cast Monday. That's when the Electoral College meets.

The Constitution gives the electors the power to choose the president, and when all the votes are counted Monday, President-elect Joe Biden is expected to have 306 electoral votes, more than the 270 needed to elect a president, to 232 votes for President Donald Trump.

The spotlight on the process is even greater this year because Trump has refused to concede the election and continued to make baseless allegations of fraud. That makes the meeting of the Electoral College another solid, undeniable step toward Inauguration Day on Jan. 20, when Biden will be sworn in as president.

Some questions and answers about the Electoral College:

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

In drafting the Constitution, America's founders struggled with how the new nation should choose its leader and ultimately created the Electoral College system. It was a compromise between electing the president by popular vote and having Congress choose the president.

Under the Constitution, states get a number of electors equal to their total number of seats in Congress: two senators plus however many members the state has in the House of Representatives. With the exception of Maine and Nebraska, states award all of their electoral college votes to the winner of the popular vote in their state.

WHAT'S THE BEEF WITH THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE?

The Electoral College has been the subject of criticism for more than two centuries. One often-repeated gripe: the person who wins the popular vote can nonetheless lose the presidential election. That happened twice in the last two decades — in 2000 with the election of George W. Bush and in 2016 when Donald Trump lost the popular vote to Hillary Clinton by nearly 3 million votes.

Biden, for his part, won the popular vote and will end up with 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232. Trump was the fifth presidential candidate in American history to have lost the popular vote but won in the Electoral College.

WHO ARE THE ELECTORS?

Presidential electors typically are elected officials, political hopefuls or longtime party loyalists.

This year, they include South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, a Trump elector who could be a 2024 Republican presidential candidate, and Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams, her party's 2018 nominee for governor and a key player in Biden's win in the state.

Among others are 93-year-old Paul "Pete" McCloskey, a Biden elector who is a former Republican congressman who challenged Richard Nixon for the 1972 GOP presidential nomination on a platform opposing the Vietnam War; Floridian Maximo Alvarez, an immigrant from Cuba who worried in his Republican convention speech that anarchy and communism would overrun Biden's America, and Muhammad Abdurrahman, a Minnesotan who tried to cast his electoral vote for Sen. Bernie Sanders instead of Hillary Clinton in 2016.

WHERE DO THEY MEET AND WHAT DO THEY DO?

The Electoral College doesn't meet in one place. Instead, each state's electors and the electors for the District of Columbia meet in a place chosen by their legislature, usually the state capitol.

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The election is low tech. Electors cast their votes by paper ballot: one ballot for president and one for vice president. The votes get counted and the electors sign six certificates with the results. Each certificate gets paired with a certificate from the governor detailing the state's vote totals.

Those six packets then get mailed to various people specified by law. The most important copy, though, gets sent to the president of the Senate, the current vice president. This is the copy that will be officially counted later.

DO ELECTORS HAVE TO VOTE FOR THE CANDIDATE WHO WON THEIR STATE?

In 32 states and the District of Columbia, laws require electors to vote for the popular-vote winner. The Supreme Court unanimously upheld this arrangement in July. Electors almost always vote for the state winner anyway, because they generally are devoted to their political party.

A bit of an exception happened in 2016 when 10 electors tried to vote for other candidates. Those included people pledged to support Clinton who decided not to back her in a futile bid to get Republican electors to abandon Trump and choose someone else as president.

Abdurrahman, the Minnesotan who wanted to vote for Sanders, was replaced as an elector. This year, he has said he will cast his vote for Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, according to the Minneapolis Star-Tribune.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Once the electoral votes are cast, they are sent to Congress, where both houses will convene on Jan. 6 for a session presided over by Vice President Mike Pence. The envelopes from each state and the District of Columbia will be opened and the votes tallied.

If at least one member of each house objects in writing to some electoral votes, the House and Senate meet separately to debate the issue. Both houses must vote to sustain the objection for it to matter, and the Democratic-led House is unlikely to go along with any objections to votes for Biden. Otherwise, the votes get counted as intended by the states.

And then there's one more step: inauguration.

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 U.N. ambassador and 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 administrations 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

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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 im-

mediacy 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.

Brexit sends ripples of uncertainty down France's coast

By JEFFREY SCHAEFFER and THOMAS ADAMSON undefined

BOULOGNE-SUR-MER, France (AP) — Long lines of trucks carrying stockpiles for British companies jam the highways leading to France's northern port of Calais, while in the coastal town of Boulogne-sur-Mer, French fishermen pull in their lines and fear that battles over fishing rights will soon erupt.

Up and down France's northern coast, the uncertainty of Brexit is causing ripples of chaos and frustration.

With just three weeks left to go before Britain is completely out of the European Union, no one knows if there will be a post-Brexit trade deal or a chaotic economic rupture between the two sides. Britain left the EU on Jan. 31 but remains in its massive market until the end of the year. That means, barring a trade agreement, New Year's Day could herald quite a hangover for businesses on both sides of the English Channel.

For Mathieu Pinto, a 28-year-old French fisherman, a no-deal Brexit will disastrously impact his right to fish in British waters, where he says he makes "between 70% and 80%" of his yearly income.

Pinto is based in France's coastal town of Boulogne, home to Europe's largest fish-processing center. He had just returned from a night fishing sea-snails or whelk when he spoke to The Associated Press. He worries that his days of making a living in the family business could be numbered.

"(A no-deal Brexit) will already impact us hugely. And then we are going to have to share our French waters with foreigners as well," he said.

That would mean fighting for fish in French maritime territory alongside northern EU neighbors from the Netherlands and Belgium, which he says could create an impossibly tense situation. There is simply not enough catch to go around without access to UK waters, he said.

"There will be war. Let's not hide it. There will be war," Pinto said.

Ireland and Denmark are also among those directly affected by the potential closing off of U.K. waters.

Under current EU rules, EU countries can currently fish in British maritime territory, as they have for decades. But the overexploitation of these rules — and the seas — have meant that fish numbers have declined sharply. And so, too, did British fisherman. Saving British waters for U.K. fishermen became a rallying cry, fueling the Brexit vote for the U.K. to leave the bloc. Since then, fishing rules have remained a major issue at the heart of the Brexit impasse.

Meanwhile in Calais, trails of truck exhaust fumes on the roadside illustrate the path to Brexit is, literally, jammed with uncertainty.

And that has caused British companies to stockpile goods, leading to a huge increase in the number of trucks heading to Calais' port and the undersea tunnel to Britain in the past few weeks. French police are delaying hundreds of trucks at the roadside to cope with the soaring traffic flow. It's a perfect storm on the highways, coming just as a coronavirus-related tourism slump has reduced the number of vehicle-carrying ferries crossing the English Channel.

Sebastien Rivera, a top regional official for the National Road Transport Federation, an industry group that represents some 350 companies that send their goods to the U.K., blasted the situation as "catastrophic."

"For about the last three weeks, we've seen an increase in the flow of traffic toward Great Britain due to stockpiling. The platforms, whether it's the port or the (Euro)tunnel, don't have capacity to absorb this increase in traffic," he said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said this week there's a "strong possibility" that negotiations on a new economic relationship with the EU to take effect Jan. 1 will fail. He and European Commission Presi-

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dent Ursula von der Leyen have set a Sunday deadline to decide whether to keep talking or prepare for a no-deal break.

A failure to secure a trade deal would mean tariffs and other barriers going up 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 27-nation bloc.

Rivera said the sheer uncertainty of what trade rules are going to be has caused enormous stress and additional costs to the transport industry, not to mention the hours of wasted time that truck drivers have spent stuck in traffic jams.

"It's not right that we're three weeks away and we don't have answers," he said.

This story corrects the title for Sebastien Rivera to a top regional official of the National Road Transport Federation, not the top official for the national group.

Follow all AP stories on Brexit developments at <https://apnews.com/hub/Brexit>.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 12, the 347th day of 2020. There are 19 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 12, 2000, George W. Bush became president-elect as a divided U.S. Supreme Court reversed a state court decision for recounts in Florida's contested election.

On this date:

In 1787, Pennsylvania became the second state to ratify the U.S. Constitution.

In 1870, Joseph H. Rainey of South Carolina became the first Black lawmaker sworn into the U.S. House of Representatives.

In 1913, authorities in Florence, Italy, announced that the "Mona Lisa," stolen from the Louvre Museum in Paris in 1911, had been recovered.

In 1917, during World War I, a train carrying some 1,000 French troops from the Italian front derailed while descending a steep hill in Modane (moh-DAN'); at least half of the soldiers were killed in France's greatest rail disaster. Father Edward Flanagan founded Boys Town outside Omaha, Nebraska.

In 1974, "The Godfather, Part II," a Paramount Pictures release, premiered in New York.

In 1977, the dance movie "Saturday Night Fever," starring John Travolta, premiered in New York.

In 1985, 248 American soldiers and eight crew members were killed when an Arrow Air charter crashed after takeoff from Gander, Newfoundland.

In 1995, by three votes, the Senate killed a constitutional amendment giving Congress authority to outlaw flag burning and other forms of desecration against Old Glory.

In 1997, Ilich Ramirez Sanchez, the international terrorist known as "Carlos the Jackal," went on trial in Paris on charges of killing two French investigators and a Lebanese national. (Ramirez was convicted and is serving a life prison sentence.)

In 2000, the Marine Corps grounded all eight of its high-tech MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft following a fiery crash in North Carolina that killed four Marines. (The Osprey program was revived by the Pentagon in 2005.)

In 2012, North Koreans danced in the streets of their capital, Pyongyang, after the regime of Kim Jong Un succeeded in firing a long-range rocket in defiance of international warnings.

In 2018, Michael Cohen, President Donald Trump's one-time fixer, was sentenced to three years in prison for crimes that included arranging the payment of hush money to conceal Trump's alleged sexual affairs.

Ten years ago: An explosives-packed minibus blew up at the entrance of a joint NATO-Afghan base in southern Afghanistan, killing six American troops and two Afghan soldiers as they prepared to head out

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on patrol. The inflatable roof of the Minneapolis Metrodome collapsed following a snowstorm that had dumped 17 inches on the city. (The NFL was forced to shift an already rescheduled game between the Minnesota Vikings and New York Giants to Detroit's Ford Field.)

Five years ago: Nearly 200 nations meeting in Paris adopted the first global pact to fight climate change, calling on the world to collectively cut and then eliminate greenhouse gas pollution but imposing no sanctions on countries that didn't do so. Women across Saudi Arabia marked a historic milestone, both voting and running as candidates in government elections for the first time; voters elected 20 women for local government seats. Fire at a Russian home for mentally ill patients killed 23 men. Derrick Henry became the second Alabama player to receive the Heisman Trophy.

One year ago: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson led his Conservative Party to a landslide victory in a general election that was dominated by Brexit, offering Johnson a new mandate to take his country out of the European Union. Danny Aiello, the blue-collar character actor whose movies included "Moonstruck" and "Do the Right Thing," died at the age of 86.

Today's Birthdays: Former TV host Bob Barker is 97. Basketball Hall of Famer Bob Pettit is 88. Singer Connie Francis is 83. Singer Dionne Warwick is 80. Rock singer-musician Dickey Betts is 77. Hall of Fame race car driver Emerson Fittipaldi is 74. Actor Wings Hauser is 73. Actor Bill Nighy (ny) is 71. Actor Duane Chase (Film: "The Sound of Music") is 70. Country singer LaCosta is 70. Gymnast-turned-actor Cathy Rigby is 68. Author Lorna Landvik is 66. Singer-musician Sheila E. is 63. Actor Sheree J. Wilson is 62. Pop singer Daniel O'Donnell is 59. International Tennis Hall of Famer Tracy Austin is 58. Rock musician Eric Schenkman (Spin Doctors) is 57. Author Sophie Kinsella is 51. News anchor Maggie Rodriguez is 51. Actor Jennifer Connelly is 50. Actor Madchen Amick is 50. Actor Regina Hall is 50. Country singer Hank Williams III is 48. Actor Mayim Bialik is 45. Model Bridget Hall is 43. Actor Lucas Hedges is 24. Actor Sky Katz is 16.