

Groton Daily Independent

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Monday, Dec. 14

Junior High GBB at Warner (7th at 5:30 p.m., 8th at 6:30 p.m.)
7 p.m: School Board meeting at Groton Area Elementary Commons

Tuesday, Dec. 15

Junior High GBB at Waubay (7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m.)

Thursday, Dec. 17

Double Header Basketball at Hamlin (7th Grade at 4 p.m., 8th grade at 5 p.m., Boys C and Girls JV at 4 p.m., JV Boys at 6:30 p.m., Varsity Girls at 6:30 p.m., Varsity Boys to follow.
5 p.m.: Wrestling at Groton Area

Friday, Dec. 18

Junior High GBB hosting Redfield (7th at 5 p.m, 8th at 6 p.m.)

Saturday, Dec. 19

Wrestling at Sioux Valley, 10 a.m.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

The service of
Robert "Bob" Groebelinghoff
Monday, Dec. 14, 10:30 a.m.
St. Elizabeth Ann Seton
Catholic Church



GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

School Board Meeting
Monday, Dec. 14, 2020



7 p.m.
Groton Area Elementary Commons Area

Hc  **DH BB**



Double Header at Hamlin
Thursday, Dec. 17
Varsity Girls at 6:30 p.m.
Varsity Boys to Follow



ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN
PRESCHOOL
Christmas Program
Monday, Dec. 21, 2020
10:30 a.m.



ST. JOHN'S LUTHERAN
PRESCHOOL
Christmas Program
Monday, Dec. 21, 2020
3:00 p.m.



Elementary
Christmas Concert
Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020
10 a.m.
Livestreamed Only
GDILIVE.COM
AND LOCALLY ON GDIRADIO AT 89.3 FM

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

December 14, 2020 – 7:00 PM – Groton Area Elementary Commons

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

1. Approval of minutes of November 9, 2020 school board meeting as drafted or amended.
2. Approval of November 2020 Financial Report, Agency Accounts, and Investments.
3. Approval of November 2020 Transportation Report
4. Approval of November 2020 School Lunch Report
5. Acknowledge receipt of public school exemption #21-15.
6. Approve open enrollment #21-18.

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Continued discussion and necessary action on District response to COVID-19.
 - a. Review and Discuss Quarantine Protocols
 - b. FFCRA Leave Entitlement
 - c. Winter Sports
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Discuss request from Langford Area School District for football cooperative beginning fall 2021.
2. Discuss preliminary 2021-2022 school calendar.
3. Executive Session pursuant SDCL1-25-2(4) for negotiations and SDCL1-25-2(1) for personnel.
4. Approve resignation/retirement of Kristi Anderson at end of the 2020-2021 school year.
5. Approve addenda to 2020-2021 negotiated agreements.
 - a. GTA Negotiated Agreement
 - b. GASA Negotiated Agreement
 - c. Administrative Staff Negotiated Agreement
6. Contract amendments for salaried auxiliary staff.
 - a. Mike Nehls
 - b. Loren Bahr
 - c. Brandon Clocksene
 - d. Beth Gustafson
 - e. Kristi Peterson

ADJOURN

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One week after clawing their way into the final playoff spot, the Minnesota Vikings are now on the outside looking in after a 26-14 loss to the Tampa Bay Buccaneers on Sunday. The final score isn't indicative of how well the Vikings played for the most part, but at the end of the day, a loss is a loss.



By Jordan Wright

What Went Right...

The Vikings found success on the ground against the number one rush defense. Coming into the game, the Bucs were only allowing 74 yards on the ground per game, a number Dalvin Cook reached by the beginning of the second quarter. When it was all said and done, the Vikings gained 162 yards on the ground, averaging 4.9 yards per carry.

The game plan coming into the game was to control the clock and keep the ball out of Tom Brady's hands. So, if you were just looking at the box score, you would have assumed the Vikings dominated this game. The Vikings had 27 first downs compared to 17 for the Bucs and 76 plays compared to 49. Minnesota also had over 39 minutes with the ball.

What Went Wrong...

The storyline we'll be hearing all week will be about the Vikings' kicker problem. Dan Bailey is 6th all-time in NFL history, completing 86.9% of his field goal attempts. Unfortunately, he missed all three of his field goals and extra point attempt, single-handedly ruining any momentum the Vikings had throughout the game. It wouldn't surprise me if he's cut before the team plane lands back in Minnesota.

The Vikings' pass protection was atrocious on Sunday. Cousins was sacked six times, with three of those coming in the fourth quarter, and he was also hit on 12 other pass attempts. The final nail in the coffin happened with 2:14 left in the game. The Vikings had the ball in Bucs' territory but were facing a fourth and 13... Cousins dropped back to pass and was immediately under pressure, getting the ball knocked out of his hands by Bucs' defensive end Jason Pierre-Paul. Tampa Bay recovered the fumble, and the Vikings never saw the ball again.

I'm not one to blame a loss on the officiating, nor do I believe in any NFL conspiracy theories. With that being said, there were some questionable things that happened in this game. The Vikings were called for defensive pass interference on a Hail Mary throw right before halftime. Pop quiz: in the last decade, how many other DPI calls have been made on Hail Mary attempts? The answer: zero. The referees also missed a blatant hands-to-the-face call late in the game, when Cousins was drilled by a forearm to the facemask. Those were just two examples of many instances throughout the game.

Looking Ahead

The Vikings return home and will welcome the Chicago Bears. The two teams played in week 10, with the Vikings winning that matchup 19-13. The Bears started the 2020 season with a 5-1 record, but have gone 1-5 since. Both teams are 6-7 this season, and the loser of this game will virtually be eliminated from the playoff race. ESPN is giving the Vikings a 62% chance to win, let's hope they're right. Skol!

Genomics and Medicine...It's Complicated

In a truly grand feat of modern science, The Human Genome Project, an international collaborative effort, set out in 1990 to map our genetic makeup using diverse human genetic samples. In 2003 the project was completed, ultimately

showing about 20,000 human genes. Since that project's completion, with ever-improving DNA sequencing technology, genomics researchers continue to gather more and more information about human DNA.

A single human cell contains a mind-numbing 6 billion base pairs (each base pair is one of four types of nucleic acid molecules) in its DNA, organized into 23 pairs of chromosomes. Fascinatingly, only about 1.5 percent of our DNA actually codes for proteins, while the vast remainder is noncoding DNA, serving a regulatory function or, at least as far as we understand, no function at all.

In 2007 the first individual human genome was sequenced and published. In 2008, James Watson (as in, the 1962 Nobel Prize winning Watson and Crick model of the DNA double helix) poetically had his genome sequenced and published. The ability to sequence an individual human's genome held much promise, we hoped, in regard to predicting illness and personalizing medical interventions. But in 2020, this promise remains very much unfulfilled. In most cases primary care physicians don't yet utilize genomics information in our daily practice. Why is this?

The short answer: It's complicated. In some specific instances, genetic information can clearly convey an increased risk for disease. One example of this might be the BRCA gene mutation and associated risk of future breast or ovarian cancer. Because this specific gene mutation is so tightly linked with elevated risk, testing and finding the mutation in an individual (based on their family history or known relative with a mutation) can have direct practical implications on strategies for cancer screening or even consideration of surgery to remove the at-risk tissue.

Scenarios like BRCA mutation are outliers, however. When we look to common diseases, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes, finding genetic information useful gets, well, complicated. In these cases, what we have found is that many genes are involved, and it is extremely difficult to estimate how much a mutation in one of those genes affects overall risk. That's not to mention all the environmental factors which may affect risk as much or more than the genetic profile.

Genomics remains a vast, new, and thus-far difficult to access specialty of medicine. At its current rate of growth, however, I am confident my previous statement will not remain true during my career in medicine.

Kelly Evans-Hullinger, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices internal medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



By Dr. Kelly Evans-Hullinger ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives



That's Life by Tony Bender

I won't judge

The sidewalk was so broken I couldn't help but step on some of the cracks. Sorry, Mom. The wind reminded me it's December or a harsh spring. And I was thinking. Walking. Walking and thinking. Mourning, really.

I didn't know Grant well. Well enough to know the aura of kindness and vulnerability he gave off, the wink hidden in his smile and the deep thoughtfulness in his eyes. His dad, Rolf, I know, and as a father, I understand the loss. Or at least I can glimpse it from here.

One time. One time, as an angry teen (and we all are) Dylan threatened suicide, and it nearly killed me. I held him by the collar, lost in an emotion somewhere between anger and fear and understanding. "Do you know what that would do to us?" I said, pointing up the stairs where his mother and India were weeping. I knew.

The first was the old Finn who I met at the river on summer days to catch fish. He spoke not a word of English, not to me, anyway, but our conversations were rich with sign language, smiles, and frowns of exasperation. They found him hanging from a tree not far from the river. Cancer, they said, and he feared doctors more than the end. I didn't judge. Couldn't. But I missed him.

There have been others; coworkers, schoolmates. Famous people, the Twilight of the Idols.

Closer to home was Paul, my stepfather Jim's grandson, and I'm not sure the pain ever left Jim's eyes. Then, Dylan's best friend Quinn, who some years after he moved away, ended his life. We both think about him a lot. His goodness. The way he encouraged Dylan, a marginal wrestler at best, while Quinn won them all. "You're getting better, Dylan," he said with a hug after every match for my downcast son who didn't quite believe it. And I'm sure he was there when Dylan finally won one. Oh, Quinn, if only you knew how much joy you brought us and how much sadness you left behind. There's a hole in the universe so massive and perverse it swallows black holes. I know.

I have known once, just once, the darkness that causes us to lose sight of all else, the light, hope, a billion reasons for trusting that things can get better. Somehow, by that noisy Rocky Mountain stream, surrounded by clouds and snowcapped mountains, an orange orb floating above, I'd lost sight of the light. Miserable in my marriage, in such dark place, for a moment as I ignored the beauty around me, I glanced at the case with the 9mm automatic inside. It could be over in a moment, I thought for just a moment—the smallest increment in which time can be measured. But then came a vision of a tow-headed son back home, that look of worshipful adoration in his eyes, undeserved and yet so welcome. Necessary even. He needed me and I needed him. Maybe we saved each other.

So I know.

I know because I know how both sides think, even if was just a glimpse from the dark side. The other side is even darker. For now. For now. But there is the promise of light and life and the certainty that all the good memories will eclipse this one.

I already miss the times I would have spent with Grant. Maybe at my dinner table. That vibe. That wry sense of humor. Even the mystery. India will miss him, too, even though they were on the periphery of each other's lives. They both could sing the birds down from the trees.

I know.

Even if it's just a glimpse, I know.

But I won't judge.

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December 13th COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent
from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota:

Positive: +632 (91039 total) Positivity Rate: 15.4%

Total Tests: 4113 (683,570 total)

Hospitalized: +49 (5174 total). 436 currently hospitalized -16)

Deaths: +16 (1259 total)

Males: 11, Females: 5

Ages: 40s=1, 70s=2, 80+=13

Counties: Davison-1, Gregory-1, Hamlin-1, Hand-1, Hughes-1, Lincoln-2, Meade-2, Minnehaha-3, Pennington-4.

Recovered: +3407 (76,247 total)

Active Cases: -2705 (12,917)

Percent Recovered: 84.3%

Beadle (32) +3 positive, +12 recovered (229 active cases)

Brookings (24) +20 positive, +27 recovered (324 active cases)

Brown (44): +12 positive, +28 recovered (526 active cases)

Clark (1): +0 positive, +6 recovered (52 active cases)

Clay (11): +2 positive, +9 recovered (197 active cases)

Codington (59): +34 positive, +29 recovered (491 active cases)

Davison (50): +14 positive, +17 recovered (278 active cases)

Day (14): +3 positive, +2 recovered (110 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +4 positive, +1 recovered (59 active cases)

Faulk (10): +3 positive, +1 recovered (25 active cases)

Grant (20): +2 positive, +5 recovered (147 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +1 recovered (40 active cases)

Hughes (25): +19 positive, +19 recovered (239 active cases)

Lawrence (26): +10 positive, +25 recovered (334 active cases)

Lincoln (57): +59 positive, +41 recovered (780 active cases)

Marshall (3): +5 positive, +3 recovered (40 active cases)

McCook (21): +4 positive, +2 recovered (69 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +0 recovery (31 active case)

Minnehaha (232): +182 positive, +171 recovered (3090 active cases)

Pennington (116): +63 positive, +87 recovered (1576 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +6 recovered (31 active cases)

Roberts (23): +14 positive, +9 recovered (165 active cases)

Spink (20): +3 positive, +4 recovered (119 active cases)

Walworth (13): +4 positive, +0 recovered (111 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 13:

- 7.9% rolling 14-day positivity
- 287 new positives
- 5,617 susceptible test encounters
- 270 currently hospitalized (-12)
- 3,692 active cases (-386)
- 1,152 total deaths (0)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	391	339	744	7	Substantial	30.77%
Beadle	2424	2163	4914	32	Substantial	18.98%
Bennett	340	304	1061	5	Substantial	16.22%
Bon Homme	1424	1322	1806	21	Substantial	28.04%
Brookings	2721	2373	9339	24	Substantial	19.73%
Brown	4067	3497	10662	44	Substantial	19.87%
Brule	612	549	1638	5	Substantial	20.45%
Buffalo	401	370	838	10	Substantial	25.00%
Butte	806	697	2730	15	Substantial	17.73%
Campbell	108	102	202	1	Minimal	12.50%
Charles Mix	1027	844	3431	10	Substantial	24.12%
Clark	290	237	819	1	Substantial	12.12%
Clay	1508	1300	4325	11	Substantial	17.47%
Codington	3130	2581	7921	59	Substantial	31.98%
Corson	430	388	870	5	Substantial	38.46%
Custer	629	523	2284	8	Substantial	23.68%
Davison	2578	2249	5490	51	Substantial	23.42%
Day	463	339	1447	14	Substantial	24.55%
Deuel	372	296	940	5	Substantial	38.03%
Dewey	1167	855	3379	7	Substantial	23.81%
Douglas	341	289	795	6	Substantial	32.14%
Edmunds	302	240	870	3	Substantial	14.29%
Fall River	397	344	2194	10	Substantial	13.04%
Faulk	300	265	581	10	Moderate	13.64%
Grant	770	603	1841	20	Substantial	33.33%
Gregory	462	400	1043	24	Substantial	9.73%
Haakon	193	149	459	3	Substantial	4.94%
Hamlin	552	444	1445	28	Substantial	25.50%
Hand	301	278	681	2	Substantial	11.76%
Hanson	288	245	562	3	Substantial	39.13%
Harding	86	68	145	0	Moderate	63.64%
Hughes	1856	1592	5266	25	Substantial	8.29%
Hutchinson	649	528	1926	14	Substantial	29.13%

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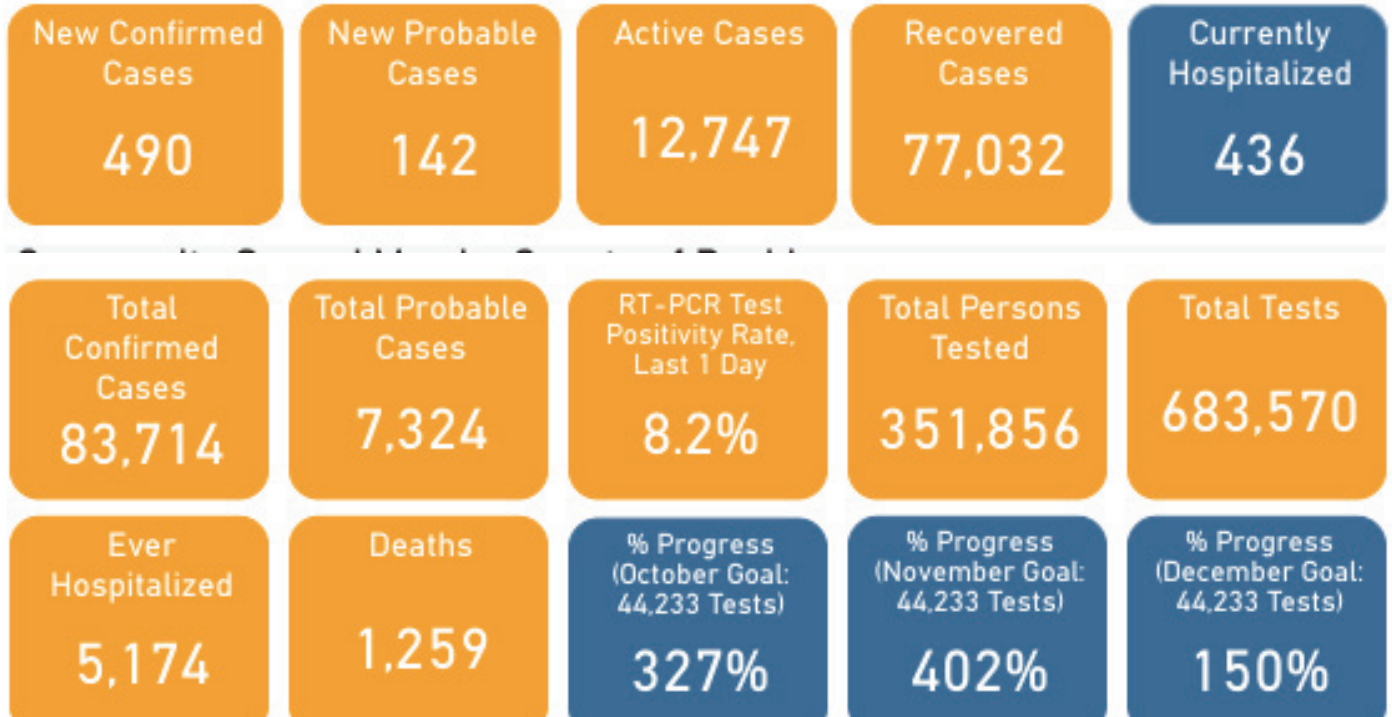
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Hyde	128	111	347	0	Moderate	8.33%
Jackson	242	191	841	8	Substantial	24.56%
Jerauld	252	220	474	15	Moderate	12.50%
Jones	63	59	176	0	Moderate	11.11%
Kingsbury	484	416	1345	13	Substantial	13.54%
Lake	941	825	2660	12	Substantial	29.01%
Lawrence	2328	1968	7301	26	Substantial	21.71%
Lincoln	6108	5230	16439	57	Substantial	25.35%
Lyman	498	441	1642	9	Substantial	18.39%
Marshall	229	186	952	3	Substantial	32.94%
McCook	634	544	1339	21	Substantial	26.58%
McPherson	162	130	485	1	Substantial	4.13%
Meade	2028	1672	6418	20	Substantial	19.60%
Mellette	206	174	640	1	Substantial	21.05%
Miner	213	180	479	6	Substantial	36.36%
Minnehaha	23112	19790	64299	232	Substantial	23.46%
Moody	487	401	1530	13	Substantial	30.30%
Oglala Lakota	1794	1533	6092	31	Substantial	20.18%
Pennington	10006	8314	32212	116	Substantial	22.91%
Perkins	236	178	611	3	Substantial	36.21%
Potter	291	261	684	2	Substantial	12.90%
Roberts	862	674	3651	23	Substantial	27.24%
Sanborn	297	248	577	3	Substantial	15.15%
Spink	652	513	1804	20	Substantial	17.18%
Stanley	247	221	720	2	Substantial	9.52%
Sully	101	87	231	3	Moderate	17.65%
Todd	1086	941	3711	17	Substantial	26.10%
Tripp	589	490	1283	10	Substantial	23.29%
Turner	892	745	2273	47	Substantial	25.66%
Union	1431	1189	5098	25	Substantial	21.75%
Walworth	570	446	1571	13	Substantial	24.90%
Yankton	2215	1705	7814	17	Substantial	27.84%
Ziebach	269	176	604	7	Substantial	36.84%
Unassigned	0	0	1867	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range	# of Cases	# of Deaths
0-9 years	3285	0
10-19 years	9975	0
20-29 years	16875	3
30-39 years	15115	12
40-49 years	12993	21
50-59 years	12943	63
60-69 years	10242	160
70-79 years	5370	264
80+ years	4240	736

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	47613	616
Male	43425	643

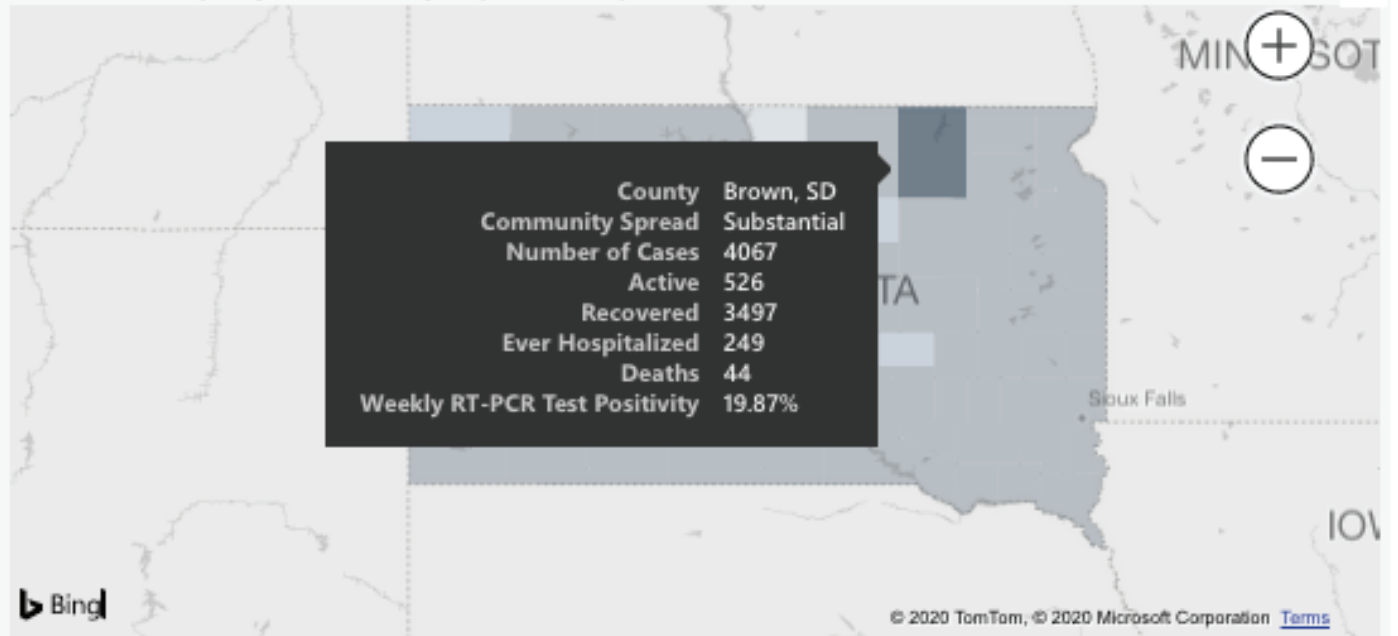
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



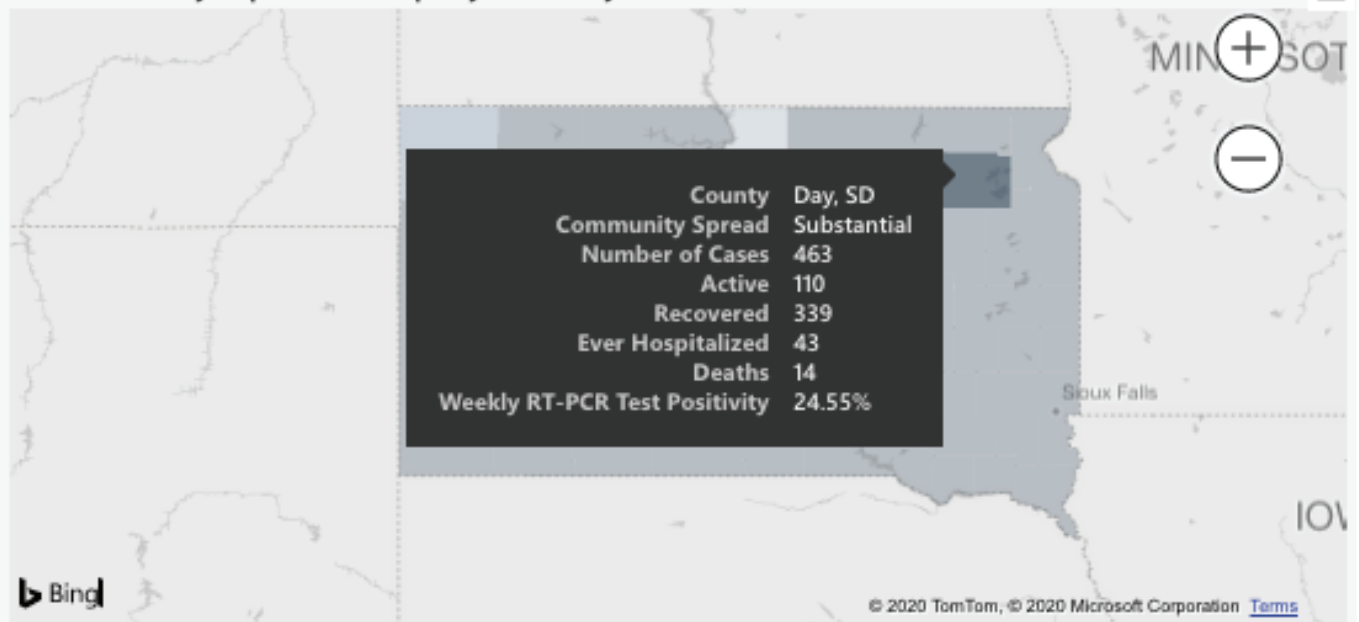
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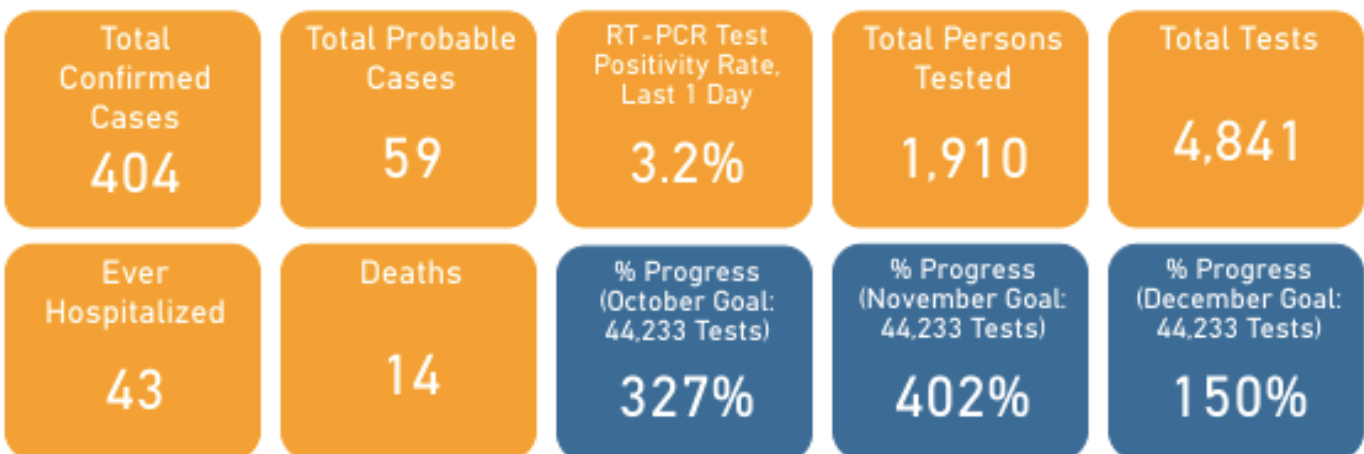
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



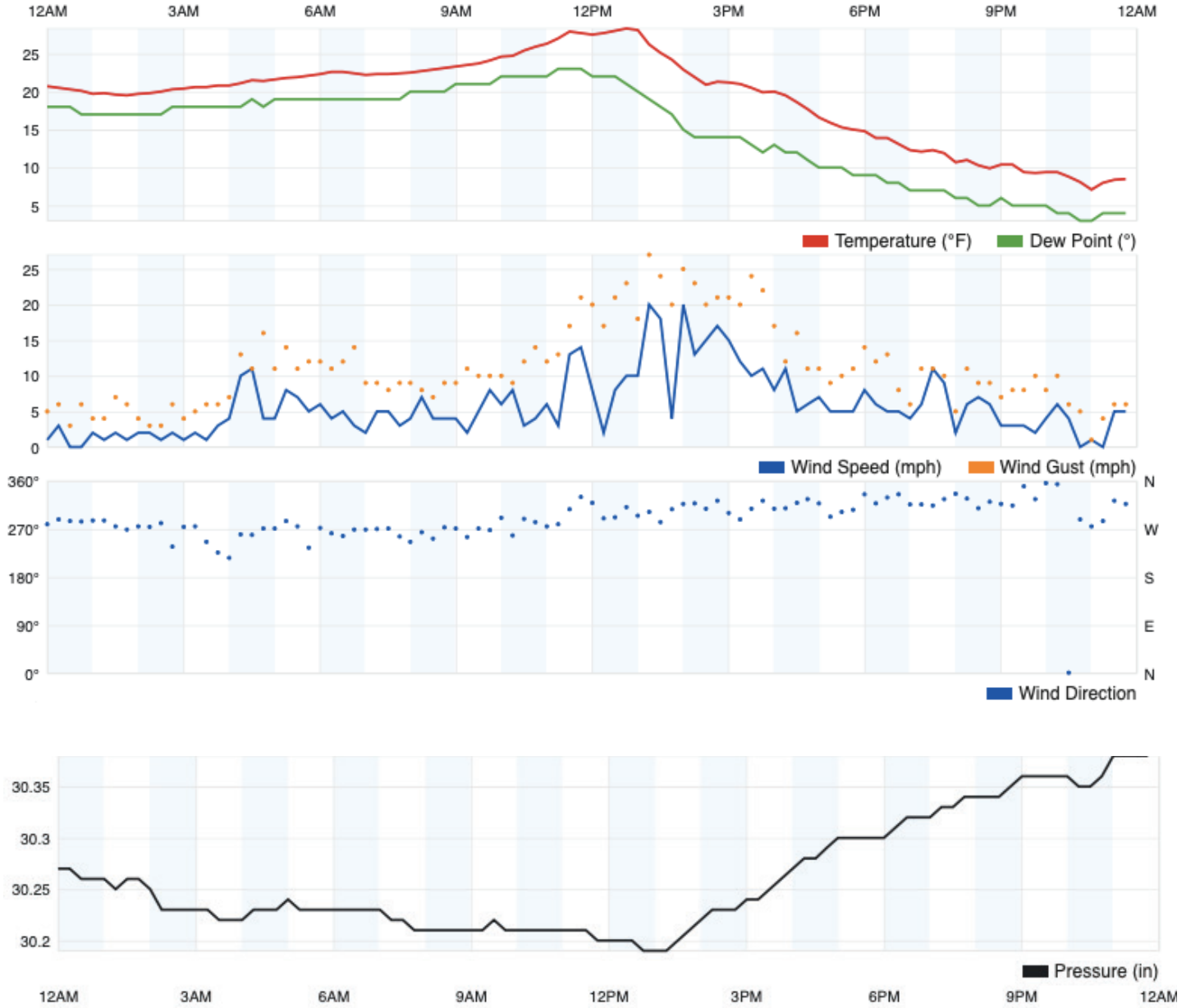
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Tuesday

Tuesday
Night

Wednesday



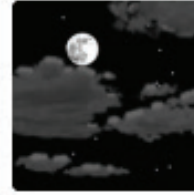
Partly Sunny



Mostly Cloudy



Partly Sunny



Partly Cloudy



Partly Sunny

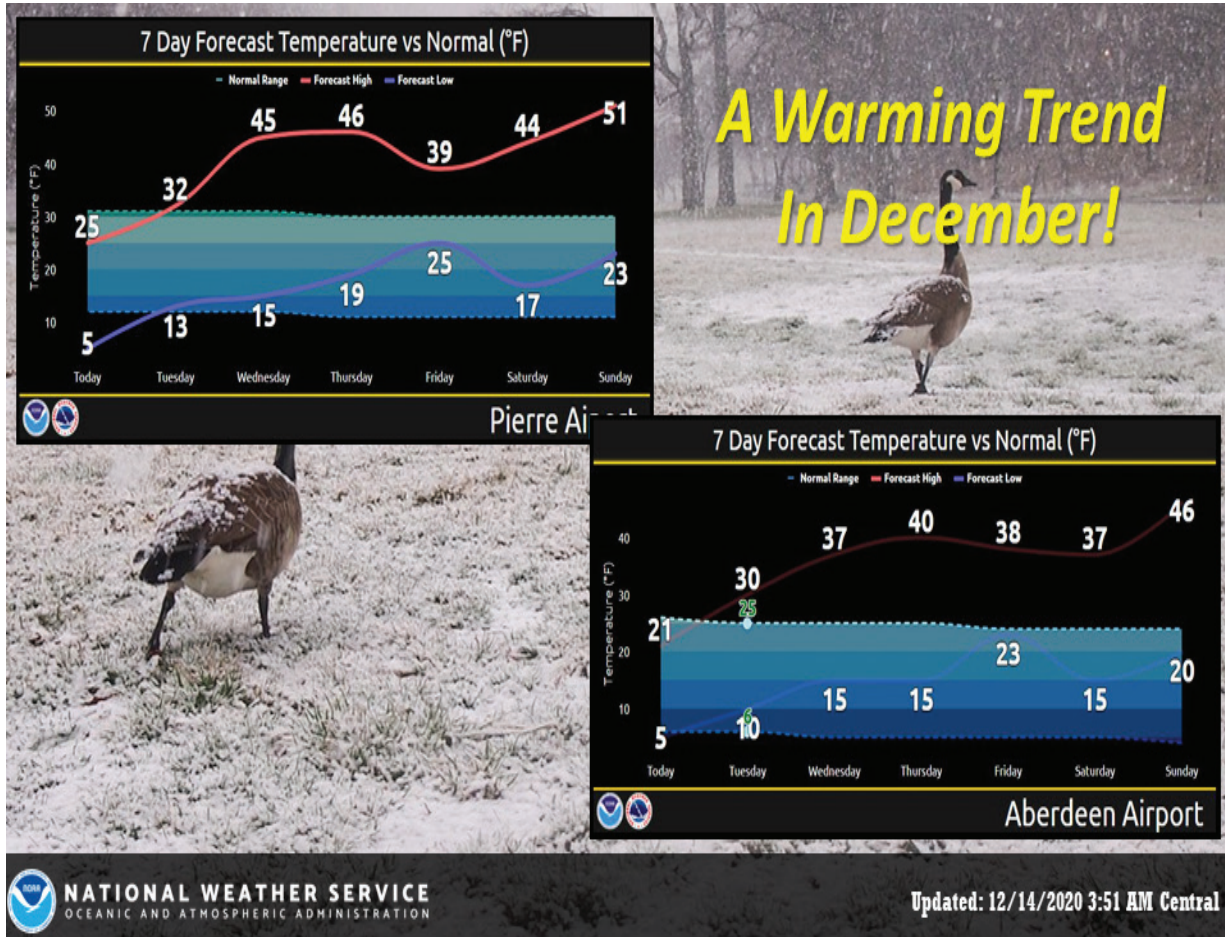
High: 20 °F

Low: 11 °F

High: 29 °F

Low: 16 °F

High: 36 °F



The forecast is generally dry for the next 7 days, save an occasional peppering of flurries. More impressive is the bare ground warm up that is anticipated through next Monday. After Tuesday, much of the region should be experiencing, both high and low temperatures, above normal.

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Today in Weather History

December 14, 1994: Snow accumulated over all of South Dakota on the 14th but was heavy in the central part of the state and at a few places in the northwest. The greatest accumulations were 11 inches at Murdo and 10 inches at the Lake Sharpe project and near Stephan. The storm caused numerous accidents, but no fatalities or injuries were reported. Eight inches of snow fell at McLaughlin and Miller, with 7 inches at Faulkton and McIntosh, 6 inches at Eagle Butte and Timber Lake, and 5 inches at Mobridge, Kennebec, and near Highmore.

December 14, 1996: Heavy snow of 6 to 20 inches fell across most of central, north central, and part of northeast South Dakota during the late evening of the 14th. Strong north winds of 20 to 35 mph created near-blizzard conditions and heavy drifting across the area. Travel was tough if not impossible, with several cars going into the ditch. A two-car accident between Blunt and Pierre left several people injured. Many activities were postponed or canceled. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Fort Pierre, Ipswich, Kennebec, Aberdeen, and Pollock; 7 inches at Mobridge; 8 inches at Lake Sharpe, Clark, and Mellette; 9 inches at Roscoe, Gettysburg, and McIntosh; 10 inches at Highmore, Eagle Butte, 22 miles SSW of Keldron, and at West Whitlock; 11 inches at Blunt and Miller; 12 inches at Ree Heights, McLaughlin, and Onida; 13 inches at Highmore; 14 inches at Redfield; 15 inches at Timber Lake; 18 inches at Faulkton; and 20 inches at Hoven.

December 14, 1287: A powerful storm affected the Netherlands and Northern Germany on this day. Called the St. Lucia's flood, which was the day before, this storm broke a dike, flooding much of the land in what is now the Waddenzee and IJsselmeer. A significant percentage of the country's population perished in this disaster and had been rated as one of the most destructive floods in recorded history. The death toll from this storm was between 50,000 to 80,000 people. Also, 180 residents of Hickling village, which is 137 miles north-east of London was impacted by this storm. The storm surge rose a foot above the high altar in the church. From British-History.ac.uk, "Hickling was one of the townships that suffered most severely from the tremendous storm of December, 1287, no fewer than nine score persons being drowned there. In the priory the water rose more than a foot above the high altar, and all the canons fled away except two, who stayed behind and managed to save the horses and other property by bringing them up into the dormitory over the vaulted undercroft."

1924 - The temperature at Helena, MT, plunged 79 degrees in 24 hours, and 88 degrees in 34 hours. The mercury plummeted from 63 above to 25 below zero. At Fairfield MT the temperature plunged 84 degrees in just 12 hours, from 63 at Noon to 21 below zero at midnight. (David Ludlum)

December 14, 1952: Trace of snow or sleet at or near Pensacola, Crestview, DeFuniak Springs, Quincy, Carrabelle, Tallahassee, St. Marks, Monticello, Madison, Mayo, Live Oak, Lake City, Glen St. Mary, and Hilliard in Florida. Frozen precipitation occurred before noon at most points, but happened in the afternoon at Mayo and Lake City and near Hilliard. Temperatures were above freezing and snow or sleet melted as it fell.

1987 - A powerful storm spread heavy snow from the Southern High Plains to the Middle Mississippi Valley, and produced severe thunderstorms in the Lower Mississippi Valley. During the evening a tornado hit West Memphis TN killing six persons and injuring two hundred others. The tornado left 1500 persons homeless, and left all of the residents of Crittendon County without electricity. Kansas City MO was blanketed with 10.8 inches of snow, a 24 hour record for December, and snowfall totals in the Oklahoma panhandle ranged up to 14 inches. Strong winds, gusting to 63 mph at Austin TX, ushered arctic cold into the Great Plains, and caused considerable blowing and drifting of snow. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

December 14, 1997: Central Mississippi and western Alabama saw significant snowfall of 4 to 8 inches on this day. In Mississippi, this was one of the heavier snowfalls to occur since 1929. The weight of the snow caused limbs of trees to break, which knocked down power lines.

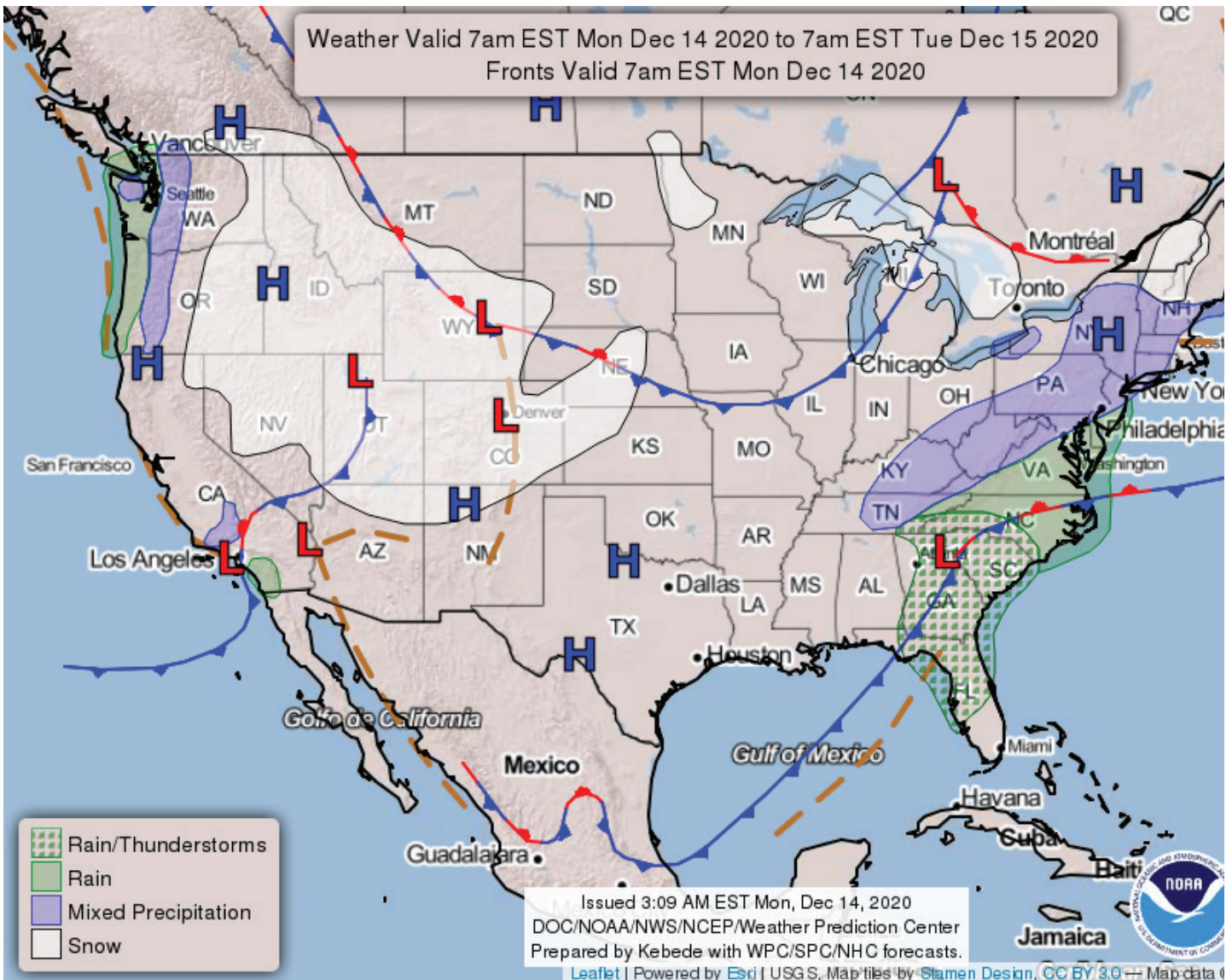
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 28 °F at 12:44 PM
Low Temp: 7 °F at 10:58 PM
Wind: 27 mph at 1:11 PM
Precip: .00

Record High: 55° in 1998
Record Low: -30° in 1917
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 6°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.23
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.43
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:51 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07 a.m.



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A GIFT FOR ETERNITY

Timothy did well in his first semester at college. A sense of excitement was building in the family as the day approached when he would be home for Christmas. His mother wanted to make it a special event, one he would remember for years to come.

"Let's give Timothy a wristwatch for Christmas," she said. "He's done so well and I want him to know how much we appreciate all of his hard work."

"But," protested his father, "what happened to that crush proof, waterproof, shockproof, scratchproof watch we gave him when he left for college?"

"He can't find it," said his mother.

In giving us the gift of His Son, God gave us Someone Who will be with us forever. A Gift that will be with us until the end of our lives and throughout eternity. An indestructible, unchanging, all-powerful, and ever-present Presence.

Jesus promised: "be sure of this – I am with you always and everywhere, even to the end of the age."

Some would ask, "What does it mean that He will be with us? Did he not leave His disciples when He ascended into heaven?" No, He didn't.

When He left them physically, He sent the Holy Spirit to be His presence with them personally. We know He was called "Immanuel – God with us" when He was born. We know He is with us now through the Holy Spirit.

Prayer: It's easy, Father, to lose sight of You and Your messages at this time of the year. But help us to pause, pray frequently and sense Your presence within us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 28:20 Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.

News from the Associated Press

AP-NORC poll: America's virus concerns stable as cases spike

By STEPHEN GROVES and HANNAH FINGERHUT Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Deaths from the coronavirus pandemic are spiking across the country, yet a new poll finds little increase in alarm among Americans about COVID-19 infections and no significant change in opinion about how the government should act to slow the spread.

The survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds about 4 in 10 Americans say they are extremely or very worried about themselves or a family member being infected with the virus, about the same as in October and slightly lower than in surveys conducted in March and in July. Stable majorities continue to favor requirements that people wear masks and limit the size of gatherings.

The risks of infection are greater than ever across broad swaths of the country — more than 1 million people tested positive for the virus over five days last week. The surge has led to record numbers of daily virus deaths as the U.S. nears 300,000 people dying from the virus over the course of the pandemic.

The nation's top health officials have pleaded with Americans to redouble their efforts to prevent infections, especially during the holidays. Roughly three-quarters of Americans say they're at least somewhat worried about the virus, a figure that's about the same as in October. In March and then again in July, about half of Americans were highly worried.

"We know our risks. We see what's happening. We see people dying," said Sarah Totta, a 36-year-old from Kansas City, Missouri. "But to be honest, I think we knew this was coming in the winter, and I just think you have to manage the risks."

Support for stay-at-home orders peaked in April, with about 8 in 10 in favor, and has steadily dipped since. Fifty percent now support requiring Americans to stay home except for essential errands, up somewhat from 44% in October. Now 45% favor closing bars and restaurants, just slightly higher than 41% two months ago. About a third of Americans oppose both steps.

Totta, a Republican, viewed forced closures as a last resort to be taken only when hospitals become overburdened. She said she would prefer that governments take an "empowering rather than controlling" approach but acknowledged her area could have benefited from a lockdown in the fall as the Midwest saw case counts rise.

The survey's findings highlight the stark differences between how Republicans and Democrats view the pandemic. Concern about the virus and support for restrictions remain overwhelming among Democrats. About 9 in 10 are at least somewhat worried about infections, compared with about 6 in 10 Republicans.

As California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, this month took his most aggressive actions since the spring to try to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed with patients, 26-year-old Lisa Main, who works in sales at a hotel, worried what effect it would have on the economy.

"In complete honesty, I think this pandemic is kind of blown out of proportion," said Main, who is a Republican. "I went to a wedding, and no one's gotten sick from that."

Meanwhile, Republican South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem has derided mask mandates, even as her state suffers through the nation's highest rate of deaths per capita in recent weeks. To defend her approach, Noem has pointed out that the virus is running rampant even in states where Democratic governors such as Newsom have issued strict orders.

"I hate that the coronavirus has turned political, but it has," Totta said.

In Florida, where Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has stridently opposed ordering bars and restaurants to close, 26-year-old Lewis Venegas, an independent, felt frustrated at seeing cases increase, fearing his mother and stepmother are vulnerable. He said it's impossible to stay socially distanced from people at the Walmart store in Miami where he works, though most people wear masks.

The fears of the pandemic have at times become overwhelming, he said: "I got to the point where I was so scared that I just started crying uncontrollably."

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Support for requirements that would limit interactions still has broad support from Americans overall. Roughly two-thirds favor restricting gatherings to 10 people or fewer. And three-quarters favor requiring people to wear masks when around others outside their homes.

About 9 in 10 Democrats support a mask mandate and a limit on the size of gatherings. About three-quarters support stay-home orders, up somewhat from about 6 in 10 in October. And 66% think bars and restaurants should be closed, an uptick from 56% two months ago.

About 6 in 10 Republicans oppose stay-home orders and bar and restaurant closures. A slim majority, 55%, support a mask mandate, while 26% are opposed. Opposition to stay-home orders, limits on gatherings and bar and restaurant closures has grown steadily among Republicans over the course of the pandemic.

In some pockets of the West and Midwest, where a fall wave of cases has been particularly devastating, arguments over mask mandates have turned ugly. Local officials have faced threats and protests as they grappled with ways to slow infections.

"I just don't like being told what to do," said Fred Carrigan, a 58-year-old from Portland, Indiana, who expressed a deep distrust of any government action.

That kind of skepticism could hinder health officials who are now working to convince millions of Americans that forthcoming vaccines are safe and effective. Experts estimate at least 70% of the U.S. population needs to be vaccinated to hold the virus in check, but the survey found that only about half of Americans are ready to get the shots when they become available.

But for Jill VonOhlen, 72, the vaccine presented some light at the end of a long, and at times dark, year.

"I'm absolutely amazed that we have a vaccine. The fact that we have that really does give me hope," she said. "I'll be first in line, no doubt. I'll just have to hear that (Dr. Anthony) Fauci or someone says it's OK."

Fingerhut reported from Washington.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,117 adults was conducted Dec. 3-7 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.9 percentage points.

Online:

AP-NORC Center: <http://www.apnorc.org/>.

Aberdeen playhouse finds new ways to entertain during virus

By TRENT ABREGO Aberdeen American News

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — For the first time since March, the Aberdeen Community Theatre, which is celebrating its 40 years of operation put on a play, "A Christmas Carol."

The first 39 years were quite a bit different when compared to what 2020 has brought thus far.

Even though there was a weekend performance, changes were apparent. The play was an "enhanced radio version," which incorporated video elements. While it's not a completely new concept, it marked the first time since 2004 that the theater hosted a radio-themed performance.

Another change that Aberdeen Community Theatre has been faced with is a lack of revenue. The theater hadn't had an income since the beginning of the pandemic in March, according to Brian Schultz, the associate artist managing director. Since it wasn't generating income, the theater had to get creative and deployed three avenues in order to keep the theater afloat.

One of those avenues was fundraising. Some of the fundraising efforts were through Jimmy's Pizza, where 20% of all pizza sales went to the theater; Popcorn Pull-up events and with GoFundMe, the Aberdeen American News reported.

"It's been continual fundraising efforts to make sure that we can pay our bills and meet all of our financial obligations," Schultz said.

Not only has the Aberdeen Community Theatre ramped up its fundraising efforts, the staff has also

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taken pay cuts to make sure that the theater could survive during the pandemic.

"We all, as a staff, made sacrifices. We all pulled back to between half and three-quarters time just to make sure that the organization itself can remain viable, so that once we come on the backside of this and we're able to resume the full-time schedule that we have something to come back to," Schultz said.

Along with those efforts, the theater has tried to stay in the public eye by hosting various events around town. During the summer, the Aberdeen Community Theatre produced Storybook Land Theatre in conjunction with the Aberdeen Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department.

The theater also hosted Rocking the Marquee events, where local musicians performed music. It also recorded and edited the recordings to make a "full-package" video, according to Schultz. And volunteers submitted performances to the theater that went out on social media accounts.

Things around the physical theater have changed, too, Schultz said.

During the pandemic, the Aberdeen Community Theatre upgraded its marquee plexiglass panel, expanded a gallery, painted and added slatwall. Slatwall is a building material with horizontal grooves — slats — that hold attachments.

Not only did the theater undergo renovations, the way it operates has also changed. It is requiring that its patrons wear masks, isn't selling concessions and has cut its capacity from 450 to 150.

Aberdeen Community Theatre put on "A Night at the Improv," on Nov. 7 as its first event.

While "A Christmas Carol," was live in the theater on Dec. 4-6, viewing options are still available. The theater recorded the play and is selling digital two-day rentals for \$18.

"The quality of it is more than just pointing a camera at the stage and hit record," Schultz said. "It's a fully produced and edited piece of art all by itself, so they definitely get their money's worth when they watch it."

South Dakota reports 632 new COVID-19 cases, 16 deaths

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials on Sunday confirmed 16 new deaths due to complications from the coronavirus, raising the total fatalities to 1,259 since the start of the pandemic.

The state's death count is the 38th highest in the country overall and the eighth highest per capita at about 141 deaths per 100,000 people, according to The COVID Tracking Project. The deaths on Sunday included five women and 11 men. South Dakota has reported 313 deaths in December.

Officials said there were 632 positive COVID-19 tests in the last day, for a total of 83,714 confirmed cases.

There were nearly 1,282 new cases per 100,000 people in South Dakota over the past two weeks, which ranks third in the country for new cases per capita. One in every 173 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week, Johns Hopkins University researchers reported Saturday.

The number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 decreased by 16 in the last day, to 436.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

US set for first COVID-19 shots as shipments begin arriving

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Hospital workers begin unloading precious frozen vials of COVID-19 vaccine Monday, with the first vaccinations against a scourge that has killed nearly 300,000 Americans expected later in the day.

"It feels like the cavalry is arriving," Robert C. Garrett, CEO of Hackensack Meridian Health, said as New Jersey's largest health network awaited delivery.

Shots made by Pfizer Inc. and its German partner BioNTech are the first authorized for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration -- beginning what will become the largest vaccination campaign in U.S. history. Several other countries also have OK'd the vaccine, including the U.K., which started vaccinating last week.

For health care workers who, along with nursing home residents, will be first in line for vaccination, hope

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is tempered by grief and the sheer exhaustion of months spent battling a coronavirus that still is surging in the U.S. and around the world.

"This is mile 24 of a marathon. People are fatigued. But we also recognize that this end is in sight," said Dr. Chris Dale of Swedish Health Services in Seattle.

Packed in dry ice to stay at ultra-frozen temperatures, the first of nearly 3 million doses being shipped in staggered batches this week made their way by truck and by plane around the country Sunday from Pfizer's Kalamazoo, Michigan, factory. Once they arrive at distribution centers, each state directs where the doses go next.

Some hospitals across the country spent the weekend tracking their packages, refreshing FedEx and UPS websites for clues.

More of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will arrive each week. And later this week, the FDA will decide whether to green light the world's second rigorously studied COVID-19 vaccine, made by Moderna Inc.

Now the hurdle is to rapidly get vaccine into the arms of millions, not just doctors and nurses but other at-risk health workers such as janitors and food handlers — and then deliver a second dose three weeks later.

"We're also in the middle of a surge, and it's the holidays, and our health care workers have been working at an extraordinary pace," said Sue Mashni, chief pharmacy officer at Mount Sinai Health System in New York City.

Plus, the shots can cause temporary fever, fatigue and aches as they rev up people's immune systems, forcing hospitals to stagger employee vaccinations.

A wary public will be watching closely to see whether health workers embrace vaccination. Just half of Americans say they want to get vaccinated, while about a quarter don't and the rest are unsure, according to a recent poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Health Research.

The FDA, considered the world's most strict medical regulator, said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine appears safe and strongly protective -- and laid out the data behind it in a daylong public meeting last week for scientists and consumers alike to see.

"Please people, when you look back in a year and you say to yourself, 'Did I do the right thing?' I hope you'll be able to say, 'Yes, because I looked at the evidence,'" Dr. Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, said Sunday on NBC's Meet the Press. "People are dying right now. How could you possibly say, 'Let's wait and see.'"

Still, emergency use means the vaccine was cleared for widespread use before a final study in nearly 44,000 people is complete -- and that research is continuing to try to answer additional questions. While effective against COVID-19 illness, it's not yet clear if vaccination will stop the symptomless spread that accounts for half of all cases.

The shots still must be studied in children, and during pregnancy. But the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said late Sunday that vaccination should not be withheld from pregnant women who otherwise would qualify.

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

AP journalists Tamara Lush and Kathy Young contributed to this report.

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.

Gmail, YouTube down briefly as Google suffers brief outage

LONDON (AP) — Google users in the U.S., Europe, India and other parts of the world were briefly unable to access their Gmail accounts, watch YouTube videos or get to their online documents during an outage

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Monday.

Tens of thousands of complaints popped up around 7 a.m. Eastern along the East Coast of the U.S. The vast majority of those people, about 90%, could not log in, according to the site Downtdetector.

The inability to sign in prevented users accessing other platforms through Google, including mobile video games.

"We're aware of a problem with Gmail affecting a majority of users," a status update on a Google dashboard said, followed by another message that said service has been restored for some users. "We expect a resolution for all users in the near future."

There were similar updates for Google's many other services, such as Docs, Hangouts and Chat. The company did not reply immediately to a request for comment.

Downtdetector, which tracks website outages, reported the problem affected users across the world, but appeared especially widespread in the northeastern U.S., Britain and other parts of Europe. Japan, Malaysia and India also looked to be more affected.

US agencies hacked in monthslong global cyberspying campaign

By ERIC TUCKER, FRANK BAJAK and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. government agencies were ordered to scour their networks for malware and disconnect potentially compromised servers after authorities learned that the Treasury and Commerce departments were hacked in a monthslong global cyber-espionage campaign discovered when a prominent cybersecurity firm learned it had been breached.

In a rare emergency directive issued late Sunday, the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity arm warned of an "unacceptable risk" to the executive branch from a feared large-scale penetration of U.S. government agencies that could date back to mid-year or earlier.

"This can turn into one of the most impactful espionage campaigns on record," said cybersecurity expert Dmitri Alperovitch.

The hacked cybersecurity company, FireEye, would not say who it suspected — many experts believe the operation is Russian given the careful tradecraft — and noted that foreign governments and major corporations were also compromised.

News of the hacks, first reported by Reuters, came less than a week after FireEye disclosed that nation-state hackers had broken into its network and stolen the company's own hacking tools.

The apparent conduit for the Treasury and Commerce Department hacks — and the FireEye compromise — is a hugely popular piece of server software called SolarWinds. It is used by hundreds of thousands of organizations globally, including most Fortune 500 companies and multiple U.S. federal agencies, which will now be scrambling to patch up their networks, said Alperovitch, the former chief technical officer of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike.

The DHS directive — only the fifth since they were created in 2015 — said U.S. agencies should immediately disconnect or power down any machines running the impacted SolarWinds software.

FireEye, without naming any specific targets, said in a blog post that its investigation into the hack of its own network had identified "a global campaign" targeting governments and the private sector that, beginning in the spring, had slipped malware into a SolarWinds software update. Neither the company nor the U.S. government publicly identified Russian state-backed hackers as responsible.

The malware gave the hackers remote access to victims' networks, and Alperovitch said SolarWinds grants "God-mode" access to a network, making everything visible.

"We anticipate this will be a very large event when all the information comes to light," said John Hultquist, director of threat analysis at FireEye. "The actor is operating stealthily, but we are certainly still finding targets that they manage to operate in."

On its website, SolarWinds says it has 300,000 customers worldwide, including all five branches of the U.S. military, the Pentagon, the State Department, NASA, the National Security Agency, the Department of Justice and the White House. It says the 10 leading U.S. telecommunications companies and top five

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U.S. accounting firms are among customers.

FireEye said it had confirmed infections in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, including in the health care and oil and gas industry — and had been informing affected customers around the world in the past few days. It's customers include federal, state and local governments and top global corporations.

It said that malware that rode the SolarWinds update did not seed self-propagating malware — like the NotPetya malware blamed on Russia that caused more than \$10 billion in damage globally — and that any actual infiltration of an infected organization required "meticulous planning and manual interaction."

That means it's a good bet only a subset of infected organizations were being spied on by the hackers. Nation-states have their cyberespionage priorities, which include COVID-19 vaccine development.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday that Russia had "nothing to do with" the hacking.

"Once again, I can reject these accusations," Peskov told reporters. "If for many months the Americans couldn't do anything about it, then, probably, one shouldn't unfoundedly blame the Russians for everything."

The Treasury Department referred requests for comment to the National Security Council, whose spokesman, John Ulyot, said Monday that the NSC was working with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, U.S. intelligence agencies, the FBI and government departments that were affected to coordinate a response to the "recent compromise."

CISA said it was working with other agencies to help "identify and mitigate any potential compromises." The FBI said it was engaged in a response but declined to comment further.

President Donald Trump last month fired the director of CISA, Chris Krebs, after Krebs vouched for the integrity of the presidential election and disputed Trump's claims of widespread electoral fraud.

In a tweet Sunday, Krebs said "hacks of this type take exceptional tradecraft and time," adding that he believed that its impact was only beginning to be understood.

Federal agencies have long been attractive targets for foreign hackers looking to gain insight into American government personnel and policymaking.

Hackers linked to Russia, for instance, were able to break into the State Department's email system in 2014, infecting it so thoroughly that it had to be cut off from the internet while experts worked to eliminate the infestation. A year later, a hack at the U.S. government's personnel office blamed on China compromised the personal information of some 22 million current, former and prospective federal employees, including highly sensitive data such as background investigations.

The intrusions disclosed Sunday included the Commerce Department's agency responsible for internet and telecommunications policy. A spokesperson confirmed a "breach in one of our bureaus" and said "we have asked CISA and the FBI to investigate."

Austin, Texas-based SolarWinds confirmed Sunday a "potential vulnerability" related to updates released between March and June for software products called Orion that help monitor networks for problems.

"We believe that this vulnerability is the result of a highly-sophisticated, targeted and manual supply chain attack by a nation state," said SolarWinds CEO Kevin Thompson said in a statement. He said it was working with the FBI, FireEye and intelligence community.

FireEye announced on Dec. 8 that it had been hacked, saying foreign state hackers with "world-class capabilities" broke into its network and stole tools it uses to probe the defenses of its thousands of customers. The hackers "primarily sought information related to certain government customers," FireEye CEO Kevin Mandia said in a statement, without naming them.

Former NSA hacker Jake Williams, the president of the cybersecurity firm Rendition Infosec, said FireEye surely told the FBI and other federal partners how it had been hacked and they determined that Treasury had been similarly compromised.

"I suspect that there's a number of other (federal) agencies we're going to hear from this week that have also been hit," Williams added.

FireEye responded to the Sony and Equifax data breaches and helped Saudi Arabia thwart an oil industry cyberattack — and has played a key role in identifying Russia as the protagonist in numerous aggressions in the burgeoning netherworld of global digital conflict.

Mandia said there was no indication they got customer information from the company's consulting or

breach-response businesses or threat-intelligence data it collects.

Bajak reported from Boston and O'Brien from Providence, Rhode Island.

Germany's health minister urges EU to approve vaccine faster

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's health minister demanded that the European Union's regulatory agency work faster to approve a coronavirus vaccine and bring an end to the suffering on the continent, while other officials suggested Monday that residents should forgo Christmas shopping as a new lockdown loomed that will close schools and most stores.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and the governors of Germany's 16 states agreed Sunday to step up the country's lockdown measures beginning Wednesday and running to Jan. 10 to stop the exponential rise of COVID-19 cases. Merkel said existing restrictions imposed in November failed to significantly reduce the number of new infections. Germany has been hitting records of new daily infections and virus deaths in recent weeks.

Expressing impatience, Health Minister Jens Spahn said in tweets late Sunday that Germany, which has created more than 400 vaccination centers and has activated about 10,000 doctors and medical staff to start mass vaccinations as early as Tuesday, was hamstrung by the lack of regulatory approval.

It was especially galling because the vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech and American drug-maker Pfizer has been authorized for use in Britain, the United States, Canada and other countries. But it's still waiting for approval by the European Medicines Agency, or EMA, and can therefore not be used in Germany yet or in any of the EU's 27 nations.

The EMA has a Dec. 29 meeting on vaccines but Spahn said the agency's assessment and approval of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine should "take place as quickly as possible."

"This is also about the trust of the citizens in the European Union's capacity to act," Spahn wrote. "Every day that we can start sooner with the vaccinations lessens the suffering and protects those who are the most vulnerable."

Spahn had previously said that going through EMA approval was the right path.

His ministry said Monday that for January, between 3 to 4 million BioNTech vaccination doses were ready to be given in Germany. It said for the first quarter of 2021, up to 11 million vaccination doses were expected.

In recent weeks, hospitals across Germany have repeatedly warned that they were reaching their limits in caring for COVID-19 patients and that staffing on intensive care units was becoming a problem. On Monday, 4,552 COVID-19 patients were being treated in ICU units, 52% of them on respirators.

Germany's central disease control center on Monday reported 16,362 new confirmed cases — about 4,000 more than a week before. The Robert Koch Institute reported 188 new deaths, bringing the country's overall death toll to nearly 22,000.

President Frank-Walter Steinmeier appealed to Germans on Monday to support and adhere to the new lockdown measures.

"The virus still has a tight grip on us," Steinmeier said. "The situation is bitterly serious: Thousands of death cases in one week and an infection scenario that threatens to spin out of control. There is no way we can avoid drastic measures."

Others urged people to avoid last-minute Christmas shopping or panic buying.

"I wish and I hope that people will only buy what they really need, like groceries," Economy Minister Peter Altmaier said. "The faster we get these infections under control, the better it is for everyone."

In some states, including Saxony in eastern Germany and North Rhine-Westphalia in the west, schools are already closed or mandatory school attendance lifted so parents can keep their children home.

Starting Wednesday, schools nationwide will be closed or will switch to home schooling; most non-food stores will be shuttered, as will businesses such as hairdressers. Restaurant takeout will still be permitted,

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but no eating or drinking can take place on site.

With the exception of Christmas, the number of people allowed to meet indoors will remain restricted to five, not including children under 14. The sale of fireworks traditionally used to celebrate New Year's will also be banned as will public outdoor gatherings on New Year's Eve.

Michael Kretschmer, the governor of Saxony, which has been especially hard hit, told the German news agency dpa that this Christmas, for the first time in his life, he won't be attending midnight Mass. He urged other Christians to do the same.

"I don't need it for my belief and I think it is right if all of us hold off during this sensitive time," Kretschmer said. "Joseph and Mary were also on their own on the Holy Night."

This story corrects the quote in the final paragraph to "Joseph and Mary" instead of "Jesus and Mary."

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

'External source' causes oil tanker blast off Saudi Arabia

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — An oil tanker off Saudi Arabia's port city of Jiddah suffered an explosion early Monday after being hit by "an external source," a shipping company said, suggesting another vessel has come under attack off the kingdom amid its yearslong war in Yemen.

The apparent attack on the Singapore-flagged BW Rhine, which had been contracted by the trading arm of the kingdom's massive Saudi Arabian Oil Co., marks the fourth assault targeting Saudi energy infrastructure in a month. It also apparently shut down Jiddah port, the most-important shipping point for the kingdom.

It also renews concerns about ship safety in the Red Sea, a crucial transit zone for global shipping and energy supplies that largely had avoided the chaos of regional tensions involving the U.S. and Iran last year.

The BW Rhine had berthed at Jiddah on Saturday, carrying over 60,000 metric tons of unleaded gasoline from an Aramco refinery at Yanbu for consumption in the kingdom, according to the data-analysis firm Refinitiv. It was there that the incident appears to have occurred.

The ship was "been hit from an external source whilst discharging," said Haifna, a tanker company under the BW Group that owns and operates the ship.

The strike caused an explosion and fire onboard the ship, though all 22 sailors on board escaped without injury and firefighters later extinguished the blaze, Haifna said. Some oil may have polluted the water along the ship, though the company said it was still assessing the damage.

Saudi Arabia had not acknowledged the blast hours later.

The United Kingdom Marine Trade Operations, an organization under Britain's royal navy, urged ships in the area to exercise caution and said investigations were ongoing. It later said Jiddah port had been shut down for a "duration unknown," without elaborating.

Dryad Global, a maritime intelligence firm, also reported the blast. The U.S. Navy's 5th Fleet, which patrols the Mideast, did not respond to a request for comment.

No one immediately offered a cause for the incident. However, the explosion comes after a mine exploded and damaged a ship off Saudi Arabia last month. Another mysterious attack targeted a cargo ship off the small port city of Nishtun in Yemen's far east earlier this month.

Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels have used sea mines before in their long war against a Saudi-led coalition. However, the Houthis have not commented last month's attack.

Dryad Global said if it was the Houthis behind Monday's blast, it "would represent a fundamental shift in both targeting capabilities and intent."

Since mid-November, there's also been what Saudi Arabia described as a bomb-laden drone boat attempted attack at Jazan, as well as a cruise missile attack claimed by the Houthis that struck an Aramco oil facility in Jiddah.

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The incidents come after tensions between the U.S. and Iran last year saw a series of escalating incidents in the Persian Gulf, the Strait of Hormuz and the nearby Gulf of Oman. While the U.S. has put together a new coalition to monitor shipping there after those incidents, it doesn't operate in the Red Sea.

In recent weeks, an attack in Iran killed a prominent scientist who founded Tehran's military nuclear program two decades ago, an assault suspected to have been carried out by Israel.

The attack nudged up oil prices, which already had been rising in recent days as Western countries begin distributing coronavirus vaccines. Benchmark Brent crude stood above \$50 a barrel in trading Monday.

The Red Sea, with the Suez Canal to the north and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait to the south, is a vital shipping lane for both cargo and global energy supplies. Its currents change seasonally and now run north. Saudi Arabia recently accused the Houthis of dumping mines into the southern Red Sea, which could be carried toward Jiddah.

The Red Sea has been mined previously. In 1984, some 19 ships reported striking mines there, with only one ever being recovered and disarmed, according to a U.N. panel of experts investigating Yemen's war. Any new mining could endanger global shipping and be difficult to find for any minesweeping operation — raising the risks and potentially the cost of insurance for those sailing in the region.

"The series of escalations in the Red Sea will certainly raise the risk profile of the region," said Ranjith Raja, the head of Middle East and North Africa oil and shipping research at Refinitiv. "This could in turn also increase the insurance premiums for added protection on vessels operating in the region, which would have an impact on the cost of shipment."

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

Electors meeting to formally choose Biden as next president

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Presidential electors are meeting across the United States on Monday to formally choose Joe Biden as the nation's next president.

Monday is the day set by law for the meeting of the Electoral College. In reality, electors meet in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to cast their ballots. The results will be sent to Washington and tallied in a Jan. 6 joint session of Congress over which Vice President Mike Pence will preside.

The electors' votes have drawn more attention than usual this year because President Donald Trump has refused to concede the election and continued to make baseless allegations of fraud.

Biden is planning to address the nation Monday night, after the electors have voted. Trump, meanwhile, is clinging to his false claims that he won the election, but also undermining Biden's presidency even before it begins. "No, I worry about the country having an illegitimate president, that's what I worry about. A president that lost and lost badly," Trump said in a Fox News interview that was taped Saturday.

Following weeks of Republican legal challenges that were easily dismissed by judges, Trump and Republican allies tried to persuade the Supreme Court last week to set aside 62 electoral votes for Biden in four states, which might have thrown the outcome into doubt.

The justices rejected the effort on Friday.

Biden won 306 electoral votes to 232 votes for Trump. It takes 270 votes to be elected.

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. There's no reason to expect any defections this year. Among prominent electors are Democrat Stacey Abrams of Georgia and Republican Gov. Kristi Noem of South Dakota.

The voting is decidedly low tech, by paper ballot. Electors cast one vote each for president and vice president.

The Electoral College was the product of compromise during the drafting of the Constitution between

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those who favored electing the president by popular vote and those who opposed giving the people the power to choose their leader.

Each state gets 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. Washington, D.C., has three votes, under a constitutional amendment that was ratified in 1961. With the exception of Maine and Nebraska, states award all their Electoral College votes to the winner of the popular vote in their state.

The bargain struck by the nation's founders has produced five elections in which the president did not win the popular vote. Trump was the most recent example in 2016.

Biden topped Trump by more than 7 million votes this year.

And then there's one more step: inauguration.

Protesting Indian farmers call for 2nd strike in a week

By SHONAL GANGULY Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Tens of thousands of protesting Indian farmers called for a national farmers' strike on Monday, the second in a week, to press for the quashing of three new laws on agricultural reform that they say will drive down crop prices and devastate their earnings.

The farmers are camping along at least five major highways on the outskirts of New Delhi and have said they won't leave until the government rolls back what they call the "black laws." They have blockaded highways leading to the capital for three weeks, and several rounds of talks with the government have failed to produce any breakthroughs.

Scores of farmer leaders also conducted a token hunger strike on Monday at the protest sites. Heavy contingents of police in riot gear patrolled the areas where the farmers have been camping.

Protest leaders have rejected the government's offer to amend some contentious provisions of the new farm laws, which deregulate crop pricing, and have stuck to their demand for total repeal.

At Singhu, a protest site on the outskirts of New Delhi, hundreds of farmers blocked all entry and exit routes and chanted anti-government slogans. Some of them carried banners reading "No farmers, no food."

About two dozen leaders held a daylong hunger strike at the site, while a huge communal kitchen served food for the other protesters.

"It's the government's responsibility to provide social benefits (to people.) And if they don't give those, then people will have to come together" to protest, said Harvinder Kaur, a government employee who came from her home in Punjab state to help at the kitchen.

Another protester, Rajdeep Singh, a 20-year-old student who helps his farming family back home in Punjab, said the protest would continue until their demands are met.

"Now it's their (government's) ego and the question of our pride," he said.

Farmer leaders have threatened to intensify their actions and have threatened to block trains in the coming days if the government doesn't abolish the laws.

The farmers filed a petition with the Supreme Court on Friday seeking the quashing of the laws, which were passed in September. The petition was filed by the Bharatiya Kisan Union, or Indian Farmers' Union, and its leader, Bhanu Pratap Singh, who argued that the laws were arbitrary because the government enacted them without proper consultations with stakeholders.

The farmers fear the government will stop buying grain at minimum guaranteed prices and corporations will then push prices down. The government says it is willing to pledge that guaranteed prices will continue.

With nearly 60% of the Indian population depending on agriculture for their livelihoods, the growing farmer rebellion has rattled Prime Minister Narendra Modi's administration and its allies.

Modi's government insists the reforms will benefit farmers. It says they will allow farmers to market their produce and boost production through private investment.

Farmers have been protesting the laws for nearly two months in Punjab and Haryana states. The situation escalated three weeks ago when tens of thousands marched to New Delhi, where they clashed with police.

Biden aides hope Electoral College vote is GOP turning point

By AAMER MADHANI and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — Joe Biden's aides have a message for President Donald Trump and his supporters: It's long past time to move on.

With the Electoral College set to formally elect Biden as president on Monday, his aides say they hope Republicans will consider their own long-term interests (and the country's), accept Trump's defeat and focus their attention on fighting the coronavirus pandemic and staving off economic tumult.

Republicans, by and large, have stood by Trump as he's made unsubstantiated claims of a rigged election, and they show no signs they'll give Biden the semblance of a honeymoon period. Biden will come to power with a narrowly divided Senate — next month's runoff elections in Georgia will decide who will control the Senate — and a thinned Democratic majority in the House as Republicans picked up seats even as Trump lost.

But aides are pointing to Biden's strong approval numbers, tallying a record 81 million votes and an electorate worn by the pandemic in their attempt to nudge Republicans to cooperate. Mike Donilon, a senior adviser to Biden, said the American electorate is looking for Democrats and Republicans to get in sync.

"The agenda that the president-elect is putting forward is very much at the forefront of what people want in their lives," Donilon said. "So, I think the case is going to be that it's going to be in the interest of the country, it's going to be in their own self-interest to get on board and not to get in the way."

In making the case for a mandate, Biden's team points to the president-elect retaking Rust Belt states that helped spring Trump to the White House four years ago as well as wins in Arizona and Georgia — firsts for a Democratic presidential candidate since the 1990s. Biden also won the popular vote by more than 7 million people, powered by strong showings with women, people of color and independents.

Aides to Biden, who is scheduled to deliver an address Monday evening after the Electoral College votes, say a turn away from a contentious election and to governing is perhaps easier said than done. The spotlight on the Electoral College vote process is heightened this year because Trump has refused to concede the election and is pushing forward with baseless allegations of fraud.

"We have won so many times, at this point, in so many different ways. We're just excited to keep on winning," said Jen O'Malley Dillon, Biden's deputy chief of staff, shrugging off Trump's challenges. "(Monday) obviously is a big day as it takes on a little bit more import than maybe traditionally it does."

Trump on Sunday continued to sow doubt about the election results and even went so far as to falsely claim that "Swing States that have found massive VOTER FRAUD, which is all of them, CANNOT LEGALLY CERTIFY these votes as complete & correct without committing a severely punishable crime."

On Saturday, thousands of Trump supporters descended on Washington to air grievances about the president's loss. They skirmished with anti-Trump demonstrators, leading to dozens of arrests, several stabbings and injuries to police officers, in disturbances hours after the rallies.

And after losing dozens of legal challenges on the state and federal level, Trump is expected to push forward with new litigation this week. Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani said Sunday that he expects five more lawsuits at the state level.

Meanwhile, Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin is set to hold a hearing Wednesday on election "irregularities." Johnson on Sunday questioned why Congress wasn't informed that the taxes of Biden's son Hunter were under federal investigation during Trump's impeachment trial last year.

The president was acquitted in a Senate trial that centered on Trump's dealings with Ukraine's president and on whether he abused his office by seeking an investigation into the Bidens. Hunter Biden served on the board of directors of a Ukrainian energy company.

"I'm sympathetic for keeping investigations confidential unless there's an indictment," Johnson said on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures." "But when you're talking about investigations within the political realm, particularly one that would have affected the impeachment trial of the sitting U.S. president in the U.S. Senate, that should have been relevant information, the fact that they had Hunter Biden's computer that had all these emails back in December 2019."

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The younger Biden said in a statement last week that he just recently learned that he was under investigation. He also said he committed no wrongdoing.

O'Malley Dillon downplayed the notion that the investigation could hamper Biden's ability to pursue his agenda.

"The president-elect himself has said this is not about his family or Donald Trump's family," she said. "It is about the American people's families. And I think we're going to continue to stay focused on the issues that are impacting their daily lives."

Weissert reported from Washington.

Gunman shot by police at NYC cathedral Christmas concert

By TED SHAFFREY and MARY ESCH The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A man was fatally shot by police on the steps of a landmark New York City cathedral Sunday after he began firing two semiautomatic handguns at the end of a Christmas choral concert, police said.

The gunfire began just before 4 p.m. at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, mother church of the Episcopal Diocese of New York.

A 45-minute concert held on the cathedral steps had just concluded and a crowd of several hundred people was drifting away when the gunman started shooting, sending people running down Amsterdam Avenue screaming and diving to the sidewalk.

A detective, a sergeant and a police officer who were at the event fired 15 rounds, killing the man, said New York Police Commissioner Dermot Shea.

"It is by the grace of God today," he said, that no one besides the gunman was struck.

The gunman was dressed in black with his face obscured by a white baseball cap and a face mask. He held a silver pistol in one hand and a black one in the other as he stepped from behind a stone column at the top of the staircase.

Witnesses told police the man was yelling "kill me" as he fired, Shea said. The man's name was not immediately released.

The man had a lengthy criminal history and was carrying a backpack containing a can of gasoline, rope, wire, tape, knives and a well-worn Bible, Shea said. The police commissioner called the actions of the officers "heroic."

It wasn't clear if the gunman was aiming at people or firing in the air.

A video posted on social media by one bystander showed officers crouched behind trash cans yelling "drop the gun!" and firing carefully aimed shots at the man for at least a minute and half as he darted in and out from behind a pillar.

Some terrified civilians lay prone at the bottom of the steps, clutching each other during the gunfire. Others cowered behind a lamp post. They ran for safety after the gunman was felled by an officer's shot.

Before the gunfire began, the concert featured members of the cathedral choir standing far apart on the stone steps wearing masks because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"It was just beautiful, and then at the end this person started shooting. Everybody is in shock," a cathedral spokeswoman, Lisa Schubert, told The New York Times. "The shooter could have killed a lot of people. There were hundreds of people here and he shot at least 20 times."

"It is horrible that our choir's gift to New York City, a much-needed afternoon of song and unity, was cut short by this shocking act of violence," cathedral spokeswoman Iva Benson said by email.

The cathedral is one of the world's largest. Construction began in 1892 and is still incomplete. The church has been connected to many New York luminaries and notable events over its long history. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was a trustee. It hosted the memorial services for puppeteer Jim Henson and choreographer Alvin Ailey, and speakers over the years including South Africa's Nelson Mandela and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

AP writer Michael R. Sisak reported from New York.

Scientists focus on bats for clues to prevent next pandemic

By CHRISTINA LARSON, ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL and MARCELO SILVA DE SOUSA Associated Press RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Night began to fall in Rio de Janeiro's Pedra Branca state park as four Brazilian scientists switched on their flashlights to traipse along a narrow trail of mud through dense rainforest. The researchers were on a mission: capture bats and help prevent the next global pandemic.

A few meters ahead, nearly invisible in the darkness, a bat made high-pitched squeaks as it strained its wings against the thin nylon net that had ensnared it. One of the researchers removed the bat, which used its pointed teeth to bite her gloved fingers.

The November nighttime outing was part of a project at Brazil's state-run Fiocruz Institute to collect and study viruses present in wild animals — including bats, which many scientists believe were linked to the outbreak of COVID-19.

The goal now is to identify other viruses that may be highly contagious and lethal in humans, and to use that information to devise plans to stop them from ever infecting people — to forestall the next potential global disease outbreak before it gets started.

In a highly connected world, an outbreak in one place endangers the entire globe, just as the coronavirus did. And the Brazilian team is just one among many worldwide racing to minimize the risk of a second pandemic this century.

To some, it might seem too soon to contemplate the next global outbreak, with the world still grappling with the devastating fallout of the ongoing one. But scientists say it's highly likely that, without savvy intervention, another novel virus will jump from animal to human host and find the conditions to spread like wildfire.

As this pandemic has shown, modern transport can disperse the pathogen to all corners of the globe in a matter of hours and spread easily in densely populated cities.

It's not a question of if, but of when, according to Dr. Gagandeep Kang, an infectious diseases expert at Christian Medical College at Vellore in southern India.

She pointed to previous research that found India was among the most likely places in the world for such a "spillover" event to occur, due to population density and increasing human and livestock incursion into its dense tropical forests teeming with wildlife.

It's no coincidence that many scientists are focusing attention on the world's only flying mammals — bats.

Bats are thought to be the original or intermediary hosts for multiple viruses that have spawned recent epidemics, including COVID-19, SARS, MERS, Ebola, Nipah virus, Hendra virus and Marburg virus. A 2019 study found that of viruses originating from the five most common mammalian sources — primates, rodents, carnivores, ungulates and bats — those from bats are the most virulent in humans.

Bats are a diverse group, with more than 1,400 species flitting across every continent except Antarctica. But what many have in common are adaptations that allow them to carry viruses that are deadly in humans and livestock while exhibiting minimal symptoms themselves — meaning they are able to travel and shed those viruses, instead of being quickly hobbled.

"The secret is that bats have unusual immune systems, and that's related to their ability to fly," said Raina Plowright, an epidemiologist who studies bats at Montana State University.

To get off the ground and sustain flight requires an incredible amount of energy, with bats' metabolic rate increasing sixteen-fold, Plowright said. "You'd expect them to get cell damage from all that metabolic exertion," she said.

But that doesn't happen. Instead, bats are remarkably resilient, with many species living more than 30 years — highly unusual for such small mammals.

Plowright and other bat scientists believe evolutionary tweaks that help bats recover from the stress of flying also give them extra protection against pathogens.

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"Bats seem to have evolved a collateral benefit of flight — resistance to deal with some of the nastiest viruses known to science," said Arinjay Banerjee, a virologist at McMaster University in Canada.

While scientists are still untangling the mystery, two leading theories are that bats may have evolved what Banerjee called "an efficient DNA repair mechanism" or that their bodies may tightly regulate inflammation triggers and not overreact to viral infections.

Probing the secrets of bat immune systems may help scientists understand more about when bats do shed viruses, as well as providing hints for possible future medical treatment strategies, he said.

Bats and other animals that carry pathogens don't innately pose a risk to humans — unless conditions are right for a spillover event. "The virus has to come out of the host for us to get infected," said Cara Brook, a disease ecologist at the University of California, Berkeley.

The bad news: Increasing destruction and fragmentation of habitats worldwide — especially biodiverse areas like tropical forests — means "we are seeing higher rates of contact between wildlife and humans, creating more opportunities for spillover," she said.

That's why the Brazilian researchers chose Pedra Branca park. As one of the world's largest forests within an urban area, it offers a constant interaction of wild animals with the thousands of humans and domestic animals in surrounding communities. The scientists are studying not just bats, but also small primates, wild cats and domestic cats in homes with confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Scientists and governments would stand a better chance at containing future outbreaks if they had faster notice of when and where they begin, said Ian Mackay, a virologist at Australia's University of Queensland.

"Ongoing, constant, nonstop surveillance," along the lines of the flu labs set up by the World Health Organization across the globe, could help researchers be better prepared, he said. He also suggested that labs for virus discovery could regularly sample waste water or materials from hospitals.

In India, a National Mission on Biodiversity and Human Well-Being has been pending since 2018 and will likely be launched next year. Abi Tamim Vanak, a conservation scientist at Ashok Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment in Bengaluru, said that a core part of the plan is to set up 25 sentinel surveillance sites across the country in both rural and urban areas.

"They will be the first line of defense," he said.

A varied patchwork of virus surveillance programs exists in several countries, but funding tends to wax and wane with the political climate and sense of urgency.

Among the most ambitious endeavors is the Global Virome Project, which aims to discover 500,000 new viruses over 10 years.

The U.S. Agency for International Development recently announced the launch of the \$100 million STOP Spillover project, an effort led by scientists at Tufts University and including global partners to study zoonotic diseases in Africa and Asia.

One approach that won't help, scientists say, is treating bats as the enemy — vilifying them, throwing stones or trying to burn them out of caves.

This spring, villagers in the Indian state of Rajasthan identified bat colonies in abandoned forts and palaces and killed hundreds with bats and sticks. They also sealed some crevices where the bats lived, effectively trapping them. In the Indian state of Karnataka, villagers cut down old trees where bats tend to roost.

Scientists say those those tactics are likely to backfire.

An investigation by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Ugandan health authorities found that, after a mining operation attempted to exterminate bats from a cave in Uganda, the remaining bats exhibited higher infection levels of Marburg virus. This led to Uganda's most severe outbreak of Marburg hemorrhagic fever, caused by the virus, in 2012.

"Stress is a huge factor in upsetting the natural balance that bats have with their viruses — the more you stress bats, the more they shed viruses," said Vikram Misra, a virologist at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada.

Although orders issued by Indian forest officials reiterating the complete ban on killing of wildlife and information campaigns to dispel myths were largely successful, convincing people not to attack bats means dispelling long-running cultural assumptions.

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"People have a lot of misconceptions about bats. They're nocturnal and look a little weird flying, and there's a lot of literature and culture built around bats being scary," said Hannah Kim Frank, a biologist at Tulane University. "But bats aren't aggressive — and attacking bats doesn't help control diseases."

Bats also play vital roles in ecosystems: They consume insects like mosquitos, pollinate plants like agave, and disperse seeds.

"We actually need bats in the wild to consume insects that otherwise destroy cotton, corn and pecan harvests," said Kristen Lear, an ecologist at Bat Conservational International.

A better approach to minimize disease risk, Frank said, is simply to minimize contact between wild bats and people and livestock.

She suggested that research on when bats migrate, and when new pups are born, could inform decisions about when people should avoid certain areas or keep their livestock penned up.

In North America, some scientists advocate restricting public access to caves where bats roost.

"Cave gating — bat-friendly gates, built with iron crossbars — can keep humans out and allow bats to move freely," said Kate Langwig, an infectious disease ecologist at Virginia Tech. "If we leave the bats alone, and don't try to hurt or exterminate them, they are going to be healthier."

Perhaps the most significant factor bringing bats into more frequent contact with people and domestic animals is the destruction of habitat, which forces bats to seek out new foraging and roosting grounds.

In Australia, widespread destruction of winter flowering eucalyptus trees that provide nectar for fruit bats — known locally as "flying foxes" — prompted the bats to move into areas closer to human settlements looking for alternate meals, including to a suburb of Brisbane called Hendra.

There, the bats transmitted a virus to horses, which in turn infected people. First identified in 1994 and named Hendra virus, it is highly lethal, killing 60% of people and 75% of horses infected.

A similar chain of events took place in Bangladesh, when habitat destruction drove fruit bats into cities, where they spread Nipah virus, which causes severe encephalitis in humans, by licking date palm sap from collection barrels.

To potentially reverse the movement of bats, Montana State University's Plowright and colleagues based in Australia are studying restoring the bats' original habitat.

"Every city in Australia is full of fruit bats that lost their winter habitats," she said. "The idea is to plant new forests and make sure they are away from places with domestic animals and people."

Whether the goal is to curb the spread of known zoonotic diseases or to reduce the risk of new ones emerging as pandemics, the strategy is the same: Reduce contact between humans and wild animals.

"In the history of COVID-19, bats have been more victim than victimizer," said Ricardo Moratelli, coordinator of the Fiocruz project in Brazil. "Bats host a large number of parasites, and they deal with these parasites well. The problem is when human beings enter into contact with them."

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Larson reported from Washington. Silva de Sousa reported from Rio de Janeiro. Ghosal reported from New Delhi.

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After 110K virus deaths, nursing homes face vaccine fears

By BERNARD CONDON and MATT SEDENSKY Associated Press

After 110,000 deaths ravaged the nation's nursing homes and pushed them to the front of the vaccine line, they now face a vexing problem: Skeptical residents and workers balking at getting the shots.

Being first has come with persistent fears that the places hit hardest in the pandemic — accounting for nearly 40% of the nation's death toll — could be put at risk again by vaccines sped into development in months rather than years. Some who live and work in homes question if enough testing was done on the elderly, if enough is known of side effects and if the shots could do more harm than good.

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"You go get that first and let me know how you feel," said Denise Schwartz, whose 84-year-old mother lives at an assisted living facility in East Northport, New York, and plans to decline the vaccine. "Obviously it would be horrible for her to get COVID, but is it totally safe for someone who's elderly and in fragile health?"

As the U.S. begins shipping out freezer-packed vials of newly approved vaccine from Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech, public health officials say the answer is yes.

Everyone from members of the military to former presidents have announced their intentions to get the shots, echoing the refrains of others who say the drugs are the product of rigorous review, firm data and independent experts.

In an ongoing study of nearly 44,000 people, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found the vaccine was safe and more than 90% effective across recipients of different ages, including older adults and those with health problems that put them at high risk of COVID-19.

But the undercurrent of doubt in nursing homes persists, sometimes fueled by divisive politics, distrust of institutions and misinformation. And so far, the workers are the ones being heard the loudest.

"Folks are concerned about it, that it was rushed through by people who were not listening to the science," said Denise Allegretti, a director at 1999 SEIU, the nation's largest healthcare worker union.

Internal surveys by groups including the American Nurses Foundation suggest many workers in long-term care facilities are so concerned about the vaccine they would refuse it.

"I will not be the test dummy," wrote one respondent to a survey by the National Association of Health Care Assistants. "It's not going to be safe and I won't trust it," added another. Some respondents just answered, "No way!"

Christina Chiger, a 33-year-veteran nurse's aide at a nursing home in Tampa, Florida, is exhausted and frightened after a relentless nine months that left two dozen residents dead and made 16-hour shifts common. But she has no plans to take the vaccine, for now at least.

"Will there be side effects? Will it actually work?" she asked. "If we all get sick from taking this, who's going to take care of our patients?"

Resistance to the vaccine in nursing homes is not entirely unexpected — about 3 in 10 staffers, and 2 in 10 residents were not vaccinated for the flu last year, for example — but it's no less worrisome.

Given how easily COVID-19 spreads, particularly in communal settings, experts believe around 70% of the population will need to receive the vaccine for it to be successful.

"Nursing home staff has always been a challenge to vaccinate," said Litjen Tan, chief strategist at the advocacy group Immunization Action Coalition. "We're cutting it close."

Cultural issues could also be at play. People of color make up a majority of aides and other frontline workers in nursing homes, and some minorities express mistrust of medicine that experts see linked with past abuses.

A poll released last week by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found Black and Hispanic people in the U.S. are far less likely than white people to agree to be vaccinated. Some 53% of whites said they would get the shots, compared with 24% of Blacks and 34% of Hispanics.

The AP-NORC poll also found women were less likely than men to say they would be vaccinated. An estimated 9 in 10 front-line nursing home workers are women. Overall, about a quarter of U.S. adults said they would refuse to get a vaccine, and another quarter said they weren't sure.

"They don't trust it. They don't trust the science," said Lori Porter, who heads the health assistants group and blames the Trump administration for making faith in science a political issue and undermining his own experts. "There's so much misinformation that has circled over this pandemic this whole year that they don't feel they can trust anyone."

The federal government is seeking to blunt such attitudes with a \$250 million ad campaign set to roll out this week that will eventually target healthcare workers and vulnerable groups. The pitch touts how vaccines will help beat COVID-19 the same way they defeated smallpox, measles and polio.

"One of the great triumphs of medical science ... has been vaccinations," Anthony Fauci, the top U.S.

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infectious disease scientist, said in one video.

The American Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes, has called for every resident and staff member to get both vaccine doses by March 1, even though it expects no federal or state mandates requiring shots.

"Our hope is that we get widespread acceptance of the vaccine," said AHCA's president, Mark Parkinson. "But if we don't, I assure you that our organization as well as individual operators will be analyzing whether or not they can mandate the vaccine. We're just hoping that we don't have to go there."

John Sauer, head of the Wisconsin branch of LeadingAge, which represents non-profit long-term care facilities, said the misery most residents and workers have already witnessed should be all the convincing they need. "They know that this could literally be a life-and-death situation."

No reliable gauges of nursing home residents' opinion on the coronavirus vaccine have emerged. Among older adults in general, the AP-NORC poll found greater acceptance of the vaccine than among younger people.

But fears persist among many older people, over the possibility of bad interactions for people already on a long list of drugs, or of undiscovered problems specific to their age group.

As with many vaccines, the drug companies say recipients may experience fever, fatigue or sore arms from the injection. Authorities are investigating several allergic reactions reported in Britain by health workers with a history of severe allergies.

Penelope Ann Shaw, a 77-year-old nursing home resident in Braintree, Massachusetts, said she plans to refuse the vaccine, as she does with annual flu shots, because of drug allergies and her concerns about how little is known about the new coronavirus drugs.

"For me, I think it's a little premature," said Shaw, who has Guillain-Barre syndrome, an immune system disorder, and was the lone long-term care resident to serve on the federal Coronavirus Commission for Safety and Quality in Nursing Homes. "You're not doing it with me."

After a year in which many facilities have walled off to the world, crippling some residents in isolation, and leading to medical declines and deaths in others, some need no convincing.

Among them is 85-year-old Harriet Krakowsky, a resident of the Hebrew Home at Riverdale in New York City, who had friends killed by the virus and is still waiting for visitation restrictions to ease so she can meet two great-grandchildren who were born this year.

"For the first time in six or seven months," she said, "there's a little light at the end of the tunnel."

EXPLAINER: The Electoral College, an unlovable compromise

By JERRY SCHWARTZ Associated Press

For a compromise that has lasted more than 200 years, the Electoral College doesn't get a lot of love.

According to the National Archives, more Constitutional amendments have been proposed to alter or abolish the Electoral College than on any other subject — more than 700 proposals in the nation's history.

It was James Madison who drew up the system, a compromise between those who wanted the states to select the president and those who wanted direct election by qualified voters. Each state was to select a number of electors equal to its representation in Congress (senators and representatives).

It was left to the states to decide how to pick their electors. At first, some states allowed voters (generally adult males who owned property) to do so, while others entrusted their legislatures. Eventually, all states embraced the popular vote, though some gave the franchise to Black men only after the ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870 and to women with the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Under the Constitution, the president must be elected with a majority of electors. If no one wins a majority, the House of Representatives decides. The national popular vote plays no part; five men have been elected president though their opponent won more votes, most recently Donald Trump in 2016.

There is a move afoot to bypass the Electoral College by convincing states to agree to give their electoral votes to the winner of the popular vote, regardless of which candidate won those states. Such a compact would only take effect if it was approved by enough states to win a majority of the Electoral College —

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270 votes.

Only Maine and Nebraska split their electoral votes — the rest are winner takes all. Electors are not obligated under the Constitution to follow the instructions of the voters, though some states have laws that require it.

The electors meet and vote in their states on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December. And there are no graduates of the Electoral College. In this case “college” is not an institution of higher education, but a group of people engaged in a common pursuit. Regardless, the term does not appear in the Constitution.

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It was James Madison who drew up the system, a compromise between those who wanted the states to select the president and those who wanted direct election by qualified voters. Each state was to select a number of electors equal to its representation in Congress (senators and representatives).

It was left to the states to decide how to pick their electors. At first, some states allowed voters (generally adult males who owned property) to do so, while others entrusted their legislatures. Eventually, all states embraced the popular vote, though some gave the franchise to Black men only after the ratification of the 15th Amendment in 1870 and to women with the 19th Amendment in 1920.

Under the Constitution, the president must be elected with a majority of electors. If no one wins a majority, the House of Representatives decides. The national popular vote plays no part; five men have been elected president though their opponent won more votes, most recently Donald Trump in 2016.

There is a move afoot to bypass the Electoral College by convincing states to agree to give their electoral votes to the winner of the popular vote, regardless of which candidate won those states. Such a compact would only take effect if it was approved by enough states to win a majority of the Electoral College — 270 votes.

Only Maine and Nebraska split their electoral votes — the rest are winner takes all. Electors are not obligated under the Constitution to follow the instructions of the voters, though some states have laws that require it.

The electors meet and vote in their states on the first Monday after the second Wednesday in December. And there are no graduates of the Electoral College. In this case “college” is not an institution of higher education, but a group of people engaged in a common pursuit. Regardless, the term does not appear in the Constitution.

Endangered-species decision expected on beloved butterfly

By JOHN FLESHER and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

Trump administration officials are expected to say this week whether the monarch butterfly, a colorful and familiar backyard visitor now caught in a global extinction crisis, should receive federal designation as a threatened species.

Stepped-up use of farm herbicides, climate change and destruction of milkweed plants on which they depend have caused a massive decline of the orange-and-black butterflies, which long have flitted over meadows, gardens and wetlands across the U.S.

The drop-off that started in the mid-1990s has spurred a preservation campaign involving schoolchildren, homeowners and landowners, conservation groups, governments and businesses.

Some contend those efforts are enough to save the monarch without federal regulation. But environmental groups say protection under the Endangered Species Act is essential — particularly for populations in the West, where last year fewer than 30,000 remained of the millions that spent winters in California's

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coastal groves during the 1980s.

This year's count, though not yet official, is expected to show only about 2,000 there, said Sarina Jepsen, director of the endangered species program at the Xerces Society conservation group.

"We may be witnessing the collapse of the of the monarch population in the West," Jepsen said.

Scientists separately estimate up to an 80% monarch decline since the mid-1990s in the eastern U.S., although numbers there have shown a recent uptick.

The Trump administration has rolled back protections for endangered and threatened species in its push for deregulation, even as the United Nations says 1 million species — one of every eight on Earth — face extinction because of climate change, development and other human causes.

Under a court agreement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must respond by Tuesday to a 2014 petition from conservation groups on behalf of the monarch.

The agency could propose or decline to list the butterfly as threatened, which means likely to become in danger of extinction within the foreseeable future throughout all or much of its range. Or it could find that a such listing is deserved but other species have a higher priority, which might delay action indefinitely.

A recommendation to designate the butterfly as threatened would be followed by a yearlong period to take public comment and reach a final decision.

Listing it "would guarantee that the monarch would get a comprehensive recovery plan and ongoing funding," said Tierra Curry, a senior scientist with the Center for Biological Diversity. "The monarch is so threatened that this is the only prudent thing to do."

If the status is granted, federal agencies would have to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service about potential harm to monarchs from actions proposed for government funding or permitting, such as expanding interstate highways. The service would prescribe other measures in a regulation tailored specifically for the butterfly.

Orley "Chip" Taylor, an insect ecologist at the University of Kansas, agreed the butterfly's long-term prognosis is grim but said he opposes a federal listing for now, fearing it would sour many rural residents on helping the monarch.

"There's a palpable fear of regulation out there," he said, adding that voluntary measures should be given additional time.

Monarchs in southern Canada and the eastern U.S. migrate by the millions to mountainous areas of Mexico each winter, while those west of the continental divide head to coastal California. They congregate so thickly in forests that scientists can estimate their numbers through aerial inspections of trees with an orange hue.

Worsening droughts are reducing the number that survive the journey south for winter, Taylor said, while rising temperatures prompt the butterflies to leave their wintering grounds too soon, damaging reproduction. As the forests dry out, wildfire risk worsens.

If habitat losses and climate change aren't slowed, "we aren't going to have a monarch migration in 30 years," Taylor said.

Environmental groups say 165 million acres (67 million hectares) of monarch habitat — an area the size of Texas — have been lost in the past 20 years to development or herbicide applications in cropland. They point to heavy farm use of Round Up, or glyphosate, in particular.

Genetically modified corn and soybeans can withstand the poisons, but they wipe out milkweed, on which the butterflies lay their eggs. Caterpillars feed only on milkweed leaves, while adults eat nectar from their flowers and pollinate the plants.

Federal protection for the monarch would draw stiff resistance from agriculture groups concerned that habitat protection rules might interfere with farm operations.

Milkweed can reduce crop yields and sicken livestock that eat it, "so farmers have spent decades trying to get rid of it," said Laura Campbell of the Michigan Farm Bureau, which has participated in a statewide monarch recovery program. "It's a hard sell to tell farmers, 'Hey, you need to start planting milkweed again.'"

Some farmers and ranchers have planted milkweed on lands set aside for conservation. Numerous or-

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ganizations and individuals are working to restore monarch habitat, focusing on backyard gardens as well as highway and utility corridors.

"But a lot is happening that's taking away habitat at the same time," said Karen Oberhauser, a restoration ecologist and arboretum director at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. "It's like we're running fast but staying in the same place."

Twenty-five years ago, the 6-year-old son of a chemist named Jim Edward just happened to catch a monarch tagged by Oberhauser's researchers, when the butterfly wandered into Edward's yard in Minnesota.

Since then, captivated by the butterfly and its complex migration over generations, Edward has raised monarchs to tell and show hundreds of school groups about the unending migrations.

"Just the exposure of kids to that, that don't necessarily get to see" wildlife otherwise, he said. "Their enthusiasm, their joy, their 'oh, wowness' — to see that."

Some enthusiasts fear they could no longer harvest eggs and raise monarchs if the species gains federal protections. Curry said her group has recommended that careful, small-scale, noncommercial raising be allowed.

Sheila Naylor, a substitute teacher near Sedalia, Mo., says the chance discovery of a milkweed plant in her yard five years ago inspired a quest to grow the monarch's host plant in every available inch of yard and roadside.

She visits the Missouri state fair, schools and elder care homes, pleading the case for preserving monarch and other native butterflies.

"I push myself," Naylor said, "because the butterflies keep me going."

Flesher reported from Traverse City, Michigan. Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City.

US agencies hacked in monthslong global cyberspying campaign

By ERIC TUCKER, FRANK BAJAK and MATT O'BRIEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hackers broke into the networks of the Treasury and Commerce departments as part of a monthslong global cyberespionage campaign revealed Sunday, just days after the prominent cybersecurity firm FireEye said it had been breached in an attack that industry experts said bore the hallmarks of Russian tradecraft.

In response to what may be a large-scale penetration of U.S. government agencies, the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity arm issued an emergency directive calling on all federal civilian agencies to scour their networks for compromises.

The threat apparently came from the same cyberespionage campaign that has afflicted FireEye, foreign governments and major corporations, and the FBI was investigating.

"This can turn into one of the most impactful espionage campaigns on record," said cybersecurity expert Dmitri Alperovitch.

News of the hacks, first reported by Reuters, came less than a week after FireEye disclosed that foreign government hackers had broken into its network and stolen the company's own hacking tools. Many experts suspect Russia is responsible. FireEye's customers include federal, state and local governments and top global corporations.

The apparent conduit for the Treasury and Commerce Department hacks — and the FireEye compromise — is a hugely popular piece of server software called SolarWinds. It is used by hundreds of thousands of organizations globally, including most Fortune 500 companies and multiple U.S. federal agencies that will now be scrambling to patch up their networks, said Alperovitch, the former chief technical officer of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike.

The DHS directive — only the fifth since they were created in 2015 — said U.S. agencies should immediately disconnect or power down any machines running the impacted SolarWinds software.

FireEye, without naming any specific targets, said in a blog post that its investigation into the hack of its own network had identified "a global campaign" targeting governments and the private sector that,

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beginning in the spring, had slipped malware into a SolarWinds software update. Neither the company nor U.S. government officials would say whether it believed Russian state-backed hackers were responsible.

The malware gave the hackers remote access to victims' networks, and Alperovitch said SolarWinds grants "God-mode" access to a network, making everything visible.

"We anticipate this will be a very large event when all the information comes to light," said John Hultquist, director of threat analysis at FireEye. "The actor is operating stealthily, but we are certainly still finding targets that they manage to operate in."

On its website, SolarWinds says its 300,000 customers worldwide including all five branches of the U.S. military, the Pentagon, the State Department, NASA, the National Security Agency, the Department of Justice and the White House. It says the 10 leading U.S. telecommunications companies and top five U.S. accounting firms are also among customers.

FireEye said it had confirmed infections in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East, including in the health care and oil and gas industry — and had been informing affected customers around the world in the past few days. It said that malware that rode the SolarWinds update did not seed self-propagating malware — like the 2016 NotPetya malware blamed on Russia that caused more than \$10 billion in damage globally — and that any actual infiltration of an infected organization required "meticulous planning and manual interaction."

That means it's a good bet only a subset of infected organizations were being spied on by the hackers. Nation-states have their cyberespionage priorities, which include COVID-19 vaccine development.

Cybersecurity experts said last week that they considered Russian state hackers to be the main suspect in the FireEye hack.

On Sunday, Russia's U.S. embassy described as "unfounded" in a post on its Facebook page the "attempts of the U.S. media to blame Russia for hacker attacks on U.S. governmental bodies."

Earlier, National Security Council spokesperson John Ulliyot said in a statement that the government was "taking all necessary steps to identify and remedy any possible issues related to this situation." The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency at DHS said it was working with other agencies to help "identify and mitigate any potential compromises."

President Donald Trump last month fired the director of CISA, Chris Krebs, after Krebs vouched for the integrity of the presidential election and disputed Trump's claims of widespread electoral fraud.

In a tweet Sunday, Krebs said "hacks of this type take exceptional tradecraft and time," adding that he believed that its impact was only beginning to be understood.

Federal government agencies have long been attractive targets for foreign hackers.

Hackers linked to Russia were able to break into the State Department's email system in 2014, infecting it so thoroughly that it had to be cut off from the internet while experts worked to eliminate the infestation.

The intrusions disclosed Sunday included the Commerce Department's agency responsible for internet and telecommunications policy.

Treasury deferred comment to the National Security Council. A Commerce spokesperson confirmed a "breach in one of our bureaus" and said "we have asked CISA and the FBI to investigate." The FBI said it was engaged in a response but declined to comment further.

Austin, Texas-based SolarWinds confirmed Sunday a "potential vulnerability" related to updates released between March and June for software products called Orion that help monitor networks for problems.

"We believe that this vulnerability is the result of a highly-sophisticated, targeted and manual supply chain attack by a nation state," said SolarWinds CEO Kevin Thompson said in a statement. He said it was working with the FBI, FireEye and intelligence community.

FireEye announced on Tuesday that it had been hacked, saying foreign state hackers with "world-class capabilities" broke into its network and stole tools it uses to probe the defenses of its thousands of customers. The hackers "primarily sought information related to certain government customers," FireEye CEO Kevin Mandia said in a statement, without naming them.

Former NSA hacker Jake Williams, the president of the cybersecurity firm Rendition Infosec, said FireEye surely told the FBI and other federal partners how it had been hacked and they determined that Treasury

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had been similarly compromised.

"I suspect that there's a number of other (federal) agencies we're going to hear from this week that have also been hit," Williams added.

FireEye responded to the Sony and Equifax data breaches and helped Saudi Arabia thwart an oil industry cyberattack — and has played a key role in identifying Russia as the protagonist in numerous aggressions in the burgeoning netherworld of global digital conflict.

Mandia said there was no indication they got customer information from the company's consulting or breach-response businesses or threat-intelligence data it collects.

Bajak reported from Boston and O'Brien from Providence, Rhode Island.

Report: Cleveland Indians changing name after 105 years

By TOM WITHERS AP Sports Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — The Cleveland Indians are changing their name after 105 years.

Citing three people familiar with the decision, The New York Times reported Sunday night that the team is moving away from a name considered racist for decades. The Indians have been internally discussing a potential name change for months.

A team spokesman told The Associated Press the franchise has no immediate comment on the report.

The Times said the team could make a formal announcement later this week. It's not known when the name change will take effect or if the team has settled on a new moniker.

Cleveland's move away from Indians follows a similar decision earlier this year by the NFL's Washington Football Team, which was previously known as the Redskins.

For years, Native American groups and others have protested against Cleveland's use of Indians as its name as well as other imagery used by the American League charter franchise founded in 1901. Last year, the team removed the contentious Chief Wahoo logo from its caps and jerseys, but the smiling, cartoonish mascot has remained popular and merchandise is still sold bearing its image.

The Indians have dealt with a backlash from fans upset over Chief Wahoo's removal and the club is certain to hear more with the decision to change its name.

"Oh no! What is going on?" President Donald Trump tweeted. "This is not good news, even for "Indians". Cancel culture at work!"

In July, just hours after Washington's plans became known after being pressured by several sponsors, including FedEx which holds naming rights to the football's team's stadium, Cleveland owner Paul Dolan released a statement saying the team would review "the best path forward with our team name."

In the months since, the team has consulted players, front office members, coaching staff, community leaders, share holders and Native American groups.

A few days after Dolan's statement, Indians manager Terry Francona said it was time to "move forward" with the name change.

"I've been thinking about it and been thinking about it before we put out that statement," said Francona, who has been with the club since 2013. "I know in the past, when I've been asked about, whether it's our name or the Chief Wahoo, I think I would usually answer and say I know that we're never trying to be disrespectful.

"And I still feel that way. But I don't think that's a good enough answer today. I think it's time to move forward. It's a very difficult subject. It's also delicate."

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

Trump says he's nixing plan for early vaccine at White House

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Sunday that he was reversing an administration directive to vaccinate top government officials against COVID-19, while public distribution of the shot is limited to front-line health workers and people in nursing homes and long-term care facilities.

Trump made the announcement hours after his administration confirmed that senior U.S. officials, including some White House aides who work in close proximity to Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, would be offered coronavirus vaccines as soon as this week under federal continuity of government plans.

"People working in the White House should receive the vaccine somewhat later in the program, unless specifically necessary," Trump said in a tweet. "I have asked that this adjustment be made. I am not scheduled to take the vaccine, but look forward to doing so at the appropriate time."

It was not immediately clear what the scale of the vaccination program was supposed to be, according to two people briefed on the matter, or what effect Trump's tweet would have on the government's efforts to protect top leadership.

News that White House staff would receive the vaccine early drew criticism on social media. Trump and his aides have consistently flouted the COVID-19 guidelines issued by his own administration, including hosting large holiday parties with maskless attendees this December.

Officials said earlier Sunday that doses of the newly approved vaccine from Pfizer would be made available to those who work in close quarters with the nation's top leaders. They said the move was meant to prevent more COVID-19 spread in the White House and other critical facilities. Trump was hospitalized with the virus for three days in October.

"Senior officials across all three branches of government will receive vaccinations pursuant to continuity of government protocols established in executive policy," National Security Council spokesperson John Ulyot had said. "The American people should have confidence that they are receiving the same safe and effective vaccine as senior officials of the United States government on the advice of public health professionals and national security leadership."

The two people briefed on the matter spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly. The New York Times first reported that top U.S. officials would get early access to the vaccine.

The move to vaccinate top U.S. officials would be consistent with the rollout of rapid testing machines for the coronavirus, which were similarly controlled by the federal government with kits reserved to protect the White House complex and other critical facilities.

According to guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is not yet enough information to determine whether those who have had COVID-19 should also get the vaccine.

Pence has not come down with the virus, and his aides have been discussing when and how he should receive the vaccine as the administration looks to boost public confidence in the shot.

The Pfizer vaccine requires two doses administered three weeks apart, meaning Trump administration officials would receive the final shot just weeks before leaving office.

Aides to President-elect Joe Biden have been discussing when and how he should receive the vaccine and have been working to establish plans to boost virus safeguards in the West Wing to keep the 78-year-old Democrat healthy.

According to a Capitol Hill official, lawmakers have not been informed how many doses would be made available to them, adding it would be premature to speculate who might receive them. The official was not authorized to discuss it publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report from Washington.

COVID-19 vaccine shipments begin in historic US effort

By MARTHA IRVINE and MORRY GASH Associated Press

PORTAGE, Michigan (AP) — The first of many freezer-packed COVID-19 vaccine vials made their way to distribution sites across the United States on Sunday, as the nation's pandemic deaths approached the

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horrifying new milestone of 300,000.

The rollout of the Pfizer vaccine, the first to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration, ushers in the biggest vaccination effort in U.S. history — one that health officials hope the American public will embrace, even as some have voiced initial skepticism or worry. Shots are expected to be given to health care workers and nursing home residents beginning Monday.

Quick transport is key for the vaccine, especially since this one must be stored at extremely low temperatures — about 94 degrees below zero. Early Sunday, workers at Pfizer — dressed in fluorescent yellow clothing, hard hats and gloves — wasted no time as they packed vials into boxes. They scanned the packages and then placed them into freezer cases with dry ice. The vaccines were then taken from Pfizer's Portage, Michigan, facility to Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids, where the first cargo plane took off amid what airport officials called a "jubilant" mood.

"This is a historic day," said Richard W. Smith, who oversees operations in the Americas for FedEx Express, which is delivering 630-some packages of vaccine to distribution sites across the country. United Parcel Service also is transporting a share of the vaccine.

Helping with the transport of the vaccine has special meaning to Bruce Smith, a FedEx package handler at the Grand Rapids airport, whose older sister, Queen, died after she contracted the coronavirus in May. She was hospitalized in Georgia one day after he saw her on a video chat, and they never spoke again.

"I think she would be ecstatic to know that something that has ravaged our family — that a family member is going to be part of such a big project," said Smith, 58, whose nephew, Queen's son, also got sick and is still undergoing therapy for stroke-like symptoms. "It is very, very important."

Tracked with GPS-enabled sensors, the initial shipments were expected to contain about 3 million doses, with many more to come. Federal officials say the first shipments of Pfizer's vaccine will be staggered, arriving in 145 distribution centers Monday, with another 425 sites getting shipments Tuesday, and the remaining 66 on Wednesday. Doses of the vaccine, co-developed by German partner BioNTech, are given out based on each state's adult population. Then the states decide where they go first.

In California, where health care workers will be among the first to be vaccinated, state health officials are prioritizing hospitals that have adequate storage capacity, serve high-risk populations and have the ability to vaccinate people quickly.

Initial surveys have found that even some health care workers don't want to be first in line. Dr. Graham Snyder, who's led the vaccine task force at Pennsylvania health care giant UPMC, estimates that about half of its employees are willing to get the vaccine as soon as it's offered.

But many health officials expect enthusiasm to grow.

"There's that thought that maybe they don't have to be so afraid to come to work if they can be vaccinated and be immune," said Dr. Sandra Kemmerly, medical director of hospital quality at the 40-hospital Oschner Health System in Louisiana and Mississippi. Employees approved for the first round are getting texts and emails directing them to schedule their initial injection, she said. Enough vaccine is being saved so that each person who gets the first dose of vaccine can get a second required shot a few weeks later.

Senior U.S. government officials, including some White House officials who work in close proximity to President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, are among those who will be offered coronavirus vaccines as soon as this week, two people familiar with the matter confirmed.

A survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that about half of Americans want to get the vaccine as soon as possible. Another quarter aren't sure, while the remaining quarter say they aren't interested. Some simply oppose vaccines in general. Others are concerned that the vaccines have been rushed and want to see how the rollout goes.

Dr. Stephen Hahn, commissioner of the FDA, which approved the Pfizer vaccine Friday, has repeatedly insisted that the agency's decision was based on science, not politics, despite a White House threat to fire him if the vaccine wasn't approved before Saturday.

Speaking to Fox News Sunday, Dr. Moncef Slaoui, chief science adviser to Operation Warp Speed, a U.S. effort to get vaccines developed quickly, also said he is "very concerned" about the skepticism about the vaccine in some circles.

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"Unfortunately ... there's been a confusion between how thorough and scientific and factual the work that has been done is, and the perception that people are thinking that we cut corners ...," Slaoui said. "I can guarantee you that no such things have happened, that we follow the science."

He called the development of vaccines from several pharmaceutical companies, including Moderna and AstraZeneca, "a remarkable achievement of science, academia, the industry ecosystem and the U.S. government, working together."

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

The Moderna vaccine will be reviewed by an expert panel Thursday and soon afterward could be allowed for public use.

—
Irvine reported from Chicago. Associated Press writer Zeke Miller in Washington contributed to this report.

Virus casts shadow over AP's pictures of the year in Asia

By FOSTER KLUG Associated Press
TOKYO (AP) — The year of the virus.

From sports to festivals, natural disasters to protests, hardly a moment of 2020 captured by the photojournalists of The Associated Press in Asia was free of the specter of the disease that rampaged first across the region, and then the world.

Take, for instance, a picture from mid-January, before the pandemic gained regional traction, of a Hindu pilgrim in the water near where the Ganges empties into the Bay of Bengal. There is a peaceful timelessness as the man stretches out a hand toward a glowing sun that hovers like a suspended orange ball just above the watery horizon; this could be from a century ago, a millennium, even. Looking back at it 11 months later, however, after the widespread misery and death that followed, it's hard to shake a lingering feeling of foreboding.

Many of these images capture not only what those experiencing an extraordinary moment must have felt; they also carry a sense of the universal, of a shared flash of understanding in an otherwise bewildering and brutal year, regardless of how specific or individual the circumstances of each picture might be.

Japanese cheerleaders are caught mid-dance, frozen in a kinetic burst of choreography and energy, pompoms flashing, hair streaming — before empty baseball stands. A little Nepalese girl is the focus of intense attention as she stands masked, her hands raised above her head, her eyes closed in a grimace, and is sprayed with disinfectant by men in head-to-toe protective gear. An Indonesian bride's latex-gloved finger receives a ring from her latex-gloved groom.

Throughout, there's a unifying unease: the visceral fear of illness; the sometimes futile, sometimes surreal measures taken to keep an invisible foe at bay; the prevalence of objects that divide people from each other — masks, gloves, protective clothing and barriers of all sorts.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that amid so much turmoil, there was no beauty. AP photographers found poignant episodes of daily life that may illuminate as much about the people living in this massive, diverse region as any pictures of misery or discord.

Dozens of homes in a Mumbai slum are lit up in the black of night with bursts of glaring electricity during celebrations for Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, each sparkling scene etching a slice of life as compelling as an old still-life painting. A man in the Philippines lounges in a hammock strung in the trees over the tops of tombs in a deserted cemetery.

Even that most humdrum of activities — the selfie — operated under the shadow of the virus. In a picture of two masked women taking a shot of themselves in front of some Olympic rings in Tokyo, it is impossible not to remember that the world's premier sporting event was canceled by the virus — and, as we enter a new year, the games still hang, along with much of what we once considered normal, in the balance for next summer, too.

John le Carre, who probed murky world of spies, dies at 89

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — John le Carre, the spy-turned-novelist whose elegant and intricate narratives defined the Cold War espionage thriller and brought acclaim to a genre critics had once ignored, has died. He was 89.

Le Carre's literary agency, Curtis Brown, said Sunday he died in Cornwall, southwest England on Saturday after a short illness. The agency said his death was not related to COVID-19. His family said he died of pneumonia.

In classics such as "The Spy Who Came in from the Cold," "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" and "The Honourable Schoolboy," Le Carre combined terse but lyrical prose with the kind of complexity expected in literary fiction. His books grappled with betrayal, moral compromise and the psychological toll of a secret life. In the quiet, watchful spymaster George Smiley, he created one of 20th-century fiction's iconic characters — a decent man at the heart of a web of deceit.

"John le Carre has passed at the age of 89. This terrible year has claimed a literary giant and a humanitarian spirit," tweeted novelist Stephen King. Margaret Atwood said: "Very sorry to hear this. His Smiley novels are key to understanding the mid-20th century."

For le Carre, the world of espionage was a "metaphor for the human condition."

"I'm not part of the literary bureaucracy if you like that categorizes everybody: Romantic, Thriller, Serious," le Carre told The Associated Press in 2008. "I just go with what I want to write about and the characters. I don't announce this to myself as a thriller or an entertainment."

"I think all that is pretty silly stuff. It's easier for booksellers and critics, but I don't buy that categorization. I mean, what's 'A Tale of Two Cities?' — a thriller?"

His other works included "Smiley's People," "The Russia House," and, in 2017, the Smiley farewell, "A Legacy of Spies." Many novels were adapted for film and television, notably the 1965 productions of "Smiley's People" and "Tinker Tailor" featuring Alec Guinness as Smiley.

Le Carre was drawn to espionage by an upbringing that was superficially conventional but secretly tumultuous.

Born David John Moore Cornwell in Poole, southwest England on Oct. 19, 1931, he appeared to have a standard upper-middle-class education: the private Sherborne School, a year studying German literature at the University of Bern, compulsory military service in Austria — where he interrogated Eastern Bloc defectors — and a degree in modern languages at Oxford University. But his ostensibly ordinary upbringing was an illusion. His father, Ronnie Cornwell, was a con man who was an associate of gangsters and spent time in jail for insurance fraud. His mother left the family when David was 5; he didn't meet her again until he was 21.

It was a childhood of uncertainty and extremes: one minute limousines and champagne, the next eviction from the family's latest accommodation. It bred insecurity, an acute awareness of the gap between surface and reality — and a familiarity with secrecy that would serve him well in his future profession.

"These were very early experiences, actually, of clandestine survival," le Carre said in 1996. "The whole world was enemy territory."

After university, which was interrupted by his father's bankruptcy, he taught at the prestigious boarding school Eton before joining the foreign service.

Officially a diplomat, he was in fact a "lowly" operative with the domestic intelligence service MI5 — he'd started as a student at Oxford — and then its overseas counterpart MI6, serving in Germany, on the Cold War front line, under the cover of second secretary at the British Embassy.

His first three novels were written while he was a spy, and his employers required him to publish under a pseudonym. He remained "le Carre" for his entire career. He said he chose the name — square in French — simply because he liked the vaguely mysterious, European sound of it.

"Call For the Dead" appeared in 1961 and "A Murder of Quality" in 1962. Then in 1963 came "The Spy Who Came in From the Cold," a tale of an agent forced to carry out one last, risky operation in divided Berlin. It raised one of the author's recurring themes: the blurring of moral lines that is part and parcel

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of espionage, and the difficulty of distinguishing good guys from bad. Le Carre said it was written at one of the darkest points of the Cold War, just after the building of the Berlin Wall, at a time when he and his colleagues feared nuclear war might be imminent.

"So I wrote a book in great heat which said 'a plague on both your houses,'" le Carre told the BBC in 2000.

It was immediately hailed as a classic and allowed him to quit the intelligence service to become a full-time writer.

His depictions of life in the clubby, grubby, ethically tarnished world of "The Circus" — the books' code-name for MI6 — were the antithesis of Ian Fleming's suave action-hero James Bond, and won le Carre a critical respect that eluded Fleming.

Smiley appeared in le Carre's first two novels and in the trilogy of "Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy," "The Honorable Schoolboy," and "Smiley's People."

Le Carre said the character was based on John Bingham — an MI5 agent who wrote spy thrillers and encouraged le Carre's literary career — and the ecclesiastical historian Vivian Green, the chaplain of his school and later his Oxford college, "who became effectively my confessor and godfather." The more than 20 novels touched on the sordid realities of spycraft but le Carre always maintained there was a kind of nobility in the profession. He said in his day spies had seen themselves "almost as people with a priestly calling to tell the truth."

"We didn't shape it or mold it. We were there, we thought, to speak truth to power."

"A Perfect Spy," his most autobiographical novel, looks at the formation of a spy in the character of Magnus Pym, a boy whose criminal father and unsettled upbringing bear a strong resemblance to le Carre's own.

His writing continued unabated after the Cold War ended and the front lines of the espionage wars shifted. Le Carre said in 1990 that the fall of the Berlin Wall had come as a relief. "For me, it was absolutely wonderful. I was sick of writing about the Cold War. The cheap joke was to say, 'Poor old le Carre, he's run out of material; they've taken his wall away.' "The spy story has only to pack up its bags and go where the action is."

That turned out to be everywhere. "The Tailor of Panama" was set in Central America. "The Constant Gardener," which was turned into a film starring Ralph Fiennes and Rachel Weisz, was about the pharmaceutical industry's machinations in Africa.

"A Most Wanted Man," published in 2008, looked at extraordinary rendition and the war on terror. "Our Kind of Traitor," released in 2010, took in Russian crime syndicates and the murky machinations of the financial sector.

There was more to come, including a memoir, "The Pigeon Tunnel," and novels "A Delicate Truth" and "Agent Running in the Field." The last, published in 2019, brought his stories of duplicity and deceit into the era of Brexit and Donald Trump.

There were many film and television adaptations of his work over the decades, in recent years of high quality. Recent examples included a big screen version of "Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy" starring Gary Oldman as Smiley, and television miniseries of "The Night Manager" and "The Little Drummer Girl."

Le Carre reportedly turned down an honor from Queen Elizabeth II — though he accepted Germany's Goethe Medal in 2011 — and said he did not want his books considered for literary prizes.

In later years he was a vocal critic of the government of Tony Blair and its decision, based partly on hyped-up intelligence, to go to war in Iraq. He criticized what he saw as the betrayals of the post-World War II generation by successive British governments.

"The changes that I was promised since I was about 14 — I remember being told when Clement Atlee became prime minister and (Winston) Churchill was slung out after the war that that would be the end of the (private) school system and the monarchy," he said in 2008.

"How can we have achieved the poverty gap that we have in this country? It's simply unbelievable."

In 1954, le Carre married Alison Sharp, with whom he had three sons before they divorced in 1971. In 1972 he married Jane Eustace, with whom he had a son, the novelist Nick Harkaway.

Although he had a home in London, le Carre spent much of his time near Land's End, England's south-

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westernmost tip, in a cliff-top house overlooking the sea. He was, he said, a humanist but not an optimist. "Humanity — that's what we rely on. If only we could see it expressed in our institutional forms, we would have hope then," he told the AP. "I think the humanity will always be there. I think it will always be defeated."

Le Carre is survived by his wife and sons Nicholas, Timothy, Stephen and Simon.

Loeffler campaign: She had 'no idea' she posed with neo-Nazi

ATLANTA (AP) — The campaign of Georgia Republican U.S. Sen. Kelly Loeffler is disavowing a photo circulating on social media of her posing with a longtime white supremacist at a recent campaign event, with less than a month to go until the runoff elections that will determine the balance of the U.S. Senate.

Loeffler did not know who Chester Doles was when she took a picture with him, her campaign spokesman Stephen Lawson said in a statement to The Associated Press on Sunday. The picture was taken Friday at a campaign event in Dawsonville, Georgia.

"Kelly had no idea who that was, and if she had she would have kicked him out immediately because we condemn in the most vociferous terms everything that he stands for," Lawson said.

Doles is a longtime white supremacist who spent decades in the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazi National Alliance. According to The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, Doles was sentenced to prison for the 1993 beating of a Black man in Maryland and again on weapons violations in Georgia.

Doles is also associated with the Hammerskins, a racist skinhead gang, with whom he marched in the 2017 United the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia.

In response to a message from AP, Doles said Sunday he had "publicly renounced racism on several occasions in the past couple of years." Doles added that he attended a "redemption service," standing "in front of an all-Black congregation and told my story and renounced all racism and asked for God's forgiveness."

Doles posted the picture of him and Loeffler to his account on VK, a Russian social networking site where he has posted pictures of himself posing with other Georgia politicians, including Republican Congresswoman-elect Marjorie Taylor Greene, the paper reported.

Doles has attempted to insinuate himself into Republican politics over the past year, claiming to have renounced his past while maintaining ties with longtime friends in the white supremacist movement.

In 2019, Doles started a new organization called American Patriots USA, a group supportive of President Donald Trump but deeply tied to the far-right militia movement. Doles endorsed several longshot political candidates in the 2020 election, but also attempted to tie himself to Greene, who had Doles removed from an event in September in Ringgold.

Both major parties and activist groups are plowing tens of millions of dollars into Georgia ahead of Jan. 5, when David Perdue and Loeffler bid to hold off Democrats Jon Ossoff and Rev. Raphael Warnock, respectively.

Republicans need one victory to maintain their Senate majority. Democrats need a Georgia sweep to force a 50-50 Senate and position Vice President-elect Kamala Harris as the tiebreaking vote.

A flurry of top-flight surrogates has underscored the stakes of the race. President Barack Obama headlined a recent virtual rally for Democrats. President-elect Joe Biden plans to visit Atlanta this week to campaign for Ossoff and Warnock. Vice President Mike Pence was in the state last week and plans to return Thursday.

Vandals hit Black churches during weekend pro-Trump rallies

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vandals tore down a Black Lives Matter banner and sign from two historic Black churches in downtown Washington and set the banner ablaze as nighttime clashes Saturday between pro-Donald Trump supporters and counterdemonstrators erupted into violence and arrests.

Police on Sunday said they were investigating the incidents at the Asbury United Methodist Church and Metropolitan A.M.E. Church as potential hate crimes, which one religious leader likened to a cross burning.

"This weekend, we saw forces of hate seeking to use destruction and intimidation to tear us apart,"

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District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser said Sunday. "We will not let that happen."

A video posted on Twitter showed a group of men appearing to take down a BLM sign at the Metropolitan A.M.E. Church as others in the crowd shout, "Whose streets? Our streets." Another video showed people pouring an accelerant on a BLM banner and setting it ablaze in the street as others cheered and cursed antifa. Someone walks up about a minute later and uses a fire extinguisher to put out the flames.

"It pained me especially to see our name, Asbury, in flames," the Rev. Dr. Ianther M. Mills, the senior pastor at Asbury church said in a statement Sunday. "For me it was reminiscent of cross burnings. Seeing this act on video made me both indignant and determined to fight the evil that has reared its ugly head."

"We will move forward, undaunted in our assurance that Black Lives Matter and we are obligated to continue to shout that truth without ceasing," she added.

Leaders of the Black Lives Matter organization decried the attacks on the churches, partly faulting police for allowing white supremacists to "run rampant."

April Goggans, a lead organizer for Black Lives Matter's D.C. chapter, accused Bowser of "sitting silent and comfortable in your home as Trump send his goons in to brutalize your citizens." She said the mayor's statement was meaningless without action.

A spokesperson for D.C. police said Sunday that it was taking the offenses seriously and actively investigating.

The incidents came following weekend rallies in support of Trump's baseless claims that he won a second term, which led to dozens of arrests, several stabbings and injuries to police officers.

Police in the District of Columbia said they arrested nearly 30 people for a variety of offenses, from assault to weapons possession and resisting arrests and rioting. The violence broke out after sundown Saturday.

Four men were stabbed around 10 p.m. after a fight downtown, police said. At least one suspect, 29 year-old Phillip Johnson of Washington, was arrested on a charge of assault with a dangerous weapon. A police report obtained by The Associated Press said at least one of the victims identified Johnson as the person who stabbed him.

Eight police officers were also injured during the demonstrations, officials said.

The earlier rallies of mostly unmasked Trump loyalists were intended as a show of force just two days before the Electoral College meets to formally elect Democrat Joe Biden as the 46th president. Trump, whose term will end Jan. 20, refuses to concede, while clinging to unfounded claims of fraud that have been rejected by state and federal courts, and Friday by the Supreme Court.

A pro-Trump demonstration last month, which drew 10,000 to 15,000 people to the capital, also ended late on a Saturday evening with scattered clashes between Trump's allies and local activists near Black Lives Matter Plaza near the White House.

On Saturday, police took more steps to keep the two sides apart, closing a wide swath of downtown to traffic and sealing off Black Lives Matter Plaza.

But while Saturday's rallies, including one on Freedom Plaza downtown, were smaller than on Nov. 14, they drew a larger contingent of the Proud Boys, a neo-fascist group known to incite street violence. Some wore bulletproof vests as they marched through town.

The group saw its profile raised after Trump in September famously told them to "stand back and stand by."

After the rallies ended, downtown Washington quickly devolved into crowds of hundreds of Proud Boys and combined forces of antifa and local Black activists — both sides seeking a confrontation in an area flooded with police officers. As dusk fell, they faced off on opposite sides of a street, with multiple lines of city police and federal Park Police, some in riot gear, keeping them separated.

Italy surpasses UK for worst COVID-19 death toll in Europe

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italy on Sunday eclipsed Britain to become the nation with the worst official coronavirus death toll in Europe.

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Italy, where the continent's pandemic began, registered 484 COVID-19 deaths in one day, one of its lowest one-day death counts in about a month.

Still, those latest deaths pushed Italy's official toll up to 64,520, while Britain's stood at 64,267, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Both numbers understate the true toll of the pandemic. Counting criteria differ in the two countries, and many coronavirus deaths, especially early in the pandemic, are believed to have gone undetected, including those of elderly people in nursing homes who were not tested for COVID-19.

Among the reasons cited for Italy's high death toll was it that was the first country in Europe to be slammed in the pandemic, leaving health workers to grapple with a largely unknown virus. Italy also has a lower ratio of medical staff to patients compared to other European nations.

Germany, a nation much bigger than Italy, has a death toll one-third of Italy's or Britain's.

A little more than half of Italy's known COVID-19 deaths were registered in the first surge.

On Sunday, Italy reported another 17,938 coronavirus infections to raise its official tally to 1.84 million.

By far, the region registering the highest number of new infections was the northern region of Veneto. Italy's Lombardy region has the highest number of cases and deaths overall.

Largely heeding the advice of medical experts, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte has tightened travel rules for the period straddling Christmas, New Year's and Epiphany Day holidays. Starting on Dec. 21 and running through Jan. 6, people in Italy won't be able to travel between regions except for work or urgent reasons such as health problems.

On the holidays themselves, under the nationwide restrictions, Italians can't leave their towns, as the government seeks to discourage families and friends from gathering in large numbers indoors.

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

Trump raises China concerns as reason to veto defense bill

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump offered a new rationale Sunday for threatening to veto the annual defense policy bill that covers the military's budget for equipment and pay raises for service members: China. He did not outline his concerns.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers say the wide-ranging defense policy bill, which the Senate sent to the president on Friday, would be tough on China and must become law as soon as possible.

Both the House and Senate passed the measure by margins large enough to override a potential veto from the president, who has a history of failing to carry out actions he has threatened.

"The biggest winner of our new defense bill is China! I will veto!" Trump said in a new tweet.

The White House did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment on Trump's specific concerns about China.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has said the bill would help deter Chinese aggression. Other GOP backers of the measure, including Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the second-ranking Senate leader, and Rep. Mike Gallagher of Wisconsin, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, have tweeted that the bill would counter threats from countries such as China.

Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said Trump's declaration that China is the biggest winner in the defense bill is false. Reed also noted the shifting explanations Trump has given for the veto threats.

"President Trump clearly hasn't read the bill, nor does he understand what's in it," Reed said. "There are several bipartisan provisions in here that get tougher on China than the Trump Administration has ever been."

A potential override of a veto would be a first for Trump and would come not long before he leaves office Jan. 20. A two-thirds vote is needed in each chamber for the bill to become law without Trump's signature.

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The president has made numerous threats over Twitter to veto the bill over a requirement that military bases honoring Confederate leaders eventually be renamed. He also threatened a veto to try to force lawmakers to include provisions — unrelated to the military and national defense — to punish social media companies he claims were biased against him during the election.

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.

The 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.

McConnell, in a rare break with Trump, had urged passage despite Trump's threat to veto it. McConnell said it was important for Congress to continue its nearly six-decade long streak of passing the defense policy bill.

In addition to the budget and pay raises it would provide, McConnell said the bill will "keep our forces ready to deter China and stand strong in the Indo-Pacific."

Gallagher tweeted last week that the United States was at the beginning of a "New Cold War" with China and that the defense bill "takes important steps to help us meet these challenges and ultimately win this competition." Thune had said in a tweet that the measure would help the U.S. defend against threats from China and Russia. "It's important for this bill to become law ASAP," he said.

Trump tweeted last Tuesday that he will veto "the very weak" defense bill unless it repeals Section 230, 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."

Associated Press writer Matthew Daly contributed to this report.

Budget toll from virus hits both Democratic, GOP-led states

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

No "blue state bailout" is a rallying cry for many congressional Republicans as attempts to provide more federal aid to a nation stricken by an ever-worsening coronavirus pandemic remain stuck in neutral.

Yet it's not just Democratic states asking for help amid plunging tax revenue, rising joblessness and a stuttering economy. Plenty of Republican-led states are feeling the pain, too.

Just this past week, five GOP governors made a joint statement calling for Congress to pass a relief package to help their states deal with the fallout from the fast-spreading pandemic.

"The people in our states continue to pay a high price for Congress' inaction," said the statement from the Republican governors of Arkansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont. "There is no more room for partisan positioning and political gamesmanship."

Alaska, Florida and Texas are among other Republican-led states where tax revenue has taken a hit.

Sending tens of billions in unrestricted aid to state and local governments has been a key sticking point for congressional Republicans, including Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. The Democratic-controlled House passed a relief bill late last spring that included about \$900 billion in direct aid to governments. One of the latest compromise proposals has that amount down to \$160 billion, but even that appears too much for many Republican lawmakers.

"Under no circumstance should American taxpayers be responsible for the excesses of wasteful states like New York and California," said Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida.

While New York had a \$6 billion budget deficit before the pandemic hit, in large part because of rising Medicaid costs, California's economy was roaring. The state had record tax revenue and had built up \$21 billion in reserves.

Scott noted that state and local government revenue is stronger now than it was projected to be in the

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spring, when swaths of the economy and stock markets were in freefall. That's largely because federal stimulus measures earlier in the spring boosted the economy, which in turn kept taxes flowing, said Shelby Kerns, executive director on the National Association of State Budget Officers.

She said the coronavirus outbreak has affected the economy of virtually every state, no matter which party is in control.

"We have not seen it be a red state-blue state problem," Kerns said.

States have been hit especially hard if they rely on tourism — Republican-led Florida and Democrat-led Hawaii and Nevada among them — or energy. That group includes Alaska, North Dakota and Wyoming, all led by Republican governors and legislatures.

A Moody's Analytics report in September found all of them with above-average revenue loss. Florida's situation is less dire because the state does not tax income, but state officials still expect revenue to be \$5.4 billion less over the next year and a half than before the pandemic.

The bipartisan National Governors Association is calling for \$500 billion over three years to stabilize government finances. The group says the infusion is needed because deep government cuts that could happen otherwise would make the overall economy worse.

As much as congressional Democrats want money directed to state and local governments, many Republicans are dead set against it. McConnell warned in April against using federal aid "to bail out state pensions by borrowing money from future generations."

It's true that some big Democratic states, most notably Illinois and New Jersey, have massive unfunded pension liabilities for public-sector workers. For years, those liabilities have forced leaders to decide between tax increases and program cuts as they try to put more money into the systems.

McConnell's own state, Kentucky, has the third-worst unfunded pension liability. Republicans have controlled the legislature there for years, and a Republican was in the governor's office until a year ago. A Pew Charitable Trusts report found that as of 2018 — the most recent year for which nationwide data is available — Kentucky's pension fund had only about 45% of what it needs to meet its obligations, leaving it \$28 billion short. Out of the eight other states with pension funding under 60%, only South Carolina is fully under GOP control.

Overall, states are still doing worse financially than they were a year ago, even if their revenue projections are better than what they had anticipated after the virus hit the U.S. Kerns, of the state budget officials' group, said states are facing another uncertain time as extended unemployment benefits, help for small businesses and other federal aid are set to expire by the end of the year, even as COVID-19 cases and deaths skyrocket nationally.

"When we talk about the states that are beating those projections," Kerns said, "better than Armageddon isn't necessarily good."

The Moody's report from September found that states and cities face a collective shortfall of \$450 billion over the next two years if no further federal relief comes through. A National League of Cities survey of members released this month found that cities were reporting, on average, revenues down 21% while spending is up 17%.

Across the country, the shortfalls have meant pay cuts for some government workers, delayed road projects and cancellation of police academy classes. This past week, Hawaii Gov. David Ige announced a plan to furlough 40,000 state workers next year, even though the savings would cover less than one-fourth of the state's \$1.4 billion budget gap.

While states such as Idaho and South Carolina have fared relatively well financially through the pandemic, some GOP-controlled states are facing budget problems. In Mississippi, lawmakers this week proposed a budget for the coming fiscal year that would include cuts for universities, community colleges, prisons, mental health and child protection services.

Texas went from projecting a \$3 billion surplus in late 2019 to expecting a \$4.6 billion shortfall by summer. In Alaska, Gov. Mike Dunleavy is proposing what he calls an extraordinary response to revive Alaska's economy, including direct payments of about \$5,000 to each resident from the state's oil-wealth fund and

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an infrastructure plan to create jobs. The state's economy has been battered by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has depressed demand for oil and led to a steep drop in tourism.

In Kansas, where Republicans control the Legislature, Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly told legislative leaders Friday that the state will have to pay for its own expanded coronavirus testing program at a cost of \$120 million for just eight weeks if it doesn't get more federal aid.

Even if Congress delivers some help to state and local governments, some governors said they will consider it only a down payment.

"It's like a 90-day Band-Aid," said Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican. "We're going to have to come back to get the major relief package that we've been pushing since April."

Mulvihill reported from Davenport, Iowa. Follow him at <http://www.twitter.com/geoffmulvihill>.

Associated Press writers John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Audrey McAvoy in Honolulu; and Brian Witte in Annapolis, Maryland, contributed to this report.

Hundreds of Nigerian students missing after attack on school

By SAM OLUKOYA Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Hundreds of Nigerian students are missing after gunmen attacked a secondary school in the country's northwestern Katsina state, police said, while the president said the military was in gunfights with bandits in a forest as it tried to find the students.

The Government Science Secondary School in Kankara was attacked Friday night by a large group of bandits who shot "with AK-47 rifles," Katsina State police spokesman Gambo Isah said in a statement.

Police engaged the attackers "in a gunfight that gave (some of) the students the opportunity to scale the fence of the school and run for safety," Isah said.

About 400 students are missing, while 200 are accounted for, Isah said. The school is believed to have had more than 600 students.

"The police, Nigerian Army and Nigerian Air Force are working closely with the school authorities to ascertain the actual number of the missing and/or kidnapped students," said Isah. "Search parties are working with a view to find or rescue the missing students."

A resident of the town, Mansur Bello, told The Associated Press that the attackers took some of the students away.

The military, supported by airpower, has located the bandits' enclave in Zango/Paula forest in the Kankara area, and there have been exchanges of gunfire in an ongoing operation, said President Muhammadu Buhari, according to a statement issued by his spokesman, Garba Shehu.

"Our prayers are with the families of the students, the school authorities and the injured," said the president's statement. It did not say if any students have been rescued.

This attack, the latest on a school by gunmen in Nigeria, is believed to have been carried out by one of several groups of bandits active in northwestern Nigeria. The groups are notorious for kidnapping people for ransom.

The most serious school attack occurred in April 2014, when members of the jihadist group Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls from their school dormitory in Chibok in northeastern Borno State. About 100 of the girls are still missing.

Silent nights: Germany tightens virus lockdown over holidays

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Most stores shut, tight limits on social contacts, no singing in church and a ban on fireworks sales: Germany is ratcheting up its pandemic restrictions in an effort to cut the stubbornly high rate of coronavirus infections.

Chancellor Angela Merkel said she and the governors of Germany's 16 states agreed Sunday to step up

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the country's lockdown measures beginning Wednesday to Jan. 10 to stop the country's exponential rise of COVID-19 cases.

"We are forced to act and we're acting," Merkel told reporters in Berlin, noting that existing restrictions imposed in November had failed to significantly reduce the number of new infections.

The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in Germany has risen over the past two weeks from 21.23 new cases per 100,000 people on Nov. 28 to 26 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 12.

Starting Wednesday, schools nationwide will be closed or switch to home schooling; most non-food stores will be shuttered, as will businesses such as hairdressers that have so far been allowed to remain open. Restaurant takeout will still be permitted, but no eating or drinking can take place on site.

With the exception of Christmas, the number of people allowed to meet indoors will remain restricted to five, not including children under 14.

The sale of fireworks traditionally used to celebrate New Year's will also be banned, as will public outdoor gatherings on New Year's Eve.

Bavaria's governor, Markus Soeder, said the ban on fireworks followed appeals from hospitals, which said they wouldn't be able to treat the large number of serious injuries that result every years from mis-handled explosives.

"We need to be careful that Germany doesn't become the problem child of Europe," he said.

Germany has set new records in the number of confirmed cases and deaths in recent weeks. Overall it has had about 22,000 virus deaths, a toll that is one-third that of Italy and Britain.

Finance Minister Olaf Scholz said the government would provide further financial support for businesses affected by the lockdown. German news agency dpa reported that the additional sums amounted to 11.2 billion euros (\$13.6 billion).

Employers will be asked to let staff work from home, where possible, for the next month.

Religious services will be permitted, provided minimum distancing rules are in place and masks are worn, although singing will be banned.

Staff in nursing homes will be required to take COVID-19 tests several times a week and visitors to the homes will have to provide a negative test result before being able to see relatives..

The German Hospital Federation welcomed the new measures, but called it "difficult to comprehend" why the European Medicines Agency had not yet approved the first coronavirus vaccine. Britain, Canada and the United States have already approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, and the U.K. began vaccinations last week.

Hospitals in the hard-hit eastern region around Dresden have appealed for people to responsibly follow social distancing and mask-wearing, saying medical facilities were about to hit full capacity.

"Nurses and doctors are already at their physical and psychological limits," the hospitals said in newspaper ads.

Three counties in Saxony, where Dresden is located, have reported rates of infection more than 10 times as high as the government's target. The state has been a hotbed of protests against coronavirus restrictions.

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

Donations soar but nonprofits still struggle with pandemic

By SALLY HO Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — The American spirit of generosity this holiday season may be no match for the coronavirus.

Despite record amounts of charitable donations this year, the effects of the pandemic are suffocating nonprofits across the country as organizations face soaring costs and demand for help, yet are largely without their own support systems, including volunteers and in-person fundraising events.

December is typically the most important month for nonprofit revenues, as Christmas and end-of-year

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tax deductions drive a flood of charitable giving. The holiday campaign season that charities big and small rely on is underway in full force amid a resurging pandemic that has infected more than 16 million people and claimed nearly 298,000 lives in the U.S. alone.

The Salvation Army, already down 18% in funding this year, projects its Red Kettle campaign will net half as much as it did in 2019. That's a \$60 million drop for the iconic fundraising drive being crippled by the pandemic in numerous ways.

Thousands of kettle locations were eliminated because the businesses that once hosted them have closed and foot traffic has diminished as much of the public opts to stay at home. Its pool of volunteer bell ringers is smaller, as many older helpers — some who dress up as Santa Claus — are unable to participate because they're at high-risk for COVID-19. There's even a national coin shortage, in part because pandemic shopping has turned increasingly digital.

The Salvation Army's thrift stores as a separate funding stream are also projected to take a \$150 million hit this year.

The Christian social services charity expects 6.6 million people — a 155% increase over last year — will seek their help between Thanksgiving and Christmas, for food, toys, and rent assistance as eviction moratoriums expire.

"The numbers in terms of the people who we are serving are simply off the charts and how we're going to meet the increased need is causing us to be concerned about the giving levels we're seeing so far," said Kenneth Hodder, the U.S. national commander for the Salvation Army.

But multiple studies and surveys say more people than ever are giving and at greater amounts than usual.

The GivingTuesday Data Commons estimates there was a 23% jump in the number of people who participated in the movement to donate on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving in the U.S.

The organization said 16.8 million people across the country gave a collective \$2.47 billion on Dec. 1 — a 25% increase in total dollars compared to Giving Tuesday last year. That's more than what any single U.S. philanthropic foundation gave in 2019, with the exception of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, said Woodrow Rosenbaum, GivingTuesday's chief data officer.

Fidelity Charitable said it has distributed 32% more grants and seen a 20% increase in people setting up investment accounts for charitable giving this year. But, the donor-advised fund operator, which generally caters to a wealthier donor base, also said two-thirds of its surveyed donors decreased or stopped volunteering during the pandemic.

There have been efforts to encourage more giving since the coronavirus took hold of modern life in March.

The IRS is urging the public to utilize a special \$300 tax deduction that can be claimed next year for cash donations in 2020 to tax-exempted nonprofits. The initiative allows non-itemized filers to get the tax break only for 2020, as part of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act passed by Congress last spring.

Big philanthropic players have also stepped up.

The Ford Foundation said it has already surpassed last year's total giving with \$580 million in grants. It's giving another \$400 million through a bond. Ford and four other foundations announced earlier this year they would borrow \$1.7 billion through bonds to help keep afloat donations-dependent nonprofits through the crisis.

"Even in the best of times, even the most well-known nonprofits live on the edge financially," said Hilary Pennington, an executive vice president at Ford.

That all might not be enough.

When stay-at-home orders were first issued in March, Adam Porter, the Meals on Wheels director for the nonprofit Sound Generations in Seattle, feared the worst because volunteers typically deliver more than half of the hundreds of thousands of meal kits the organization provides to the elderly.

"I said to myself: 'Well, game over. We gave it a good shot but we won't have a program without our volunteers,'" Porter said.

The program has made do with 40 fewer active volunteers this year compared to last, while Sound

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Generations has raised \$200,000, or nearly 10%, more in donations overall. The remaining volunteers, Porter said, have taken on more work to ensure there's no waitlist for food.

Nationally, Meals on Wheels America said its 5,000 community programs are, on average, serving 77% more meals this year compared to 2019, and nearly all of them are facing financial strain because they've also had to buy additional safety equipment and pay drivers to replace volunteers. Though the national organization has given emergency grants worth more than \$31 million to local programs since April, increasing donations are simply not bridging the gap in many cases.

The nonprofit tracker Candid also projected in July that 22,000 or 7% of nonprofits in the U.S. may close because of the coronavirus crisis.

Among those struggling the most are arts organizations, which have collectively lost an estimated \$14.6 billion in revenue to date this year, according to the Americans for the Arts. The national advocacy group projects 12,000 arts and cultural nonprofits are at risk of being wiped out forever.

But as the world recovers from the isolation of the pandemic, Rosenbaum of GivingTuesday said, arts and social services organizations that draw people together will be among the most integral to rebuilding a sense of community.

"They have a role of community," Rosenbaum said. "And a role of healing."

Follow Sally Ho on Twitter at http://twitter.com/_sallyho

EXPLAINER: How do other democratic nations select leaders?

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

The way the United States will formally choose its president on Monday stands in stark contrast to how most of the world's democracies select leaders.

In other democratic countries, heads of government are either directly elected by voters or by a parliamentary system in which the party winning the most seats in the national assembly selects the head of state.

Some processes are complex and intricate, others more straightforward. Here is a look at how some of those countries choose their leaders — and how complications can arise.

SOUTH AFRICA

In South Africa, which held its first all-race elections in 1994, citizens vote for political parties rather than for candidates. The president is then chosen in a vote by the National Assembly. The party that won the majority of seats would be able to elect its own leader as president. The African National Congress, the liberation movement turned political party, has dominated politics since Nelson Mandela became president in 1994. In 2019, however, the ANC obtained its weakest victory, winning only 57% of the vote.

POLAND

In Poland, its democracy reborn in 1989 after the fall of communism across eastern Europe, a candidate who gets at least 50% of the popular vote becomes president. If no candidate gets at least 50%, a second round pits the top two vote-getters against each other. There has only been only one first-round winner, with the re-election in 2000 of Aleksander Kwasniewski, a former communist who transformed himself into a pro-democracy figure. Even Lech Walesa, the famous founder of Poland's anti-communist Solidarity movement, needed a second-round vote to become Poland's first popularly elected president.

SPAIN

In Spain, the Congress of Deputies elects the prime minister. The party that wins the most seats but falls short of a majority must form alliances with other parties to select the country's leader. In 1996, this led to an awkward situation for the would-be prime minister. As votes were being counted, Jose Maria Aznar's conservative Popular Party thought it won enough seats to make him prime minister. Supporters, celebrating outside party headquarters in Madrid, aimed an ugly chant at Jordi Pujol, a diminutive politician from the autonomous region of Catalonia, where Catalan is spoken. "Pujol, you dwarf, speak in Spanish!" they chanted. They had to swallow those words a few hours later when final results showed Aznar needed

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the votes of Pujol's coalition to win easy election as prime minister. The conservatives wound up humbly wooing Pujol's coalition and offering Catalonia even greater autonomy.

UNITED KINGDOM

U.K. voters elect a lawmaker for their local area. Then, the party that wins the largest number of the 650 constituencies generally takes power, with the party leader becoming prime minister. A coalition government might be formed if no party wins a majority of seats. The winning party is almost always the one that took the biggest share of the popular vote. It is rare for any party to win a majority of the popular vote because several parties compete. Boris Johnson's Conservatives got 44% of the popular vote in the 2019 election but won an 80-seat majority in Parliament, allowing him to remain as prime minister.

BRAZIL

Brazil chooses its president through direct election, held in two rounds unless the first-round winner gets more than 50% of valid votes. Voting is mandatory, leading to high turnout, and to a fair number of spoiled or blank ballots. In 2018, turnout was about 80%. The fine for failing to vote is less than a dollar.

SOUTH KOREA

The president is directly elected by a single-round, popular vote in which the candidate who gets the most votes wins outright. A person must be at least 40 years old to be eligible to run. The country's current president, Moon Jae-in, won a by-election on May 2017, two months after South Korea's Constitutional Court formally removed his conservative predecessor Park Geun-hye from office over a corruption scandal. She is now serving a prison term for abuse of power, bribery and other crimes.

TAIWAN

A constitutional amendment in 1994 instituted direct, popular elections for president. Previously, the office was filled indirectly by the National Assembly, dominated by the then-ruling Nationalist Party. The 1996 election marked the first time Taiwan selected its president by popular vote.

NEW ZEALAND

New Zealand's prime minister is chosen by other lawmakers and typically is the leader of the party which gains the most votes in the election. Under New Zealand's proportional voting system, parties must often form alliances to command a majority in the parliament. Although New Zealand functions as a fully independent and democratic nation, its head of state remains Britain's Queen Elizabeth II. That means the prime minister must officially be approved by the Queen's representative in New Zealand, the governor-general.

AP reporters Jill Lawless in London; Vanessa Gera in Warsaw, Poland; David Biller in Rio de Janeiro; Kim Tong-Hyun in Seoul, South Korea; and Nick Perry in Wellington, New Zealand, contributed to this story. Follow Andrew Selsky on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/andrewselsky>

Fresh food initiatives feed, teach communities of color

By CHEYANNE MUMPHREY and ANITA SNOW Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Bruce Babcock only has to walk across the street from his house in a residential neighborhood to get to the 10-acre patch (40,500 square meters) of farmland where he labors to help feed his community.

As a community garden coordinator, Babcock works with volunteer growers and food enthusiasts to provide enough freshly grown produce every week for hundreds of low-income Phoenix residents without access to much nutritional food.

The Spaces of Opportunity neighborhood food system is among several initiatives launched in Phoenix in recent years, following other U.S. communities like Oakland, California; Detroit and Chicago where urban gardens aim to improve food options in racially and ethnically diverse neighborhoods.

The efforts have grown increasingly important with hunger across America on the rise amid the coronavirus pandemic. For example, more than 5 million people in Arizona filed unemployment claims this year and many worry where their next meal will come from.

The Arizona Department of Economic Security said as of October more than 900,000 people had applied for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, formerly known as food stamps.

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Spaces of Opportunity works with the Roosevelt School District, the Orchard Community Learning Center, Unlimited Potential, the Tiger Foundation and the Desert Botanical Garden to produce and improve access to healthy food through farmers markets and distribution programs.

It is located in south Phoenix, a predominantly Latino and Black community that public health officials call "food deserts" because of limited access to fresh produce and other healthy options.

A map by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows such food deserts are widespread throughout Arizona and other parts of the Southwest. A lack of fresh food can cause people to depend on fast food and other items that can make them vulnerable to diet-linked health problems such as diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity.

Babcock began volunteering with the garden in 2015, after he experimented with an aquaponics project in his backyard. He began paying for a quarter-acre plot of his own shortly after that.

Babcock said growers start out paying \$5 a month for a quarter-acre and can later expand to a full acre plot. More than 60 gardeners now work there and as many as 200 have worked under Babcock since 2015.

"We really slowed down over the summer and I was worried it wasn't going to pick back up because of COVID-19," Babcock said. But people returned in the fall when the triple-digit temperatures dropped and he opened up more land for gardeners.

Community interest in nutrition and food education has sparked some of the growth, said John Wann-Angeles, director of the Orchard Community Learning Center.

Wann-Angeles, a former principal in the Roosevelt School District, said part of his interest comes from his earlier experiences working with children, hoping to keep educating young people to build a better future for their community.

Wann-Angeles gathered one early fall morning with volunteers at a Roosevelt district elementary school, wrapping vegetarian burritos for the meals they deliver each Thursday to up to 175 people with modest resources. Bags stuffed with seasonal fruits and vegetables were also lined up for delivery.

The recipients that day included residents of the Justa Center, which provides shelter, food and job services to people over 55 who have lived on the street.

Justa Center Executive Director Wendy Johnson said the fresh fruits and vegetables from Spaces of Opportunity "are a treat among our residents."

"The strawberries are a favorite. The oranges are gone in minutes," said Johnson, noting that residents are used to getting canned foods. "Food is a privileged item when you are poor."

Spaces of Opportunity farmland is also where former WNBA athlete, coach and executive Bridget Pettis operates Project Roots Arizona, the group she recently founded after she retired.

Project Roots offers seasonal produce bags for free to residents in Phoenix, Tempe, Scottsdale and Glendale; sells garden boxes that people can use to grow their own produce at home; cooks soup for homeless people and sells vegetables at farmers markets throughout metro Phoenix.

"There is a lack of access, but it's a lack of knowledge and education about food in these areas that we are trying to address," Pettis said. "That's what Project Roots wanted to bring — the knowledge of food."

The International Rescue Committee, a leading resettlement agency for people who come to the U.S. fleeing war and persecution, has a similar program in the Phoenix area called New Roots for refugees.

New arrivals from countries such as Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan are given lots, seeds and guidance to grow crops such as tomatoes and watermelon to sell or add fresh, healthy options to their own family meals.

Farm Express, another fresh food initiative, has taken a more accessible approach, converting a 40-foot (12-meter) city bus and a smaller shuttle into mobile markets selling fruits and vegetables at cost in disadvantaged Phoenix neighborhoods.

"We're trying to make sure working class families have the same access to the kind of produce the restaurants get, that are sold at farmer's markets," said Elyse Guidas, executive director of Activate Food Arizona that runs Farm Express.

Activate Food Arizona buys the produce wholesale, then charges the same prices to shoppers who choose what they want from a list. Shoppers can use their government nutrition benefits, plus get a bit

more produce for free through a program funded by a local grant.

Matthew Forest, 32, said he was delighted by the low prices he found for fruits and vegetables at a recent stop Farm Express made next to a public housing project south of downtown Phoenix.

It was the first time he and his girlfriend, Eboni Davis, 33, bought anything from the brightly painted former city bus. The closest grocery store is a 1 1/2-mile walk for Forest and Davis, who don't have a car.

"This has been a real experience," Forest said after the couple spent less than \$14 for a bunch of bananas, a few oranges, collard greens, a grapefruit, a butternut squash, a green apple, a red onion, strawberries and a few potatoes.

"This is a lot less expensive than the supermarket," Forest said before wheeling the produce home in a metal cart.

Swift backlash for Brazil students targeting misinformation

By DAVID BILLER Associated Press

RIO DE JANEIRO (AP) — Before dawn on Dec. 1, Leonardo de Carvalho Leal prepared to leave his family behind in the Brazilian city of Ponta Grossa, in Parana state. His mother overwhelmed him with goodbyes and gifted him a bracelet she said had brought her luck. He fiddled with it on his wrist the entire ride to the airport, unsure when he might see her again.

"Maybe I was blaming myself a bit, for leaving so many people vulnerable," he said in a video interview with The Associated Press, with tears welling as he recalled his departure. "But what I did was right."

Leal and his girlfriend of six years, Mayara Stelle -- both 22-year-old law students -- this year created a Twitter account with its stated mission to call out Brazilian websites for spreading "hate speech and Fake News," and torpedoing those sites' advertising revenue. They garnered 410,000 followers, more than the number of residents in their mid-size city.

They also mustered a legion of enemies. Vitriol poured in, directed toward their account, Sleeping Giants Brazil. Believing their identities are soon to be revealed after a ruling against Twitter, they expect they will be personally targeted, for lawsuits or worse.

Fear their families would be caught in the barrage because they had often accessed the account at their parents' homes, they say, is why they left their lives behind and are choosing to make their identities known to The Associated Press and Folha de S.Paulo, Brazil's biggest newspaper. The AP observed them accessing and using the Sleeping Giants Brazil account, and checked the names they provided against their government-issued identification cards.

"Those threats that say, 'I'm going to kill you,' or, 'I'm offering 100,000 reais (\$20,000) for the head of the profile's owner,' will now be directed at Mayara and Leo," Stelle said from a city outside Sao Paulo. "This is a decision to protect our families and control exposure to show we're common people, like anyone else who can have an idea. And that idea can be brilliant, can change things."

This year, Brazil has been awash in misinformation about the pandemic, egged on by dubious claims from President Jair Bolsonaro. It marks the continuation of a digital battle in Latin America's biggest country, with each side in the polarized nation seeking to portray itself as "owner of the truth," as an expression in Portuguese goes.

Pursuit of Sleeping Giants Brazil is part of a growing trend over the last several years to instrumentalize the judiciary against those who train fire on conservative media outlets, interest groups and Bolsonaro's administration, according to Taís Gasparian, a partner at law firm Rodrigues Barbosa, Mac Dowell de Figueiredo, Gasparian who has worked with media and free speech for decades. Often the alleged offenses may be covered by rights of free speech or press freedom. This year, that has included a writer, a cartoonist and a beach volleyball player.

Sleeping Giants Brazil followed the playbook of its US predecessor, which after Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory alerted companies to the fact their ads were appearing on websites including Breitbart News, a platform that critics have repeatedly accused of running racist, xenophobic and sexist content. Companies' ads were often automatically placed through Google, and they decamped en masse upon

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learning of risk to their brands. Video that surfaced in mid-2019 showed Breitbart's former executive chairman Steve Bannon saying Sleeping Giants had cost the organization 90% of its ad revenue.

The number of Sleeping Giants Brazil's followers surpassed that of the US handle as it toppled one ad after another. A top target was Jornal da Cidade Online, a conservative website based in southern Brazil. The site's content has repeatedly been debunked by fact-checking organizations, and a preliminary technical report shows "it is one of the big disseminators of false news in our country," said lawmaker Lídice da Mata, the rapporteur of Congress' ongoing investigation into misinformation, in a written response to AP questions.

Scores of advertisers in Brazil -- among them Dell, McDonald's, Facebook and Domino's Pizza -- have responded publicly to alerts from Sleeping Giants Brazil and likeminded Twitter users about their ads appearing on Jornal da Cidade, saying that they would remove them because of the site's content or already had. State-run Bank of Brazil did the same, prompting a swift rebuke from Bolsonaro's son and his communications secretary, who said on Twitter that independent journalism is important.

Jornal da Cidade claimed reputational and financial damages and sued Twitter, demanding the platform turn over data associated with the Sleeping Giants Brazil account that could identify its users. Twitter last week provided the court with the account's I.P. addresses, according to a person with knowledge of the case, who isn't authorized to speak publicly. Twitter said in an emailed statement that it "vigorously fought this case through several different appeals" and will continue to defend free speech and privacy rights.

Jornal da Cidade's editor José Tolentino declined an interview request, and referred the AP to the law office representing him. His lawyer Simone Custódio declined an interview request, didn't answer questions sent by email about the case, instead saying they will await the right time to comment publicly in observance of their client's best interests.

"The cowardly attacks against Jornal da Cidade Online hide people, businesses and entities that certainly act in their desired attempt to install left-wing radicalism in Brazil or other even more sordid interests," read an editorial it published on Dec. 4. The site has repeatedly denied spreading misinformation.

Danilo Doneda, a lawyer who specializes in data protection, told the AP that Brazilians are guaranteed freedom of expression, but the constitution has the peculiarity of prohibiting anonymity. Doneda, a member of the government's newly-formed data protection council, likens Sleeping Giants Brazil to the pen name of an author known to his or her publisher.

"Twitter can gather the elements, technically, to reach these people, so it's a pseudonym, not anonymity," said Doneda.

Others have faced legal repercussions using their names.

Writer J.P. Cuenca has been hit with more than 140 lawsuits in 21 Brazilian states since he composed a tweet in June, according to his lawyer, Fernando Hideo. The tweet, which appeared to call for violence against Bolsonaro and evangelical pastors, was a Brazilian spin on a historical quotation.

Federal police interrogated cartoonist Renato Aroeira in July after depicting Bolsonaro as transforming a red cross representing hospitals into a swastika; the president had recently called on his social media followers to enter hospitals and film whether they were in fact overburdened with COVID-19 patients. And beach volleyball player Carol Solberg shouted "Out, Bolsonaro!" during an on-court interview on Sept. 20 in Rio de Janeiro state; a sports court warned her she could face a fine of up to \$20,000 and a 6-game suspension if she spoke out again.

Polarization has taken root since Brazil's sprawling Car Wash investigation that kicked off in 2014 and exposed rampant corruption, followed by President Dilma Rousseff's impeachment. The reason was violation of Brazil's budget laws, but her Workers' Party ascribed removal to political motives.

Into that political divide strode Bolsonaro, a fringe lawmaker claiming he would restore law and order to the beleaguered nation, put God and country above all else, loosen gun controls and banish left-wing politics.

His 2018 campaign was turbocharged by social media and messaging app WhatsApp. Media reported that executives had bankrolled blast messages on WhatsApp -- much of which contained content deemed false by fact-checkers -- and in doing so potentially broke campaign finance laws. It spurred Congress to

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launch its investigation into misinformation spread before the election.

One of the businessmen named in a story was Luciano Hang, a Bolsonaro booster and department store tycoon with a penchant for wearing bright green suits with yellow ties -- the colors of Brazil's flag. He denied the assertions and sued the story author Patrícia Campos Mello, one of the nation's more prominent journalists, and Folha de S.Paulo. A judge this month ruled in his favor and ordered payment of 100,000 reais. The paper and Campos Mello will appeal to a higher court, according to Gasparian, the lawyer representing them.

Throughout, Bolsonaro has denigrated mainstream media, often calling them "fake news." In February, he repeated a debunked, sexually charged allegation about Campos Mello, who last year won the International Press Freedom Award after coverage of his campaign.

Sympathetic conservative websites have consistently cheered him on. One is Jornal da Cidade, which the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) characterized as a pro-Bolsonaro site. Its editorial stance is explicit in its suit against Twitter, saying editor Tolentino has sought "to highlight the current federal administration's fight to govern the country, despite the groundless accusations it is suffering publicly."

When Leal and Stelle successfully petitioned Dell to remove its ads from Jornal da Cidade, Tolentino published a text saying Sleeping Giants' followers were "all frustrated, spiteful, criminal and envious leftists," and that his site receives more than one million visits daily. It has 1.5 million followers on Facebook, where its posts about COVID-19 significantly outperformed those from traditional media outlets, particularly ones politicizing the health crisis, according to a DFRLab report in May.

Sleeping Giants Brazil targeted Jornal da Cidade early on, Stelle said, because of its coronavirus-related content. That has included touting chloroquine to fight COVID-19, an anti-malarial drug that Bolsonaro trumpeted despite a growing body of evidence that it is ineffective against the disease. In April, Congress extended its probe to investigate misinformation about the pandemic.

The site published a story with the headline: "A catastrophic analysis about the vaccines against the Chinese virus: 'They interfere directly in genetic material.'" It was debunked by two separate fact-checking groups, Agencia Lupa and Comprova, but not before racking up 191,000 interactions on Facebook. Jornal da Cidade replaced the story with a correction, which has garnered less than 3% as many interactions.

And ahead of this year's municipal elections, Jornal da Cidade hosted six of the ten most-shared links on Facebook that encouraged Brazilians to believe in ballot fraud and election manipulation, according to a study published Nov. 10 by the department of public policy analysis at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, a university.

Cristina Tardáguila, associate director of the International Fact-Checking Network and founder of Agencia Lupa, said Sleeping Giants Brazil was naive in not providing transparency and focusing efforts on one side of the political spectrum, which hurt credibility and handed ammunition to opponents.

"There was a certain naivete in thinking they'd be carried on the shoulders of the people, but Brazilians are ultra-polarized," Tardáguila said. "Half the people wanted to do that, but half wanted to kill them, destroy them."

She added she worried that the judiciary didn't take into account the very real physical risk that the account's administrators could face. The AP reviewed more than ten physical threats made publicly on Twitter. Jornal da Cidade hasn't incited any violence against them.

Leal and Stelle aren't sticking around to see if threats are mere bluster from keyboard warriors. They're moving to their new home -- the location of which they declined to disclose -- where they intend to keep working.

Da Mata, rapporteur for Congress' investigation, called Sleeping Giants Brazil "truly important work, an initiative that helps combat disinformation as a whole."

Jornal da Cidade is just one of the sites Sleeping Giants Brazil went after. Congresswoman Carla Zambelli, a close ally of Bolsonaro's, in August called on everyone who was targeted to sue for civil and criminal charges.

Leal and Stelle say they know their struggle is only beginning.

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"We tried to prepare as much as possible for this. We're betting everything on this project," Leal said. "Demonetization of fake news means dealing with the worst of the internet: racists, xenophobes, and so on. From the moment you take the money away from these people, they never forget." ___ Follow Biller on Twitter: @DLBiller

EXPLAINER: How much COVID-19 vaccine will be shipped in US

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — COVID-19 vaccines have begun shipping in the U.S. after getting emergency authorization, setting off the nation's biggest ever vaccination push. But supplies are expected to be limited for some time.

The first wave of shipments is going to health care workers and nursing home residents. Officials say vaccines should be available to everyone by the middle of next year.

Trucks with Pfizer's vaccine rolled out Sunday. They will deliver to 145 distribution centers around the country by Monday, said Army Gen. Gustavo Perna of Operation Warp Speed, the government effort to develop and distribute COVID-19 vaccines. An additional 425 sites will get shipments Tuesday, and the remaining 66 on Wednesday.

For now, only Pfizer's vaccine, which the Food and Drug Administration greenlit Friday, is being shipped. Another vaccine by Moderna will be reviewed by an expert panel this week and could get the go-ahead soon afterward.

Other vaccines also could follow.

HOW MANY SHOTS WILL BE SHIPPED OUT INITIALLY?

Around 3 million.

When states were told their first-round allocations earlier this month, the figures were based on the 6.4 million Pfizer doses that were ready for distribution at the time, Perna said. Since the Pfizer vaccine requires two doses, the government is holding back the second shots to ensure people can get them.

An additional 500,000 doses are being held in reserve for any emergencies, Perna said.

HOW MUCH VACCINE IS EACH STATE GETTING?

U.S. officials say it's based on a state's population of people 18 and older. Federal officials haven't released a breakdown, but some states have shared their initial allocations.

Colorado, for example, says it's supposed to get 46,800 doses of the Pfizer vaccine in the first round, with more expected in the weeks that follow. If the Moderna vaccine gets the green light, the initial shipment for that shot would be 95,600 doses, said Kevin Klein, director of the state's Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management.

HOW MUCH MORE IS ON THE WAY?

By the end of December, U.S. officials say they expect to have enough vaccine to give 20 million people their first doses — meaning they'd have around 40 million shots available. That's factoring in Moderna's vaccine, which also requires two doses and still has to clear regulatory hurdles.

Officials say they expect to be able to vaccinate an additional 30 million people in January and 50 million more in February.

WHY NOT DISTRIBUTE ALL THE DOSES RIGHT AWAY?

Even though Pfizer study data indicates people get some level of protection after the first shot, officials say full protection means two doses. And they need to be sure they'll have that second dose for people at the right time — three weeks after the first shot.

For Moderna's vaccine, the second shot comes four weeks after the first.

Yet officials say exactly how many additional shots will become available from week to week might vary based on how much can be produced, especially in the beginning, so they don't want to risk anyone not being able to get their second shot.

COULD THE STRATEGY CHANGE?

Officials say they might adjust once they become more confident about the flow of future supplies.

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"As we get more experience on quality control on the production, we'll get greater confidence, of course, at the level of supply reserve we hold back for the second dose administration," Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said in a briefing with reporters. "But we will not distribute the vaccine knowing that a booster will not be available, either from reserve supplied by us, or from ongoing, expected, predicted production."

HOW ARE DOSES ALREADY AVAILABLE?

Even though the Pfizer shots just got the green light from regulators, shipments can start right away because manufacturing and stockpiling of the doses was underway. It was a chance officials took to speed up delivery if the vaccines were shown to be safe and effective.

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

Going 'the extra mile': UK, EU keep up Brexit trade talks

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Teetering on the brink of a no-deal Brexit departure, Britain and the European Union stepped back from the void Sunday and agreed to continue trade talks, although both downplayed the chances of success.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen ditched a self-imposed deadline and promised to "go the extra mile" to clinch a post-Brexit trade agreement that would avert New Year's chaos and costs for cross-border commerce.

"Where there's life, there's hope," said Johnson, offering little else as rationale to keep on with talks that have struggled to make headway for most of the year and need to be finished before Jan. 1, when the transition period for Britain, which left the EU last January, ends.

With hundreds of thousands of jobs and tens of billions in trade at stake, von der Leyen said after her phone call with Johnson that "we both think it is responsible at this point in time to go the extra mile."

All this, she added, "despite the exhaustion after almost a year of negotiations and despite the fact that deadlines have been missed over and over."

U.K. and EU negotiators were still talking at EU headquarters on Sunday, with less than three weeks to go until the U.K. leaves the economic embrace of the 27-nation bloc.

But their leaders failed to present visible progress on any of the outstanding issues of fair-competition rules, mechanisms for resolving future disputes and fishing rights.

Johnson said the "most likely" outcome was that the two sides wouldn't reach a deal and would trade on World Trade Organization terms, with the tariffs and barriers that would bring.

European Council President Charles Michel warned there could not be a deal "at any price, no. What we want is a good deal, a deal that respects these principles of economic fair play."

It remains unclear how much of the gap between the two sides is negotiating tactics and how much reflects fundamental differences that make a deal unlikely.

"Negotiations need to have a purpose," said Fabian Zuleeg of the EPC think tank. "We just spent another 4-5 days not moving forward, so adding more days doesn't really help."

He said the extension of talks just seems an indication "that neither side wants to be blamed for no deal."

It has been four and a half years since Britons voted narrowly to leave the EU and — in the words of the Brexiteers' slogan — "take back control" of the U.K.'s borders and laws.

It took more than three years of wrangling before Britain left the bloc's political structures on Jan. 31. Disentangling economies that have become closely entwined as part of the EU's single market for goods and services took even longer.

The U.K. has remained part of the single market and customs union during an 11-month post-Brexit

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transition period. That means so far, many people will have noticed little impact from Brexit.

On Jan. 1, it will feel real. New Year's Day will bring huge changes, even with a deal. No longer will goods and people be able to move between the U.K. and its continental neighbors.

Exporters and importers face customs declarations, goods checks and other obstacles. EU citizens will no longer be able to live and work in Britain without a visa — though that doesn't apply to the more than 3 million already there -- and Britons can no longer automatically work or retire in the EU.

There are still unanswered questions about significant areas, including security cooperation between the two sides and access to the EU market for Britain's huge financial services sector.

Without a deal, the disruption would be far greater. The U.K. government has acknowledged a chaotic exit is likely to bring gridlock at Britain's ports, temporary shortages of some goods and price increases for staple foods. Tariffs will be applied to many U.K. goods, including 10% on cars and more than 40% on lamb, hurting the U.K. economy as it struggles to rebound from the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

Johnson insists the U.K. will still "prosper mightily" on those terms but British businesses have been sounding the alarm with increasing urgency.

"The 11th hour has passed and every passing moment of uncertainty makes it harder for businesses to prepare effectively for Jan. 1," said Helen Dickinson, chief executive of the British Retail Consortium.

While both sides want a deal, they have fundamentally different views of what it entails. The EU fears Britain will slash social and environmental standards and pump state money into U.K. industries, becoming a low-regulation economic rival on the bloc's doorstep, so is demanding strict "level playing field" guarantees in exchange for access to its market.

The U.K. government claims the EU is trying to bind Britain to the bloc's rules and regulations indefinitely, rather than treating it as an independent nation.

Johnson on Sunday repeated his willingness to go to Brussels or other European capitals if it would help seal a deal. His attempts to speak directly to key national leaders including French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have been rebuffed by the EU, which says the Commission speaks for all EU nations in the Brexit negotiations.

Britain's belligerent tabloid press urged Johnson to stand firm, and floated the prospect of Royal Navy vessels patrolling U.K. waters against intruding European fishing vessels.

But others, in Britain and across the EU, urged the two sides to keep talking.

"Every opportunity to still reach an agreement is highly welcome," said Merkel.

Spanish Foreign Minister Arancha Gonzalez Laya said a no-deal Brexit would be a "double whammy" for economies already battered by the pandemic.

Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin, whose economy is more entwined with Britain's than any other EU nation, said "even at the 11th hour, the capacity in my view exists for the United Kingdom and the European Union to conclude a deal that is in all our interests."

Jill Lawless reported from London. John Leicester contributed from Paris

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More US churches are committing to racism-linked reparations

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The Episcopal Diocese of Texas acknowledges that its first bishop in 1859 was a slaveholder. An Episcopal church in New York City erects a plaque noting the building's creation in 1810 was made possible by wealth resulting from slavery.

And the Minnesota Council of Churches cites a host of injustices — from mid-19th century atrocities against Native Americans to police killings of Black people — in launching a first-of-its kind "truth and reparations" initiative engaging its 25 member denominations.

These efforts reflect a widespread surge of interest among many U.S. religious groups in the area of

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reparations, particularly among long-established Protestant churches that were active in the era of slavery. Many are initiating or considering how to make amends through financial investments and long-term programs benefiting African Americans.

Some major denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, have not embraced reparations as official policy. The Episcopal Church has been the most active major denomination thus far, and others, including the United Methodist Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, are urging congregations to consider similar steps.

The Minnesota Council of Churches initiative was announced in October.

"Minnesota has some of the highest racial disparities in the country — in health, wealth, housing, how police treat folks," said the council's CEO, the Rev. Curtiss DeYoung. "Those disparities all come from a deep history of racism."

The initiative, envisioned as a 10-year undertaking, is distinctive in several ways. It engages a diverse collection of Christian denominations, including some that are predominantly Black; it will model some of its efforts on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that operated in South Africa after the end of apartheid; and it is based in Minneapolis, where the police killing of George Floyd in May sparked global protests over racial injustice.

"This particular event, because it was right here where we live, was a call to action," DeYoung said. "The first thing that we did, of course, like everyone else, was get into the streets and march ... but there are deep, historic issues that require more than marching."

Another notable aspect of the Minnesota initiative is that it seeks to address social justice concerns of African Americans and Native Americans in a unified way,

"For so long these have been two separate camps — Indigenous people and African Americans felt they are competing against each other for the same limited resources," said the Rev. Jim Bear Jacobs, a Native American who is the church council's director of racial justice.

"By bringing these two communities together, it removes that mindset of, 'We have to get ours, and that might mean you don't get yours,'" he said.

Jacobs belongs to a Wisconsin-based Mohican tribe but was born in Minnesota and is well-versed in the grim chapters of the latter's history regarding Native Americans. He cited the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862, which ended with the internment of hundreds of Dakota people and the hanging of 38 Dakota men in Mankato — the largest mass execution in U.S. history. After the war, many of the Dakota were expelled from the state.

Jacobs hopes to see churches commit to ongoing financial support for Native Americans to reclaim their culture and languages.

"I want it to be a line in their budget, like they do for building maintenance," he said. "If all the churches do is take up a special offering, there's no shift in the power dynamics that created these problems in the first place."

The Rev. Stacey Smith, presiding elder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Minnesota and a member of the Council of Churches board, said the reparations initiative places the state "at the epicenter of being transformed with racial justice."

"Truth-telling in our stories is so important," she said as the project was announced. "There has been such a vacuum of missing stories, not only from Black and brown people but our Indigenous people and others as well."

In the Episcopal Church, several dioceses — including Maryland, Texas, Long Island and New York — launched reparations programs in the past 13 months, while others are preparing to do so. The Diocese of Georgia is committing 3% of its unrestricted endowment to help create a center for racial reconciliation.

"Each diocese will make its own decisions how to do this work," said New York Bishop Andrew Dietsche. "What is common across the whole church is the recognition that it's time to address and reckon with the wrongs and evils of our past."

The largest pledge thus far came from the Diocese of Texas, which announced in February that it would allocate \$13 million to long-term programs benefiting African Americans. This will include scholarships for

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students attending seminaries or historically Black colleges and assistance for historic Black churches.

The Texas Diocese bishop, C. Andrew Doyle, noted that slavery played a key role in the diocese's origins. Its first bishop, Alexander Gregg, was a slaveholder, and its first church, in the town of Matagorda, was built with slave labor.

The Diocese of New York, which serves part of New York City and seven counties to the north, was similarly blunt about its history while unveiling its \$1.1 million reparations initiative in November 2019.

Dietsche said the diocese played a "significant, and genuinely evil, part in American slavery" — including some churches' use of slaves as parish servants. He noted that in 1860, on the eve of the Civil War, delegates at the diocese's convention refused to approve a resolution condemning slavery.

"We have a great deal to answer for," Dietsche said. "We are complicit."

Over the past year, a multiracial committee has been studying possible uses for those reparation funds. At one point it convened an online "apology retreat" featuring prayer, meditation and discussions about combating racism; Dietsche said participation was capped at 1,000 and organizers had to turn some people away.

Specific recommendations for spending the \$1.1 million will come later in 2021. But Dietsche expects some funds will help congregations launch their own reparations initiatives, particularly if their churches had historical involvement in slavery.

St. James' Episcopal Church, in a posh neighborhood on Manhattan's Upper East Side, dedicated a plaque a year ago with the inscription, "In solemn remembrance of the enslaved persons whose labor created wealth that made possible the founding of St. James' Church" in 1810.

The Episcopal Diocese of Maryland voted in September to create a \$1 million reparations fund, likely to finance programs supporting Black students, nursing home residents, small-business owners and others. The vote at the diocese's annual convention was 189-31, an outcome preceded by years of research into how it had benefited from slavery and racial inequality.

While Dietsche and Doyle are white, the bishop of Maryland, Eugene Sutton, is the first Black cleric to hold that post. He periodically converses with white people who oppose reparations on the grounds that they are not personally guilty of slaveholding or racism, and should not be asked to pay for those wrongs.

"That is a false conception," Sutton said. "Reparations is simply, 'What will this generation do to repair the damage caused by previous generations?' ... We may not all be guilty, but we all have a responsibility."

Sutton said the \$1 million allocation, envisioned as an initial investment in a long-term program, represents about 20% of the diocese's operating budget.

"We wanted something that would actually not just be a drop in the bucket — it's going to cost us," he said. "We've done that in recognition of the fact that this church, as well as many other churches and institutions, benefited from theft. We stole from the impoverished, from the African American community."

Many of the United Methodist Church's regional conferences are moving in a direction similar to the Episcopalians, considering various steps to benefit people of color. The bishop of the UMC's Florida Conference, Kenneth Carter, has formed an anti-racism task force and says commitments to financial reparations are likely to follow.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has not embraced the term "reparations" in its official policies. The word never appears in a 2018 pastoral letter condemning "the ugly cancer" of racism, though the document encourages support for programs "that help repair the damages caused by racial discrimination."

Cardinal Wilton Gregory, the Black archbishop of Washington, D.C., told The Associated Press in October that initiatives involving financial reparations should be made by individual institutions, not by the U.S. church as a whole. He cited the example of Catholic-affiliated Georgetown University, which last year committed funds to benefit descendants of enslaved people sold in 1838 to pay off debt.

However, there have been calls by some Black Catholics for substantive reparations by the church nationwide, due to its past involvement in slavery and segregation.

Shannen Dee Williams, a Black historian at Villanova University, has proposed several steps the church could take, including issuing formal apologies, investing in Catholic schools serving Black communities and requiring that the history of Black Catholics be taught in church schools.

"Black Catholic history reminds us that the Church was never an innocent bystander in the histories of colonialism, slavery or segregation," Williams wrote in an email.

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Artists, activists rush to save Black Lives Matter murals

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Neither woman could bring themselves to watch the video of George Floyd's final moments, his neck pinned under a Minneapolis police officer's knee.

But as their city grieved, Leesa Kelly and Kenda Zellner-Smith found much-needed comfort in the messages of anguish and hope that appeared on boarded-up windows as residents turned miles of plywood into canvases. Now, they're working to save those murals before they vanish.

"These walls speak," said Zellner-Smith, who said she was too numb to cry after Floyd's killing. "They're the expressions of communities. We want these feelings, hopes, calls to action to live on."

Together, the two Black women formed Save the Boards to Memorialize the Movement, part of a push to preserve the ephemeral expressions of anger and pain born of outrage over racial injustice that triggered weeks of protests across the country.

Some artists began painting intricate murals, but many spray-painted raw messages of anguish. Zellner-Smith started with the simple pieces.

"Some of these boards aren't pretty," she said. "There is collective pain and grief in each board, and each one tells a different aspect of this story. And now we get to tell that story to everyone."

One is the word "MAMA" scrawled hastily onto the side of an abandoned Walmart. The word was among Floyd's last. Now it's part of a database of protest art called the Urban Art Mapping George Floyd and Anti-Racist Street Art database.

"The art was changing quickly, and these raw, immediate responses were being erased and painted over," said Todd Lawrence, an associate professor of English at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, and one of the database's creators. "We want people to see the full range of responses, the complexity, the multitude of voices."

Lawrence and art history professor Heather Shirey were part of a research team already documenting street art. When the streets of countless cities became temporary galleries after Floyd's death, they set out to capture the art before it disappeared.

Although many of the 1,600 artworks in the crowdsourced database come from Minneapolis, Shirey says they hope to expand to pieces from around the world.

"Oppression and racial violence is unfortunately universal, so art is responding to it around the world," she said.

Similar work is going on across the country as groups take measures to keep the art alive.

In New York City, the Soho Broadway Initiative worked with local arts groups to get permission for murals and provide artists with materials. As murals started coming down, the organization returned 22 artworks to artists and collected 20 more waiting to be returned.

In Indianapolis, organizer Malina Jeffers is unsure about the future of the Black Lives Matter street mural stretching across Indiana Avenue. The mural is wearing down from traffic, and with winter will come weather damage and snowplows.

But the mural will live on in prints and T-shirts created by the local Black artists behind the original mural. More than 1,000 shirts have been sold. Vinyl banners representing 24 other murals painted in the downtown area are displayed at the city's Central Library.

"All of us know the mural won't be there forever," Jeffers said. "So we all wanted a piece of it to hold onto."

For Seattle's Black Lives Matter street mural, Mexican American artist Angelina Villalobos, aka 179, mixed her mother's ashes into the bright green paint she used for the letter A. City workers scrubbed the mural from the asphalt after it began chipping, but one worker collected paint from each letter, which Villalobos

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plans to keep on her mother's altar in the kitchen.

"I'm getting my mom back, but she's been transformed," she said. "It's like ... a time capsule of that mural experience and all the work and thought and pain that went into it."

The original artists have repainted the mural, planning to touch it up again in five years.

Designers at the Seattle architecture and design firm GGLO are using a different approach to preserve protest art by creating an augmented reality art show that allows visitors to use smartphones to view works scattered around the city. The show includes a digital version of the "Right to Remain" poster by local artist Kreau, 3D graffiti honoring victims of police brutality and digital tears pouring over Seattle's skyline.

Gargi Kadoo, a member of the design team, says much of the protest art around Seattle was removed. Street art has been erased in many other cities, including Tulsa, Oklahoma, where workers in October removed a Black Lives Matter painting at the site of the Tulsa Race Massacre where in 1921 a white mob attacked a prosperous African American district, killing an estimated 300 people. Other cities such as Indianapolis and New York City have seen their Black Lives Matter murals vandalized.

"This is our homage to the art that is gone," she said. "It's trying to keep the message alive virtually, in a form that no one can take down or hose off."

In Oakland, California, community arts organizations are preserving and cataloging more than 700 murals. The team is discussing plans including a December outdoor exhibition, a 2021 indoor exhibition, and high school lesson plans centering the artwork, said Jean Marie Durant, president of Oakland Art Murmur Board of Directors.

The Black-led Black Cultural Zone has a leading role in the project.

"We've been living this story, this trauma for a long time," CEO Carolyn Johnson said. "That gives us a perspective that others may not have. We know how to best tell this story."

Back in Minneapolis, Save the Boards is working with researchers Lawrence and Shirey as well as the Minnesota African American Heritage Museum and Gallery to document, archive and plan an exhibition in May 2021, the anniversary of Floyd's death.

Museum co-founder Tina Burnside says the initiative hopes to preserve the murals in a way that continues dialogue on systemic racism, provides context and allows for public access.

"It's an important chapter in the fight for racial justice in this country," she said. "We're documenting history."

Kelly and Zellner-Smith have filled their warehouse space to capacity. They started out by hoarding boards in their garages. Now, they have 537 in a warehouse. They say watching the space fill up was surreal.

"Being surrounded by these boards that encompass this pain and grief and hope, it was spiritual," Kelly said.

The group's next steps are to catalog the boards, do 3D scans and build a virtual gallery.

But while Kelly and Zellner-Smith created a GoFundMe to raise money for the project, funds have quickly dwindled.

"They all need to be saved," Zellner-Smith said. "They all matter, and we want to keep collecting. We're just a little stuck right now. But the work is far from over."

Fernando is a member of AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/christinetfern>.

Biden's challenge: Building Cabinet that meets all his goals

By WILL WEISSERT and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Shortly after President-elect Joe Biden's victory last month, Cabinet hopeful Marcia Fudge pointedly noted that Black people are often typecast into positions such as housing secretary.

On Friday, Biden announced Fudge, a prominent Black congresswoman from Ohio, was his nominee for that very role. She was introduced alongside Biden's pick for the job she initially sought, head of the Agriculture Department. That went instead to Tom Vilsack, a 70-year-old white man who already spent

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eight years in the position during the Obama administration.

Those nominations highlight the competing priorities Biden is facing as he fills out the top ranks of his administration. He's pledged to nominate the most diverse Cabinet in history and restore experience at beleaguered federal agencies. He's seeking to reward loyalists who have stood with him throughout his lengthy career and give opportunities to new voices in the Democratic Party.

Each of his nominees has to win confirmation in a narrowly divided Senate that could be controlled by Republicans, depending on who wins two runoff races in Georgia next month. The GOP has barely acknowledged Biden's victory so the cooperation of its senators in the confirmation process is far from certain.

"There's a lot of pressure, and part of the reason you saw such big turnout is that people are eager for change from the Trump years," said Democratic strategist Karen Finney. "That creates a lot of high expectations."

The challenge won't get easier. Biden is facing a decision on attorney general that will come under intense scrutiny from Black leaders, who want someone with a background in civil rights advocacy, and Republicans who are demanding political independence as Biden's son, Hunter, faces a federal investigation into his finances.

Some of those tensions emerged last week during a meeting between Biden and civil rights leaders who pressed the incoming president to diversify his Cabinet and warned about the Vilsack pick in particular. Vilsack has been criticized for the firing of department official Shirley Sherrod, who is Black, during his last stint at the USDA, a move he later apologized for.

NAACP President Derrick Johnson warned Biden that the Vilsack selection could hurt Black turnout in the critical Georgia contests.

"Vilsack could have a disastrous effect on voters in the state of Georgia," NAACP President Derrick Johnson told Biden during the meeting, which was private.

Audio was leaked to The Intercept, which released excerpts.

Biden bristled at such concern, saying, "Let's get something straight, you shouldn't be upset."

"What I've done so far is more than what anyone else has done this far," he added. "I mean what I say."

The president-elect has several more Cabinet posts to fill, and has made history with some of his early selections. He nominated retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin to be the first Black person to lead the Pentagon, while picking California Attorney General Xavier Becerra to be the first Latino to lead the Health and Human Services Department. His nominee for U.S. trade envoy, Katherine Tai, was born in Connecticut to Taiwanese parents.

But those choices were announced after African Americans, Latinos and Asian Americans in Congress voiced concerns that their perspectives may not be fully represented in the new administration. Some nominees will face other hurdles, most notably Austin who needs a waiver to fill the civilian role leading the Pentagon. That's a step some Democrats have historically opposed.

Biden could further diversify his Cabinet by picking Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico as the first Native American interior secretary, giving her authority over a powerful agency that oversees the nation's tribes. But doing so would further erode the razor thin Democratic majority in the House, something Biden can ill afford considering the party's tenuous standing in the Senate.

There's particular frustration that, until Tai's nomination, there was no one of Asian descent in a Cabinet-level secretary position. California Rep. Judy Chu, the chair of the Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, said she suggested senior roles for Asian Americans during the campaign and transition, only for action to come at the last minute.

"We tried to work collaboratively during the campaign," Chu said. "That's why we are worried."

One prominent feature of Biden's picks so far: deep ties to the Obama administration. That includes ex-White House chief of staff Denis McDonough as secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs and former U.N. ambassador and national security adviser Susan Rice as director of the White House Domestic Policy Council.

Biden's team has said long government experience is paramount at a time when the country is facing a historic pandemic and economic uncertainty. But other Democrats are urging him to blend those familiar

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faces with newer voices.

"We have some people who've been in the Cabinet before -- there's a role for those people, especially in a crisis like this, they have the knowledge -- but it's important to be adding voices and lifting up the next generation of leaders," said Rep. Katie Porter, D-Calif.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., also voiced concern that there was no cohesive vision emerging from Biden's slate of advisers.

"We can wrestle about whether they are bold enough or ambitious enough, especially given the uncertainty and what kind of Senate we're going to have," Ocasio-Cortez said. "But aside from that, I think one of the things I'm looking for, when I see all of these picks together, is: What is the agenda? What is the overall vision going to be?"

After a largely centrist primary bid won him the Democratic presidential nomination, Biden sought to incorporate more progressive priorities into his general election campaign, promising to invest billions in new green jobs and make major improvements to infrastructure to battle climate change.

But some progressive leaders, including Sens. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., and Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., seem unlikely to land in the Cabinet, given the transition team's concerns about poaching from Democrats' ranks in the Senate. That's left some activists worried that the administration won't live up to its campaign promises to the party's left flank.

"I think there are some red flags or, in this case, some discouraging blue flags," said Norman Solomon, national director of the progressive activist group RootsAction.

Solomon said progressive groups are prepared to organize to try and block the nomination of Biden's pick for director of the Office of Management and Budget, Indian-American Neera Tanden, because of her past antagonism toward Sanders. They also oppose many of Biden's picks from the Democratic establishment, including incoming senior adviser Cedric Richmond, a Louisiana congressman with close ties to oil and gas companies active in his energy-rich district.

Brent Colburn, a former Obama administration official who served in several agencies, encouraged Democrats to consider the bigger picture as they judge Biden's Cabinet.

"What will ultimately impact the success of the Biden presidency is his ability to build a team that is qualified, tested, and that he is comfortable taking advice and counsel from," Colburn said. "You have to assess these picks in context of the long game."

Associated Press writer Bill Barrow in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 14, the 349th day of 2020. There are 17 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 14, 2012, a gunman with a semi-automatic rifle killed 20 first-graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, then committed suicide as police arrived; the 20-year-old had also fatally shot his mother at their home before carrying out the attack on the school.

On this date:

In 1799, the first president of the United States, George Washington, died at his Mount Vernon, Virginia, home at age 67.

In 1819, Alabama joined the Union as the 22nd state.

In 1861, Prince Albert, husband of Queen Victoria, died at Windsor Castle at age 42.

In 1911, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen (ROH'-ahl AH'-mun-suhn) and his team became the first men to reach the South Pole, beating out a British expedition led by Robert F. Scott.

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson vetoed an immigration measure aimed at preventing "undesirables" and anyone born in the "Asiatic Barred Zone" from entering the U.S. (Congress overrode Wilson's veto in

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February 1917.)

In 1961, a school bus was hit by a passenger train at a crossing near Greeley, Colorado, killing 20 students.

In 1964, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States*, ruled that Congress was within its authority to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964 against racial discrimination by private businesses (in this case, a motel that refused to cater to Blacks).

In 1981, Israel annexed the Golan Heights, which it had seized from Syria in 1967.

In 1988, President Reagan authorized the U.S. to enter into a "substantive dialogue" with the Palestine Liberation Organization, after chairman Yasser Arafat said he was renouncing "all forms of terrorism."

In 2005, President George W. Bush defended his decision to wage the Iraq war, even as he acknowledged that "much of the intelligence turned out to be wrong."

In 2006, a British police inquiry concluded that the deaths of Princess Diana and her boyfriend, Dodi Fayed, in a 1997 Paris car crash were a "tragic accident," and that allegations of a murder conspiracy were unfounded. Atlantic Records founder Ahmet Ertegun died in New York at age 83.

In 2016, Yahoo said it believed hackers had stolen data from more than one billion user accounts in Aug. 2013 (in Oct. 2017, Yahoo raised that figure to 3 billion).

Ten years ago: The White House insisted the implementation of President Barack Obama's landmark health care law would not be affected by a negative federal court ruling, and the Justice Department said it would appeal. Gunman Clay A. Duke fired at school board members in Panama City, Florida, but hit no one before fatally shooting himself. Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi scraped through two parliamentary votes of no confidence.

Five years ago: Bill Cosby fired back at seven women who were suing him for defamation, accusing them in a federal countersuit of making false accusations of sexual misconduct for financial gain. Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred announced that Pete Rose, serving a lifetime ban for betting on baseball, would continue to be banned from working in the sport. Lillian Vernon, 88, creator of a multimillion dollar catalog business that sold specialized gifts and home goods, died in New York. "Star Wars: The Force Awakens" had its world premiere at Hollywood's TCL Chinese Theater.

One year ago: French New Wave film star Anna Karina, an icon of the cinema in the 1960s, died at the age of 79. The bat that Babe Ruth used to hit his 500th home run was sold at auction for more than \$1 million. Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner defeated Tony Buzbee in a runoff election to win a second term; Turner had highlighted Buzbee's prior support of President Donald Trump. LSU quarterback Joe Burrow won the Heisman Trophy in a record landslide vote.

Today's Birthdays: Singer-actor Abbe Lane is 89. Actor Hal Williams is 86. Actor-singer Jane Birkin is 74. Pop singer Joyce Vincent-Wilson (Tony Orlando and Dawn) is 74. Entertainment executive Michael Ovitz is 74. Actor Dee Wallace is 72. Rhythm-and-blues singer Ronnie McNeir (The Four Tops) is 71. Rock musician Cliff Williams is 71. Actor-comedian T.K. Carter is 64. Rock singer-musician Mike Scott (The Waterboys) is 62. Singer-musician Peter "Spider" Stacy (The Pogues) is 62. Actor Cynthia Gibb is 57. Actor Nancy Valen is 55. Actor Archie Kao is 51. Actor Natascha McElhone is 51. Actor-comedian Michaela Watkins is 49. Actor-comedian Miranda Hart is 48. Rhythm-and-blues singer Brian Dalrymple (Soul For Real) is 45. Actor KaDee Strickland is 45. Actor Tammy Blanchard is 44. Actor Sophie Monk is 41. Actor-singer-musician Jackson Rathbone is 36. Actor Vanessa Hudgens is 32. Rock/R&B singer Tori Kelly is 28.