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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:

Multipurpose Gym: 7th Grade girls at 4 p.m., 8th grade girls at 5 p.m.

New Auxiliary Gym: Boys C Game, 4 p.m.

Main Gym: Games start at 4 p.m.: JV Girls, JV Boys, Varsity Girls, Varsity Boys

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.

Junior High Girls Basketball hosting Moberidge-Pollock (7th at 1 p.m., 8th to follow)



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



HSC **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

The service of
Douglas Doeden
Saturday, Dec. 19, 10:00 a.m.
Groton Area School Arena



GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM

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Attendance limitations implemented at Groton Area

There will be attendance limitations at Groton Area home events. The Groton School Board grappled with COVID-19 issues for nearly an hour Monday night before deciding to reduce attendance at home events. At double headers, quadrangular and wrestling tournaments, attendance will be limited to four tickets per participant. For regular home games, it will be limited to six tickets per participant. Students in grades six through 12 will be able to attend without a ticket. Children in grades five and under will be required to have a ticket to attend.

Superintendent Joe Schwan said he was uneasy about the lack of social distancing and the wearing of face masks at the first home game. "Are we doing the right thing?" He asked the board about the totally open attendance policy the district has had. Board member Marty Weismantel said that the important thing is the safety for the kids and to allow them to have a full season. Weismantel, who is also a board member of the South Dakota High School Activities Association, emphasized, "The SDHSAA strongly recommends and highly encourages the wearing of masks."

The policy follows suit with limitations being implemented by many other school districts.

Discussion as begun with a potential coop of football with the Langford Area School District. Langford Area is facing a shortage of players to field a football team. Bringing in Langford Area should not boost Groton Area up to the next division in football. The SDHSAA is reclassifying football for one year, then will redo it for a two-year term to match up with the timeframe of reclassifications in neighboring states. In essence, it would be a three-year agreement if everything comes together. There are many things that would need to be worked out including having one football game in Langford for their homecoming event, finances, practices and school policies. There is not a lot of time to get this worked out as all paperwork for coops for the fall of 2021 need to be submitted to the SDHSAA by January 13th. The Groton Area Board of Education meets January 11th. Langford Area also has to decide which way to go. The Groton Area board decided to keep the doors open for a possible coop with Langford Area.

The board agreed to extend the emergency paid sick leave option to the end of the school year. The current program, implemented by Congress, ends December 31. Schwan said it is likely that Congress will extend it, but who knows when. He said in fairness to the district's employees, the program should be extended.

There was discussion on the 2021-22 school calendar on whether to revert back to a five-day school week or to keep with the four-day school week. Travis Kurth said there have been so many benefits to the four-day week plan. He said students have been able to get more help on Friday, that prep time and paper work can be done on Friday. Board member Deb Gengerke said she notices that Fridays seem to be a "decompression" day for her children and has been a benefit. The board directed Schwan to pursue both a four-day and a five-day calendar for consideration.

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#295 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Another lighter day: Weekend effect should be off tomorrow so we can get a better look. There were 192,100 new cases reported today. We're now at 16,556,900 cases in this pandemic, 1.2% more than we had yesterday. Even with the weekend slowdown, our seven-day new-case average has been over 200,000 for over a week; this is almost triple the summer's highest numbers. Hospitalizations continue to set records, today for the eighth consecutive day at 109,298, and we've been over 100,000 for almost two weeks. We know that's going to translate into deaths; just give it a week or two.

And we broke the 300,000 line for deaths today. We're now at 300,880, which is 0.5% more than we had yesterday. 1563 deaths were reported today. More than 17,000 people died from this virus last week; more than 15,000 died the week before, so it's getting worse.

All 50 states have received their first shipment of the newly-authorized Pfizer/BioNTech coronavirus vaccine, and the vaccinations have begun across the United States. The supply is very limited as we knew it would be, and the first doses are going into health care workers as we knew they would. It is expected to take until next week to get programs underway in long-term care facilities because the consent process can be more complicated, often involving relatives as well as the residents themselves. Let's hope the effort getting underway is going to be enough and soon enough to turn this thing around. And let's all redouble our efforts to prevent transmission so we don't lose this war on the verge of winning it. We have a few weeks to months yet before an appreciable fraction of our population can be vaccinated; we don't want to mess up now.

The current supply picture for this Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is looking like there will be 20 million doses available by the end of the year. Half of those will likely be given soon and the other half held back for second doses. Then by the end of February, it looks like there will be another 100 million doses available, enough for another 50 million people. Then I understand the government has placed an order for another 100 million doses, but because the order was not made before the remaining supply was committed elsewhere, it may be the third quarter before most these can be delivered.

Remember, we're starting this whole dance again this week for the Moderna vaccine candidate. Tomorrow, the data will be released, and Thursday the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee will hold an open meeting to discuss with a vote on a recommendation at meeting's end. That recommendation goes to the FDA's commissioner Stephen Hahn for approval. Then the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices will meet Saturday and Sunday (if needed) to prepare its recommendations for who should be vaccinated. That is the last hurdle before vaccine ships, likely over the weekend, so that vaccinations can begin on Monday. There are reportedly about six million doses ready to ship immediately and more to follow by year's end.

And where there are sought-after, short-supply vaccines, there will be scams. For the record, if someone contacts you offering to get you on a "list" for vaccination or to bump you up the list in return for a payment, it's a scam. There is no list, and you couldn't buy your way onto it if it did exist. You want priority vaccination, go get a job in health care or in an essential occupation. Beware of offers to pay for your vaccine; for most Americans, the vaccine will be free already (although you may have to pay for the administration of the vaccine). Someone offering to pay for it is likely looking for your bank account numbers "so they can make a deposit;" don't fall for it. And while you're waiting your turn for vaccine, be wary also of offers of miracle cures for the virus. There are no cures at the moment, and there is no effective treatment available without a doctor's prescription. Walk away from these offers. There will never be a shortage of people looking to make money off others' misfortune and fear.

We are, of course, being warned not to travel or gather with those outside our households for Christmas, and it appears holiday travel will be less this year than last. It also appears, despite all the warnings, more people are expected to travel for Christmas than did for Thanksgiving—because we haven't had enough yet, I guess.

If you do insist on traveling, know I will be standing in judgement (so maybe just don't tell me, OK?);

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but here are the latest guidelines.

- (1) Drive.
- (2) Along the way, your biggest risk is rest stops. Make as few of these as you can, and plan them to minimize risk. Look at the state department of health web site for each state where you may need to stop to identify areas/towns where the infection rate is lowest, and plan for rest stops there.
- (3) Choose state-owned rest stops or travel plazas over little local restaurants or gas stations; the restrooms tend to be larger and better ventilated. Check reviews before choosing a stop to assess cleanliness. And if you stop somewhere and it doesn't look so clean, be prepared to move on to an alternate location. It's not that dirt on the floor carries virus necessarily, but it would be indicative of the overall level of interest in doing the sorts of things that will mitigate spread.
- (4) Be aware that bathrooms are the highest risk part of a stop. We know this virus occurs in feces, and toilet plumes—a cloud of microparticles sprayed up to three feet high when flushing—can aerosolize this virus where it can linger in the air for as long as four hours afterward. Wear a premium mask or double up on your mask for bathroom visits, and keep them as short as possible. Create as much social distance as you can; try to avoid using the stall next to an occupied one. Choose paper towels over hand dryers, which can blow virus around your face.
- (5) Consider carrying a personal protective equipment kit that includes hand sanitizer, masks, toilet paper, paper towels, and disinfectant wipes in a plastic bag.
- (6) Disinfect common surfaces like gas pumps, light switches, doorknobs. You may consider wearing gloves, but if you're not handling those well, they probably create more risk than bare hands and sanitizer or touching surfaces with a paper towel over your hand.
- (7) If you're traveling through a high-risk area, consider adding a face shield to your mask at rest stops, especially if you have to use small, poorly ventilated restrooms.
- (8) Bring your own meals, snacks, and beverages, or at least only use to-go or drive-up options. The less time you spend indoors with other people, the better. Don't even think of sitting down for a meal in a restaurant, especially in an area with a positivity rate over 10 percent.

The US Department of Agriculture's National Veterinary Services Laboratories have reported a case of SARS-CoV-2 in a wild mink in Utah, apparently discovered as part of a routine surveillance program conducted around infected mink farms in Utah, Wisconsin, and Michigan. The virus isolated was a genomic match for the variant isolated from the farmed mink, so it seems clear there is a link. The agency said, "To our knowledge, this is the 1st free-ranging, native wild animal confirmed with SARS-CoV-2." This is not great. The last thing we need is a wild animal reservoir established for this virus.

A couple of months ago, we discussed Derlin Newey, the 89-year-old pizza delivery driver whose customers loved him so much that they raised some \$12,000 for the best tip ever and then a further \$8000 in the days after the initial gift. A customer shared TikTok videos of his interactions with Newey, and the world sort of fell in love with him. (If you missed that story, check it out on my Update #250 posted October 30 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4125507854132256>.) The money has continued to flow in from people donating just a dollar or two here and there in an effort to ease this man's retirement. Amazingly, he's now up to over \$50,000 in donations, which should help to extend his retirement income, which is one reason he took the delivery job in the first place. He told Kelly Clarkson on her TV show, "I love what I do because I love people." Apparently it shows. You could do worse.

Be well. We'll talk again.

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Superintendent's Report to the Groton Area School District 06-6 Board of Education

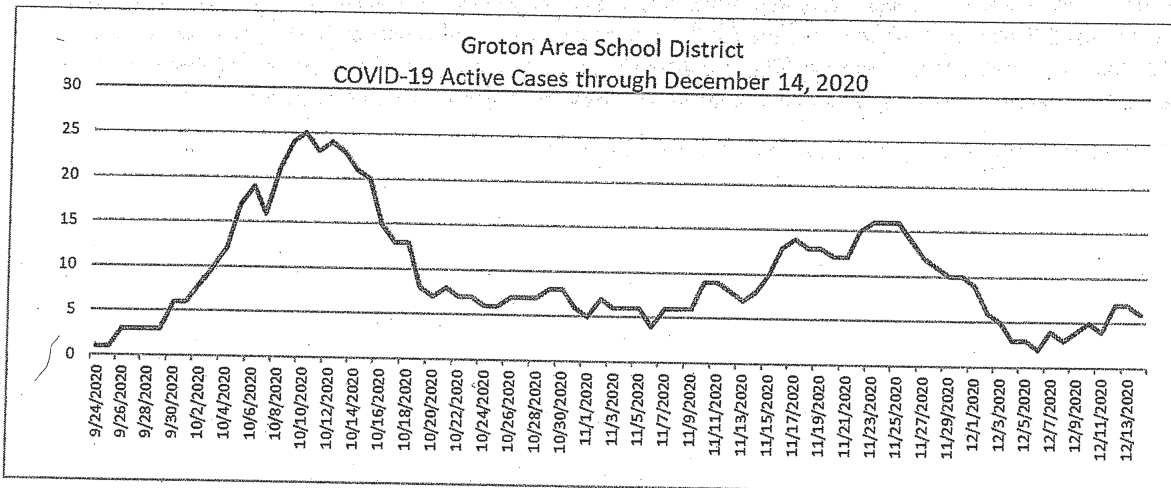
December 14, 2020

Groton Area School District COVID Data Update.

Groton Area School District															
Active COVID-19 Cases															
Updated December 14, 2020; 1:00 PM															
JK	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Staff	Total
0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	6

To date, we've had 75 total confirmed cases of COVID-19 [10.34%] of students or staff members of our District (27 staff members [27.0%], 16 elementary students [5.26%], 14 middle school students [10.0%], and 18 high school students [9.57%])

Brown County data to date indicates 4,079 infections of total population 30,839 [10.50%].
Statewide data to date indicates 83,986 infections of total population 884,659 [9.49%].



Abbott BinaxNOW Rapid Testing. To date, we've conducted 56 tests. 19 have been positive (33.9%).

Quarantine Protocols. The Centers for Disease Control has provided two new options for reducing the quarantine period for close contacts; 1) Reduced quarantine period from 14 days to 10 days without testing or 2) Reduced quarantine from 14 days to 10 days after receiving a negative test on day 5 or later. After stopping quarantine, they advise to watch for symptoms until 14 days after exposure, self-isolate if you experience symptoms, wear a mask, stay at least six feet away from others, and follow the standard COVID prevention methods.

Our current modified quarantine period allows students to return to school and school activities following five days of quarantine provided they remain asymptomatic and agree to wear a mask for the remainder of the 14 day quarantine period. The SD Department of Health is considering the ten day shortened quarantine as the new standard for quarantine periods.

My recommendation is that we continue permitting students to return to school on six following exposure under the condition that they remain asymptomatic and agree to wear a mask through the ten day quarantine period.

FFCRA Leave Entitlements. The initial round of federal coronavirus relief bills passed in Congress included leave protection for school employees. There are two different types of leave that we are required to provide for our employees; Emergency Paid Sick Leave that provides up to 80 hours of Emergency Sick Leave for six specified reasons

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and Expanded Family Medical Leave that provides up to 12 weeks of job protected leave for employees who are caring for children whose school or place of care is closed due to COVID-19. Both are set to expire on December 31, 2020 but likely to return if Congress will agree on a new relief bill.

My recommendation is that we operate the program through the school year subject to the limitations established in the initial legislation.

Winter Sports. The SDHSAA has left in place its recommendation for tiered attendance that we reviewed last fall and adopted a motion to encourage the limiting of fan attendance and masking at its events. We have had one home varsity basketball game that was well attended with very few in attendance following social distancing and mask recommendations.

2021 Legislative Session. Governor Noem presented her budget recommendations to the legislature on Tuesday, December 8. Notable for K-12 education is a proposed 2.4% increase to state aid for school fiscal year 2022 along with the allocation of \$11M in one time funds distributed to school districts based on the difference between a school district's historical growth and their fall 2020 enrollment.

It is important for us to remember that a 2.4% increase in state aid to education doesn't correlate to a 2.4% increase in general fund revenues. Our general fund revenue depends on changes to our property valuations combined with the levies established by the legislature to generate the appropriate amount of education funding on a statewide basis. Generally, an increase to state aid requires a proportional increase to the statewide property tax collection for education. Levies are determined based on changes to the overall property valuations across the state.

The first day of the 2021 legislative session is Tuesday, January 12.

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Principal's Report

MS/HS Building

Mrs. Sombke

December 14, 2020

1) **WorkKeys Assessment/National Career Readiness Certificate Program**

- 47 Total Students Participated in the Assessment for the 2020-2021 School Year; 3 students did not complete testing
- Platinum, Gold, Silver, and Bronze
- Skill-level Breakdown and Certificate-level Breakdown
- Statewide School Results
- College and Career Readiness Article: District Administration, November/December 2020

2) **SDCNA (South Dakota Comprehensive Needs Assessment) Process, Planning, and Application into the 2020-2021 School Year**

- School Success Action Plan: MS/HS Building Grades 6-12
- Action Plan Item #5: Lesson Plan Revision and Improvement will include the creation and submission of weekly lesson plans that demonstrate the planning and incorporation of Evidenced Based Teaching Strategies, to include differentiation of instruction, listing of content standard being met, and plans that are both vertically and horizontally aligned across content areas and grade levels.
- Initial Action Plan called for Certified Staff Professional Development to support all Certified Staff in their acquisition of the new Planbook Lesson Planning Platform
- Due to the need for staff to focus their time and energies toward gaining instructional proficiency on the Brightspace Platform, Planbook Professional Development had been postponed until the Spring of 2021 Inservice
- Many Certified Staff in the MS/HS Building have "worked ahead", and have begun to use the Planbook site; creating and submitting lesson plans that demonstrate the inclusion of the components listed in the Action Plan; see samples of previous plans and current plans
- Certified Staff will receive Professional Development Training during Inservice 2021 to support using the new Planbook Platform, and being prepared to use and document the Action Plan Items within their weekly lesson plans
- See comparison examples for content areas of **HS Science, Math, and Grade 8 Reading**

3) **Enrollment Update**

MS 2019 Dec	MS 2020 Dec	HS 2019 Dec	HS 2020 Dec
6-47	6-44	9-45	9-45
7-42	7-49	10-44	10-48
8-44	8-51	11-51	11-46
Total=133	Total=144	12-43	12-51
		Total=183	Total=190

December 2019 Total=316

December 2020 Total=334

4) **Groton Area-Accuplacer Assessment Site during COVID 19 parameters and time frame**

- **Mrs. Sombke:** Testing Supervisor for students needing to complete assessment before placement into a Dual Credit Course at **NSU**
- **Mrs. Schwan:** Testing Supervisor for students needing to complete assessment before placement into a Dual Credit Course at **Lake Area Technical Institute**

5) **Curriculum Guidebook 2021-2022 School Year**

- February 8-11, 2021: Class Registration for **2021-2022** School Year

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Elementary Principal Report

Brett Schwan

12/14/20

1. Enrollment
 - a. PS-12
 - b. JK-20
 - c. KG-37
 - d. 1st-48
 - e. 2nd-47
 - f. 3rd-45 (1 remote)
 - g. 4th-42 (1 remote)
 - h. 5th-52 (1 remote)
2. School will be dismissing at 2:00 on Tuesday, December 22nd.
3. OST would like to thank all the students and families who participated in the coffee fundraiser. We were able to raise over \$5,000. OST will be closed after school on December 22nd.
4. Elementary Concert will be held at 10:00 on Tuesday, December 22nd. Paper Paul will be livestreaming it. If families want to watch it at a later time or date they can contact Paul for further information and subscription information.
5. Teachers are currently administering the DIBELS winter benchmark assessments as well as the STAR reading and math assessments. These assessments give teachers a nice snapshot of how their students are progressing and what skills need to be further examined. These two assessments also help teachers identify students who need additional support and interventions. They have been especially helpful this year after coming off a long spring/summer break due to Covid.
6. Building Academic Groton Students for tomorrow...(BAGS). The BAGS program is currently distributing 55 bags for students in the elementary and MS/HS. We are always looking for donations to help fund our program.
7. Waiting to hear back with quotes for the 2 tire swings that are currently out of commission.
8. Staff update

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December 14th COVID-19 UPDATE

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from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota:

Community Spread Update:

Substantial: Faulk upgraded from Moderate to Substantial

Moderate: Harding, McPherson (downgraded from Substantial), Hand (downgraded from Substantial), Jerauld, Sully, Stanley (downgraded from Substantial).

Minimal: Campbell, Hyde (downgraded from Moderate), Jones (downgraded from Moderate).

Positive: +317 (91354 total) Positivity Rate: 9.9%

Total Tests: 3196 (686,766 total)

Hospitalized: +26 (5200 total). 441 currently hospitalized +5)

Deaths: +0 (1259 total)

Recovered: +1225 (77,472 total)

Active Cases: -294 (12,623)

Percent Recovered: 84.8%

Beadle (32) +1 positive, +5 recovered (224 active cases)

Brookings (24) +9 positive, +6 recovered (327 active cases)

Brown (44): +12 positive, +21 recovered (517 active cases)

Clark (1): +1 positive, +3 recovered (50 active cases)

Clay (11): +0 positive, +4 recovered (193 active cases)

Codington (59): +9 positive, +12 recovered (488 active cases)

Davison (50): +5 positive, +7 recovered (276 active cases)

Day (14): +5 positive, +2 recovered (113 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +2 positive, +3 recovered (58 active cases)

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

Grant (20): +2 positive, +3 recovered (146 active cases)

Hanson (3): +2 positive, +4 recovered (38 active cases)

Hughes (25): +5 positive, +2 recovered (242 active cases)

Lawrence (26): +10 positive, +12 recovered (332 active cases)

Lincoln (57): +24 positive, +30 recovered (774 active cases)

Marshall (3): +0 positive, +1 recovered (39 active cases)

McCook (21): +0 positive, +3 recovered (66 active cases)

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

Minnehaha (232): +66 positive, +98 recovered (3058 active cases)

Pennington (116): +56 positive, +65 recovered (1567 active cases)

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

Roberts (23): +4 positive, +2 recovered (167 active cases)

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

Walworth (13): +5 positive, +2 recovered (114 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 14:

- 7.8% rolling 14-day positivity
- 201 new positives
- 3,311 susceptible test encounters
- 277 currently hospitalized (+7)
- 3,592 active cases (-100)
- 1,157 total deaths (+5)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	391	341	741	7	Substantial	7.89%
Beadle	2425	2168	4923	32	Substantial	9.56%
Bennett	340	305	1062	5	Substantial	4.46%
Bon Homme	1425	1324	1809	21	Substantial	22.50%
Brookings	2730	2379	9356	24	Substantial	11.67%
Brown	4079	3518	10687	44	Substantial	17.62%
Brule	611	549	1639	5	Substantial	26.00%
Buffalo	401	371	838	10	Substantial	26.19%
Butte	809	702	2734	15	Substantial	20.54%
Campbell	109	102	202	1	Minimal	6.67%
Charles Mix	1030	854	3437	10	Substantial	27.42%
Clark	291	240	820	1	Substantial	6.25%
Clay	1508	1304	4332	11	Substantial	17.42%
Codington	3139	2593	7950	59	Substantial	21.28%
Corson	432	389	871	5	Substantial	22.64%
Custer	630	528	2293	8	Substantial	21.66%
Davison	2583	2256	5497	51	Substantial	13.88%
Day	468	341	1450	14	Substantial	17.95%
Deuel	372	297	945	5	Substantial	18.60%
Dewey	1169	857	3380	7	Substantial	30.23%
Douglas	341	290	794	6	Substantial	18.09%
Edmunds	304	243	874	3	Substantial	16.81%
Fall River	398	346	2203	10	Substantial	17.76%
Faulk	301	266	581	10	Substantial	23.08%
Grant	772	606	1840	20	Substantial	22.16%
Gregory	462	402	1043	24	Substantial	12.50%
Haakon	195	149	459	3	Substantial	21.43%
Hamlin	553	449	1447	28	Substantial	9.26%
Hand	302	279	682	2	Moderate	11.54%
Hanson	290	249	564	3	Substantial	16.28%
Harding	86	68	146	0	Moderate	21.43%
Hughes	1861	1594	5268	25	Substantial	12.33%
Hutchinson	650	533	1933	14	Substantial	23.60%

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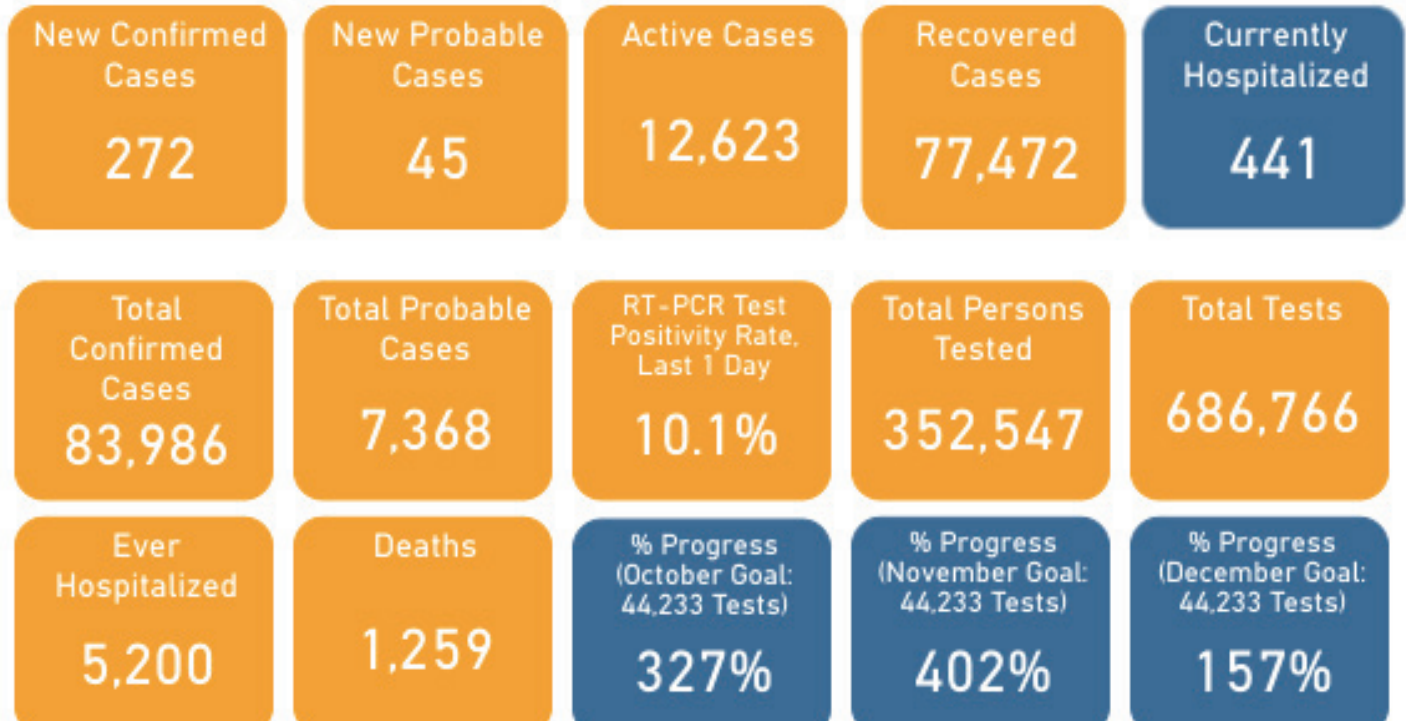
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Hyde	128	113	347	0	Minimal	12.50%
Jackson	252	191	839	8	Substantial	44.29%
Jerauld	252	221	474	15	Moderate	23.81%
Jones	63	59	177	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	486	418	1347	13	Substantial	12.66%
Lake	946	827	2661	12	Substantial	18.24%
Lawrence	2338	1980	7312	26	Substantial	17.95%
Lincoln	6132	5260	16459	57	Substantial	22.18%
Lyman	498	444	1643	9	Substantial	10.84%
Marshall	229	187	954	3	Substantial	24.68%
McCook	634	547	1343	21	Substantial	24.29%
McPherson	162	130	485	1	Moderate	3.97%
Meade	2037	1690	6429	20	Substantial	21.25%
Mellette	208	175	640	1	Substantial	21.43%
Miner	214	181	480	6	Substantial	4.35%
Minnehaha	23188	19888	64387	232	Substantial	19.39%
Moody	489	401	1530	13	Substantial	33.73%
Oglala Lakota	1796	1544	6097	31	Substantial	15.11%
Pennington	10062	8379	32266	116	Substantial	23.58%
Perkins	243	179	618	3	Substantial	15.56%
Potter	291	261	684	2	Substantial	13.33%
Roberts	866	676	3646	23	Substantial	25.94%
Sanborn	297	249	579	3	Substantial	12.12%
Spink	655	516	1804	20	Substantial	18.48%
Stanley	248	222	721	2	Moderate	12.20%
Sully	102	87	231	3	Moderate	0.00%
Todd	1093	952	3709	17	Substantial	17.28%
Tripp	589	494	1287	10	Substantial	15.49%
Turner	893	750	2276	47	Substantial	17.59%
Union	1436	1191	5110	25	Substantial	18.62%
Walworth	575	448	1571	13	Substantial	26.80%
Yankton	2225	1744	7816	17	Substantial	22.83%
Ziebach	270	176	604	7	Substantial	33.33%
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	3300	0
10-19 years	10020	0
20-29 years	16918	3
30-39 years	15164	12
40-49 years	13033	21
50-59 years	12991	63
60-69 years	10278	160
70-79 years	5394	264
80+ years	4256	736

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	47768	616
Male	43586	643

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Brown County

New Confirmed Cases

12

New Probable Cases

0

Active Cases

517

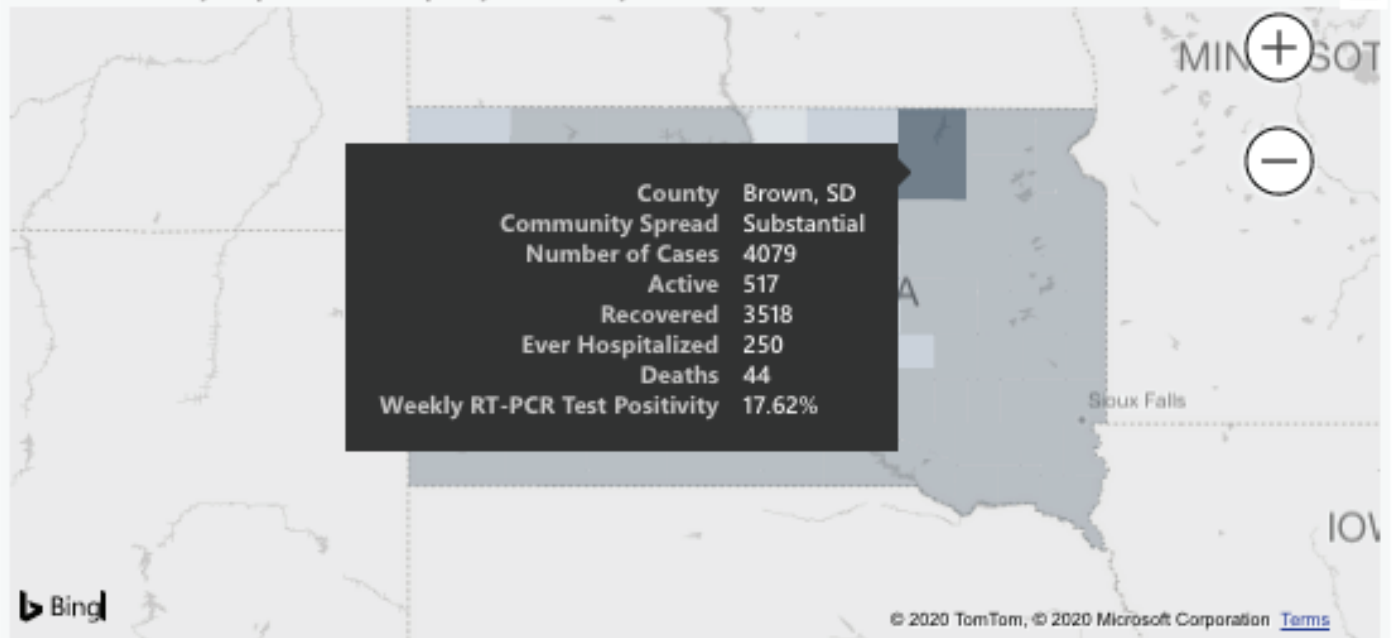
Recovered Cases

3,518

Currently Hospitalized

441

Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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

Total Confirmed Cases

3,898

Total Probable Cases

181

RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate, Last 1 Day

7.6%

Total Persons Tested

14,766

Total Tests

32,212

Ever Hospitalized

250

Deaths

44

% Progress (October Goal: 44,233 Tests)

327%

% Progress (November Goal: 44,233 Tests)

402%

% Progress (December Goal: 44,233 Tests)

157%

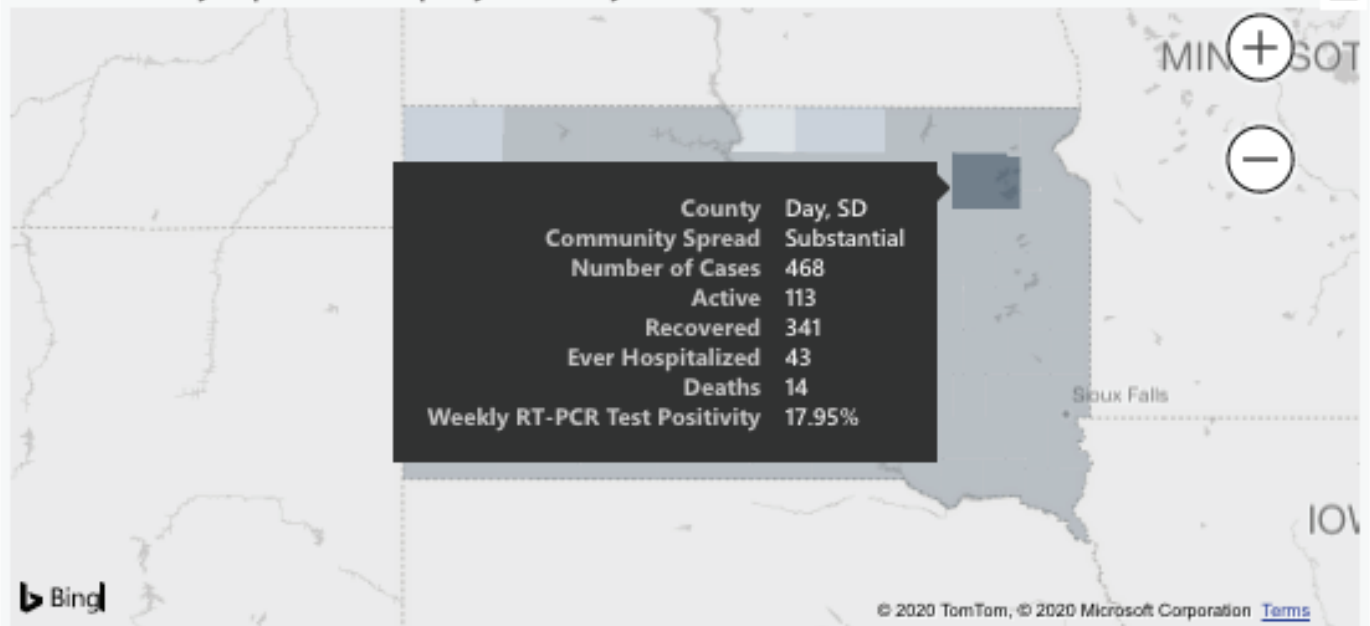
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Day County

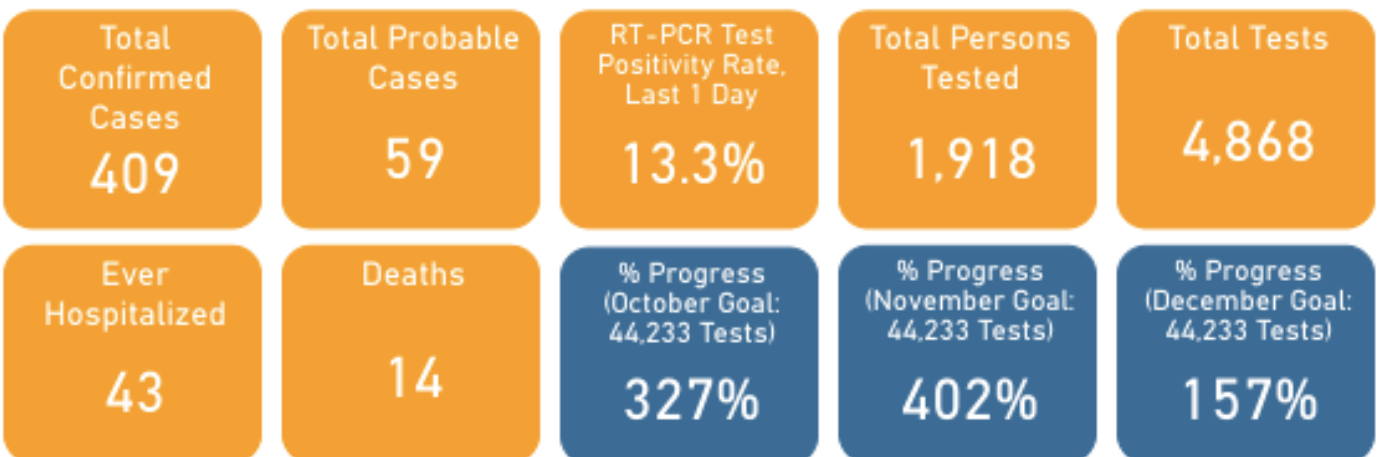


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

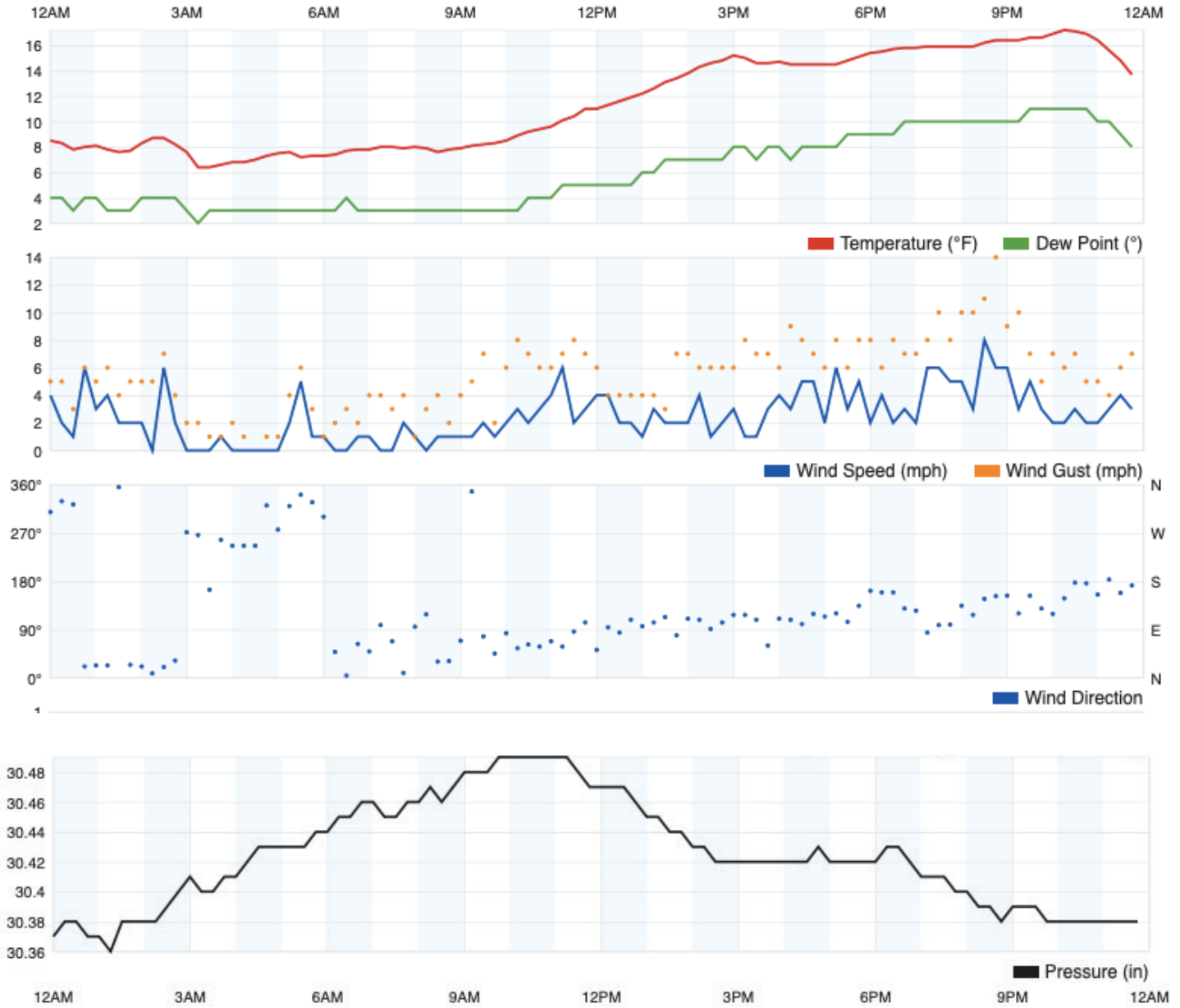
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Decreasing
Clouds

High: 25 °F

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: 14 °F

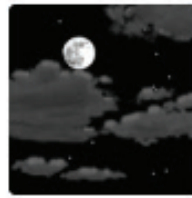
Wednesday



Partly Sunny

High: 33 °F

Wednesday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 14 °F

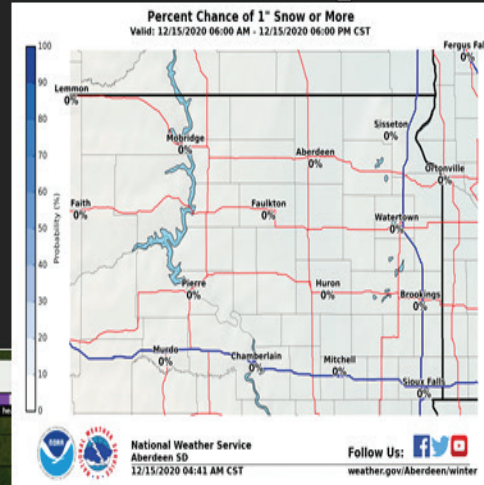
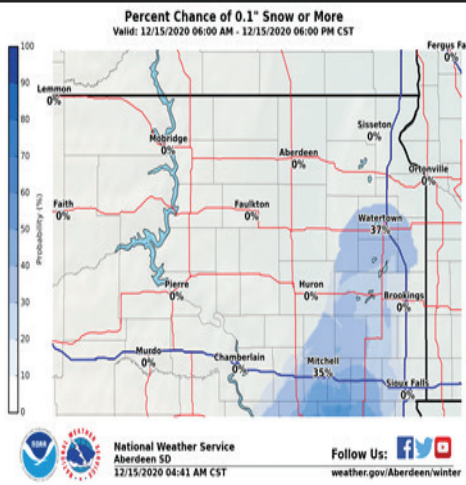
Thursday



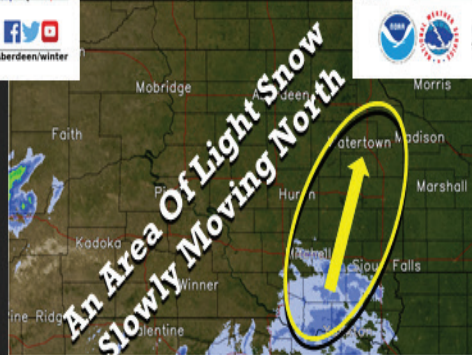
Mostly Sunny

High: 36 °F

A Little Light Snow Today



3:00am Tuesday Radar



National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Updated: 12/15/2020 5:07 AM Central

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 15, 1983: A storm system impacted the region on the 14-15th with five inches of snow and high winds to produce blocked roads and numerous school closings on the 15th throughout most of the eastern third of South Dakota. No travel was advised from late afternoon on the 14th due to low visibility and blocked roads in Roberts and Brookings Counties. The conditions contributed some to several traffic accidents. Meanwhile, snow also spread across Minnesota on December 13th and diminished late on the 15th. Snow accumulations ranged from 1 to 2 inches in west central Minnesota to higher amounts over 10 inches to the east. Winds increased and temperatures began to fall on December 14th as an arctic cold front pushed through the state. The strongest winds occurred during the night of December 14th and into the morning of December 15th. Near-blizzard conditions developed in the southwest and west-central sections of Minnesota where the visibility was reported to be near zero with winds of 20 to 30 mph. The wind chill index dropped to 30 below to 60 below zero. Blowing and drifting snow conditions occurred to some degree throughout all of Minnesota. Snow drifts caused many roads to close. Drifting snow continued during the evening of December 15th as the winds and snowfall gradually diminished. This event, associated with an arctic cold front, was the beginning of what would become, and remains, the coldest stretch of December days on record across most of the area. For the next nine days, beginning on December 16th, Aberdeen did not warm above -6 degrees, enduring temperatures as low as -34 F and high temperatures as low as -15 F. Other stations around the region had very similar cold temperatures during the December 16th through December 24th period, with temperatures warming into single digits above zero on Christmas Day.

December 15, 1992: Cyclone John hit the sparsely populated northwest coast of Australia with winds gusting to 185 mph. John was the strongest cyclone to hit Australia in over 100 years.

1839 - The first of triple storms hit Massachusetts Bay. The storm produced whole gales, and more than 20 inches of snow in interior New England. There was great loss of life at Gloucester MA. (David Ludlum)

1901 - An intense cold front swept across the eastern U.S. The cold front produced heavy rain in Louisiana, and heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. (David Ludlum)

1945 - A record December snowstorm buried Buffalo, NY, under 36.6 inches of snow, with unofficial totals south of the city ranging up to 70 inches. Travel was brought to a halt by the storm. (14th-17th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm hit the Great Lakes Region, intensifying explosively as it crossed northern Illinois. High winds and heavy snow created blizzard conditions in southeastern Wisconsin. Winds gusted to 73 mph, and snowfall totals ranged up to 17 inches at LaFarge. The barometric pressure at Chicago IL dropped three quarters of an inch in six hours to 28.96 inches, a record low reading for December. Up to a foot of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and winds in the Chicago area gusted to 75 mph. O'Hare Airport in Chicago was closed for several hours, for only the fourth time in twenty years. High winds derailed train cars at Avon IN. Light winds and partly sunny skies were reported near the center of the storm, a feature typical of tropical storms. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - High pressure in the Pacific Northwest and low pressure in the southwestern U.S. combined to produce high winds from Utah to California. Winds gusting to 70 mph in the San Francisco area left nearly 300,000 residents without electricity. Winds in Utah gusted to 105 mph at Centerville. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A couple of low pressure systems spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S. Up to two feet of snow was reported along Lake Erie in northeastern Ohio, and up to ten inches was reported in Connecticut. Heavy snow squalls developed over Michigan for the third day in a row. Three Oaks MI reported 25 inches of snow in two days. Twenty-six cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 10 degrees below zero at Wichita KS was a December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

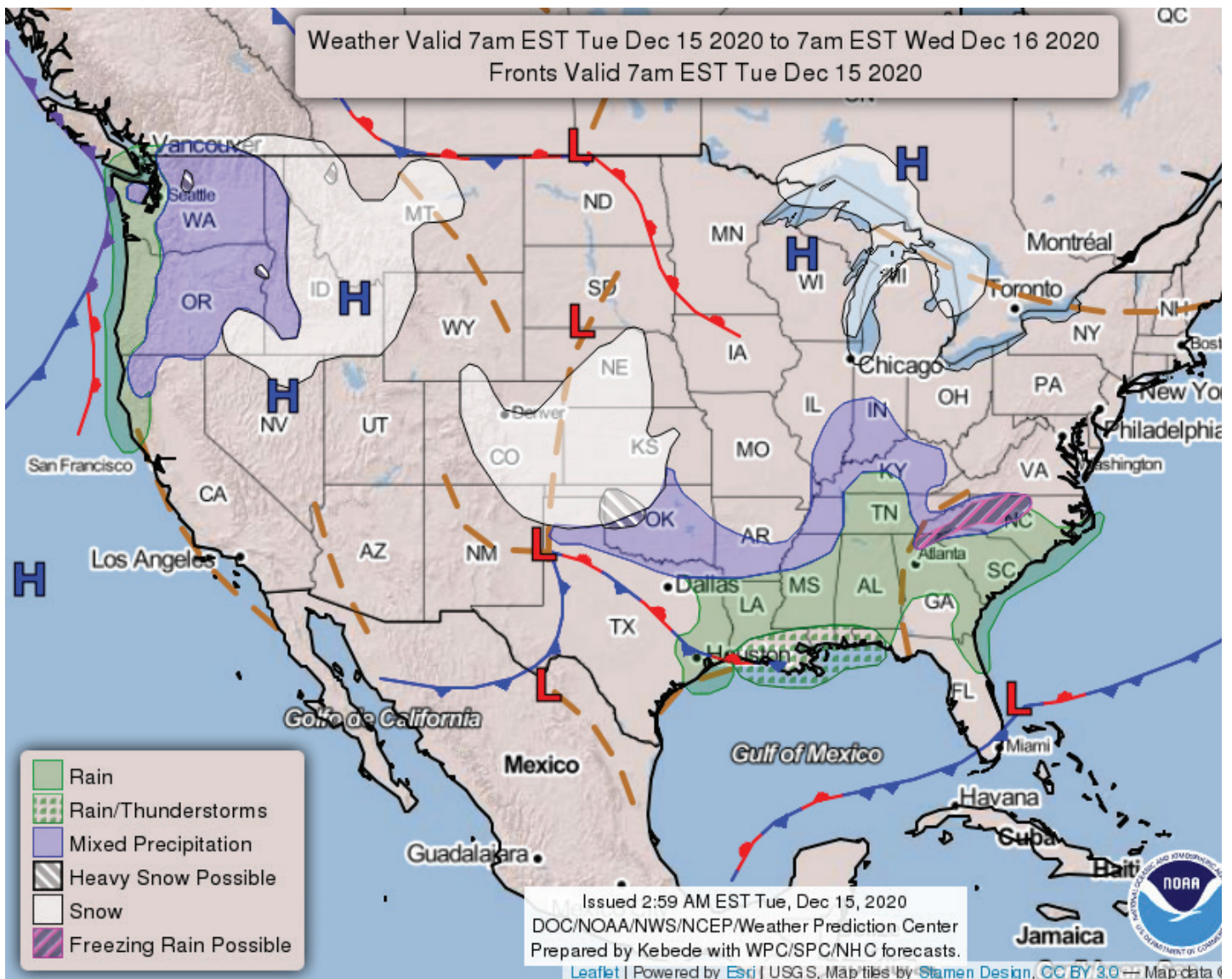
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 17 °F at 10:14 PM
Low Temp: 6 °F at 3:19 AM
Wind: 14 mph at 8:41 PM
Precip: .00

Record High: 60° in 1939
Record Low: -24° in 1917
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 6°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.24
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.44
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:51 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:08 a.m.



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PLANNING AHEAD

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the teacher of the fifth-grade class was reviewing the details of the birth of Jesus. With carefully chosen words, she talked about the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Then she said with sadness, "And when they arrived, there was no room for them in the inn. Wasn't that terrible?"

George, after thinking for a moment about the vacations his family had taken and the careful, detailed plans they made said without thinking, "Why didn't Joseph make a reservation?"

There will be many around us during this holiday season who will make no room – no reservation – for Jesus to be with them this year. We often remind each other that "He's the reason for the Season" but do not take time to explain to others what that "reason" is. We are quick to condemn those who want to take "Christ out of Christmas" but do not take time to plant the message of Christ in their minds and hearts at Christmas. We place the manger scene under the tree, cover it with presents and then wrap it back up and forget about His birth and its significance for another year.

Hanging next to Jesus on a cross was a thief who was dying for crimes he committed. In his final moments, he turned to Him and said, "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus said, "I certainly will! Today you will be with me in paradise." The best day to make your reservation to be with Him is this day if you have not done so. Don't delay!

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, declares with certainty: "Today is the day of salvation." May we take advantage of this day and not risk the uncertainties of life! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:1-7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

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News from the Associated Press

Monday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Dell Rapids 70, Baltic 34

Florence/Henry 59, Waverly-South Shore 44

Kimball/White Lake 64, Freeman 41

Lemmon 71, Grant County, N.D. 25

Miller 67, James Valley Christian 56

Mobridge-Pollock 67, Aberdeen Roncalli 60

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Bon Homme 49, Irene-Wakonda 37

Redfield 54, Faulkton 50

Vermillion 59, Canton 35

Wolsey-Wessington 47, DeSmet 40

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

Girl's Basketball Polls

By The Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Sportswriters Association high school girl's poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points.

Class AA

- | | | | |
|---------------------|-----|----|---|
| 1. O'Gorman (13) | 1-0 | 81 | 1 |
| 2. Washington (4) | 1-0 | 70 | 2 |
| 3. Harrisburg | 1-0 | 51 | 3 |
| 4. Brandon Valley | 2-0 | 30 | 4 |
| 5. Aberdeen Central | 1-0 | 16 | 5 |

Others receiving votes: Stevens 7.

Class A

- | | | | |
|--------------------|-----|----|---|
| 1. Winner (17) | 1-0 | 85 | 1 |
| 2. St. Thomas More | 2-0 | 70 | 2 |
| 3. Hamlin | 0-0 | 40 | 3 |
| 4. Tea Area | 1-0 | 35 | 4 |
| 5. West Central | 1-0 | 22 | 5 |

Others receiving votes: Dakota Valley 2, Flandreau 2, Sioux Falls Christian 1.

Class B

- | | | | |
|-------------------------|-----|----|----|
| 1. Corsica-Stickney(17) | 1-0 | 85 | 1 |
| 2. Castlewood | 1-0 | 67 | 2 |
| 3. De Smet | 1-0 | 29 | 5 |
| 4. Ethan | 1-0 | 25 | RV |
| 5. White River | 1-0 | 20 | RV |

Others receiving votes: Bridgewater-Emery 7, Colman-Egan 6, Viborg-Hurley 5, Waubay-Summit 3, Howard 3, Faith 3, Newell 1, Kadoka Area 1.

Boy's Basketball Polls

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By The Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Sportswriters Association high school boy's poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points.

Class AA

1. Roosevelt (13)	1-0	80	1
2. Yankton (4)	2-0	71	2
3. Brandon Valley	2-0	53	3
4. Washington	1-0	29	5
5. Harrisburg	1-0	14	6

Others receiving votes: Rapid City Central 4, Mitchell 2, O'Gorman 2.

Class A

1. Dakota Valley (13)	1-0	85	1
2. SF Christian (4)	2-0	67	2
3. Dell Rapids	1-0	38	4
4. Tea Area 0-1	35	3	
5. Sioux Valley	1-0	28	5

Others receiving votes: Vermillion 2.

Class B

Rank-School

1. De Smet (16)	1-0	83	1
2. White River	1-0	66	2
3. Platte-Geddes (1)	1-0	51	3
4. Viborg-Hurley	1-0	35	4
5. Dell Rapids St. Mary	0-0	14	5

Others receiving votes: Aberdeen Christian 4, Canistota 1, Howard 1.

South Dakota health care providers receive COVID-19 vaccine

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The COVID-19 vaccine has arrived in the state where medical personnel will begin to administer the doses, the South Dakota Department of Health said Monday.

The Pfizer vaccine will be given to Avera Health in Sioux Falls and Monument Health in Rapid City Monday. Sanford Health was due to receive its initial doses on Tuesday, DOH said.

The state is expected to get about 7,800 doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which was approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for emergency use last Friday. The vaccine requires two doses administered about three weeks apart.

An estimated 19,000 health care workers in COVID-19 units are first in line to get the vaccine followed by about 11,000 people in long term care facilities.

The general population likely won't be receiving the vaccine until spring, DOH said.

State health officials on Monday confirmed the lowest number of positive tests in more than two months with 316, raising the total cases to 91,354 since the start of the pandemic. Numbers posted after the weekend tend to be lower because of lag time.

No deaths were reported in the last day.

South Dakota gives electoral college votes to Trump

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's three presidential electors awarded the state's electoral votes on Monday to President Donald Trump, who won the state's popular vote in November's general election.

The state's electors, which included Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden and Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg, met at the Capitol building in Pierre Monday afternoon. South Dakota GOP Chairman Dan Lederman replaced Republican Gov. Kristi Noem as the state's third elector after the governor decided not to participate last

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week.

Trump received nearly 62% of the popular vote in South Dakota, defeating Democratic nominee Joe Biden by more than 100,000 votes. The state has chosen the Republican nominee for president in every general election since 1964.

Electors met in all 50 states and the District of Columbia to cast their ballots on Monday, the day set by law for the meeting of the Electoral College. 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.

President Donald Trump has refused to concede the election and continues to make unsupported allegations of fraud, drawing more attention to electors' votes than in a usual year.

Another state lawmaker tests positive for coronavirus

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Another South Dakota state lawmaker has tested positive for the coronavirus after attending Gov. Kristi Noem's budget address last week and visiting the governor's mansion.

Sen. Reynold Nesiba says he was tested for COVID-19 on Friday and got the positive results Saturday. The 54-year-old Sioux Falls Democrat says he has experienced minor coronavirus symptoms, KSFY-TV reported.

Nesiba said he suspected he contracted the virus while attending a committee meeting last Monday or during the budget address on the House floor Tuesday. He said he always wore a mask in the Capitol except when he was in his office.

Sen. Helene Duhamel, a Republican from Rapid City, became ill and tested positive for COVID-19 last week. She too attended the budget address and event at the governor's mansion. The 58-year Rapid City Republican posed with Noem and other lawmakers at the Capitol and none wore masks.

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

Germany demands EU agency approve vaccine before Christmas

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany on Tuesday increased the pressure on European regulators to speed up their review of a coronavirus vaccine, with its health minister, a hospital association and several lawmakers urging that the vaccine be given the stamp of approval by next week.

"Our goal is an approval before Christmas," Health Minister Jens Spahn told reporters. "We want to still start vaccinating this year."

Spahn added that he "welcomed" German media reports that said the European Medicines Agency, or EMA, would finalize its approval process of the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine by Dec. 23, instead of at a Dec. 29 meeting.

The EMA could not immediately be reached for comment on exactly when it would release its findings on the approval process.

Italy, where Europe's coronavirus outbreak erupted in February and which now leads the continent in the COVID-19 death count, is also pressing for a safe, accelerated approval process.

"My hope is that the EMA, in compliance with all safety procedures, will be able to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine earlier than expected and that vaccinations can also begin in the countries of the European Union as soon as possible," Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza said in a statement.

Spahn has expressed impatience with the EMA for days, noting that Germany has created some 440 vaccination centers, activated about 10,000 doctors and medical staff and was ready to start mass vaccinations immediately.

Spahn is pushing for a quick approval of a new vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer that is already being used in Britain, the United States, Canada and other countries. But Germany cannot start vaccinations because it is still waiting for approval by the EMA, which evaluates drugs and vaccines for the EU's 27 nations.

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Seeing the vaccine being given to thousands of people elsewhere was galling for many Germans.

"It cannot be that a vaccine that has been developed in Germany is only approved and vaccinated (here) in January," said Christine Aschenberg-Dugnus, a federal lawmaker with the pro-business Free Democrats.

The German Hospital Association chimed in, demanding that the EU shorten its lengthy approval process and issue emergency authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

"I am asking myself if we really need time until Dec. 29 to reach the approval of the vaccination in Europe — Europe should try to get an emergency authorization earlier," Gerald Gass, president of the hospital association, told the RND media group. "That way we could still go into nursing homes with mobile teams before Christmas and vaccinate the residents."

EMA chief Emer Cooke said Monday that her team is already working "around the clock" but added that the vaccine approval timeline is constantly under review, which suggests the date could change.

Part of the problem could be that the EU is seeking to kick off vaccinations in all of its nations at the same time, and Germany could be more prepared than others.

Spahn's growing anxiety comes as Germany has been hitting records of new daily infections and virus deaths in recent weeks. Hospitals and medical groups across Germany have also repeatedly warned they are reaching their limits in caring for COVID-19 patients. On Tuesday, 4,670 COVID-19 patients were being treated in German ICUs.

The nation is going into a hard lockdown Wednesday with schools and most stores shutting down at least until Jan. 10 to stop the exponential rise of COVID-19 cases.

Spahn's ministry says Germany is ready to give 3 million to 4 million BioNTech vaccination doses in January and up to 11 million doses in the first quarter of 2021.

The country would be able to vaccinate up to 60% of Germany's citizens by the end of the summer, Spahn said Monday night on public broadcaster ZDF. The World Health Organization says around 60% to 70% of a population needs to be vaccinated to successfully tamp down the pandemic.

The Robert Koch Institute, Germany's central disease control center, on Tuesday reported 14,432 new confirmed cases and 500 new deaths, the third-highest number of daily deaths since the pandemic began. Germany has counted over 22,600 virus deaths overall, which is still one-third the toll of Italy or Britain.

The head of the Robert Koch Institute warned that the case numbers would still go up for some time after Germany heads into lockdown on Wednesday. He expressed worry that especially older people and residents of nursing homes are facing high infection figures again.

"The age group of those older than 80 are getting more and more affected, and those are the people who get severely ill or die." Lothar Wieler warned.

Frank Jordans in Berlin, Nicole Winfield in Rome and Maria Cheng contributed reporting from Toronto, Canada.

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

Poor countries face long wait for vaccines despite promises

By MARIA CHENG and ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — With Americans, Britons and Canadians rolling up their sleeves to receive coronavirus vaccines, the route out of the pandemic now seems clear to many in the West, even if the rollout will take many months. But for poorer countries, the road will be far longer and rougher.

The ambitious initiative known as COVAX created to ensure the entire world has access to COVID-19 vaccines has secured only a fraction of the 2 billion doses it hopes to buy over the next year, has yet to confirm any actual deals to ship out vaccines and is short on cash.

The virus that has killed more than 1.6 million people has exposed vast inequities between countries, as fragile health systems and smaller economies were often hit harder. COVAX was set up by the World Health

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Organization, vaccines alliance GAVI and CEPI, a global coalition to fight epidemics, to avoid the international stampede for vaccines that has accompanied past outbreaks and would reinforce those imbalances.

But now some experts say the chances that coronavirus shots will be shared fairly between rich nations and the rest are fading fast. With vaccine supplies currently limited, developed countries, some of which helped fund the research with taxpayer money, are under tremendous pressure to protect their own populations and are buying up shots. Meanwhile, some poorer countries that signed up to the initiative are looking for alternatives because of fears it won't deliver.

"It's simple math," said Arnaud Bernaert, head of global health at the World Economic Forum. Of the approximately 12 billion doses the pharmaceutical industry is expected to produce next year, about 9 billion shots have already been reserved by rich countries. "COVAX has not secured enough doses, and the way the situation may unfold is they will probably only get these doses fairly late."

To date, COVAX's only confirmed, legally binding agreement is for up to 200 million doses, though that includes an option to order several times that number of additional doses, GAVI spokesman James Fulker said. It has agreements for another 500 million vaccines, but those are not legally binding.

The 200 million doses will come from the Serum Institute of India, the company that will likely make a large portion of the coronavirus shots destined for the developing world. CEO Adar Poonawalla says it has a confirmed order for 100 million doses each of a vaccine developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca and one from Novovax.

"We don't have anything beyond that in writing," he told The Associated Press. "If they want more, they'll have to place more orders."

He said the lack of commitment from COVAX will mean a much longer wait for people in developing countries. Poonawalla also noted that his company's first priority would be making shots for India, which has suggested it wants at least 300 million vaccines. It's likely India would not be able to take all of those at once, but a big order could delay the distribution of vaccines for other parts of the developing world, Poonawalla said.

Asked on Tuesday about why the Serum Institute was only contracted to produce 200 million vaccines for COVAX, WHO's Dr. Bruce Aylward said they would go back to the company "to make sure they have the assurances they need." He said the Serum Institute was "absolutely crucial to the supply of many vaccines."

Potentially further slowing down the process is that neither the AstraZeneca vaccine nor the Novovax one has been licensed by any regulatory agency yet — and any injection distributed by COVAX will likely need WHO approval. COVAX does not have any supplies of the two vaccines that appear to be most effective so far — the Pfizer-BioNTech shot and the Moderna one. The United Kingdom has already begun giving the Pfizer vaccine, and the United States and Canada are rolling it out this week. Some Gulf countries have also authorized it.

Still, GAVI said they "aim to start rolling out safe and effective vaccines to COVAX (member countries) at scale within the first and second quarters of the New Year."

Even with vaccines in hand, the rollouts will take many months in rich countries, and many developing ones are facing serious logistical challenges that will add to delays, noted Dr. Gagandeep Kang, an infectious diseases expert at the Christian Medical College at Vellore in southern India.

Senior officials at the WHO have acknowledged privately that attempts to fairly allocate vaccine through the initiative are flawed, despite publicly lauding its success.

"The whole call for global solidarity has mostly been lost," said Dr. Katherine O'Brien, WHO's vaccines chief, during a recent internal discussion, a recording of which was obtained by the AP.

Asked to clarify her remarks, O'Brien said in an email that "every country should have access to COVID-19 vaccines, as early as feasible."

Adding to COVAX's difficulties, O'Brien noted at a news conference this month that it was still \$5 billion short to buy the doses it's planning to obtain next year.

According to a report GAVI issued ahead of a meeting this week, the alliance itself concluded that the risk COVAX will fail is "very high," saying it was "established in record time and has to navigate unchar-

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tered territory.”

John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, criticized Western countries for buying up the global vaccine supply “in excess of their needs while we in Africa are still struggling with the COVAX (effort).”

With no certainty about which shots would work, governments scrambled in recent months to sign multiple deals to ensure their citizens would have at least some COVID-19 injections. Canada, for example, bought nearly 200 million vaccines — enough to cover its population of 38 million about five times over.

Nkengasong called the idea that people in rich countries would get immunized while Africans go without “a moral issue.”

Beyond the ethics, experts note that failing to protect people in the developing world will leave a reservoir of coronavirus that could spark new outbreaks at any time.

Amid fears COVAX can't deliver, some developing countries are pulling out entirely or seeking their own private deals. Earlier this month, the tiny Pacific island nation of Palau announced it was abandoning the initiative and would get donated vaccines from the U.S. instead. Other low and middle-income countries, including Malaysia, Peru, and Bangladesh, have stayed in the initiative but also recently inked their own deals with drugmakers as a Plan B.

Anban Pillay of the South African Ministry of Health said that joining COVAX was just a stop-gap measure before signing bilateral deals with pharmaceutical companies.

Kate Elder, vaccines policy adviser at Doctors Without Borders, said “it’s increasingly looking like the ship has sailed on equitable vaccine distribution” — and GAVI, WHO and others need to discuss how to increase vaccine manufacturing.

To that end, South Africa and India have asked the World Trade Organization to waive some provisions regulating intellectual property rights to make it easier for manufacturers in poor countries to make COVID-19 drugs and vaccines. But many rich countries are reluctant to do that.

As more countries in the West authorize the vaccine, “the difference between people in rich countries getting vaccinated and the lack of any vaccines for the developing world will become quite stark,” said Anna Marriott, health policy manager at Oxfam. “And it will only prolong the pandemic.”

Cheng reported from Toronto. Associated Press writers Cara Anna in Nairobi; Lori Hinnant in Paris; Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Julhas Alham in Dhaka, Bangladesh; Victoria Milko in Jakarta, Indonesia; Eileen Ng in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; and Krishan Francis in Colombo, Sri Lanka, contributed to this report.

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EXPLAINER: Why is the EU taking so long to OK vaccine?

AMSTERDAM (AP) — As Canadians, Britons and Americans begin getting immunized with a German-developed vaccine against coronavirus, pressure is building on the European Medicines Agency to approve the shot made by Pfizer Inc. and the German company BioNTech. German officials have been especially vocal that they want it approved before Christmas. Here’s a look at the EMA approval process:

WHAT IS THE EUROPEAN MEDICINES AGENCY?

The EMA is Europe’s medicines regulatory agency and approves new treatments and vaccines for all 27 countries across the European Union. It is roughly comparable to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The agency is headquartered in Amsterdam and it has nearly 900 employees.

WHY IS THE EMA TAKING SO LONG TO APPROVE A VACCINE?

Britain, Canada and the U.S. granted approval for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine to be used under emergency use provisions earlier this month, meaning the shot is an unlicensed product whose temporary use

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is justified by the urgency of a pandemic that has already killed over 1.6 million people.

But the EMA's approval process for coronavirus vaccines is largely similar to the standard licensing procedure that would be granted to any new vaccine, only on an accelerated schedule. The companies will still need to submit follow-up data to the EU regulator and the approval will need to be renewed after one year.

EMA Executive Director Emer Cooke told The Associated Press that while all of the regulatory agencies in the U.S., Britain and Canada are largely looking at the same data, "we may not have all gotten it at the same time." EMA began its expedited approval process of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in October and the companies formally asked for their shot to be licensed on Dec. 1.

Using its expedited approval process, the EMA says the time for assessing a new drug or vaccine has been shortened from about 210 days to fewer than 150.

HOW WILL THE EMA DECIDE WHETHER TO OK THE VACCINE?

The EMA is convening an "extraordinary" meeting on Dec. 29 — although that date could be moved up sooner — during which their experts will discuss the data behind the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. The meeting, which will be closed, will include a presentation by two officials charged with assessing the vaccine and could also include bringing in company representatives to answer questions.

Within hours of the meeting's conclusion, the EMA will issue a statement on whether or not it is recommending the vaccine be approved. Several days later, they will release their full scientific assessment explaining the decision.

The EMA's approval is valid in all 27 EU countries and once it is granted, countries can start receiving vaccines for immunization campaigns. An Italian health official says all EU countries want to start vaccinations on the same day.

WHAT DOES GERMANY THINK?

Germany is increasing the pressure on the agency, with its health minister, a leading hospital association and lawmakers all demanding that it approve a coronavirus vaccine before Christmas.

"Our goal is an approval before Christmas so that we can still start vaccinating this year," Health Minister Jens Spahn said.

Spahn has expressed impatience with the EMA, noting that Germany has already created some 440 vaccination centers, activated about 10,000 doctors and medical staff and was ready to start mass vaccinations.

The German Hospital Association chipped in Tuesday as well, demanding that the agency issue emergency authorization for the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. That way, it says, workers can go into nursing homes to vaccinate those most at risk of dying from the virus.

Other EU nations are also getting impatient.

"My hope is that the EMA, in compliance with all safety procedures, will be able to approve the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine earlier than expected and that vaccinations can also begin in the countries of the European Union as soon as possible," Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza said Tuesday.

WILL THE EMA SPEED UP ITS APPROVAL?

Cooke, the agency's chief, said Monday that EMA staff are working "around the clock" and that if they have sufficient data and have completed their required protocols, the Dec. 29 meeting to consider the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine could indeed be moved up.

"We feel a huge responsibility to get this right ... to make sure that what we deliver in terms of a scientific opinion is robust and reliable," Cooke told the AP in an interview last week. "It's already a huge responsibility, I can tell you, without putting a race around it."

IS THE AGENCY EXAMINING ANY OTHER CORONAVIRUS VACCINES?

The EMA is also planning to convene a meeting Jan. 12 to consider approving the coronavirus vaccine made by Moderna, but said that discussion too could be moved up earlier.

It is also assessing data from two other vaccines, one made by Oxford University and AstraZeneca and the other by Janssen, but neither of those two companies have yet made a formal request to be licensed in the EU.

HOW WILL EMA MAKE SURE A VACCINE IS SAFE ONCE IT'S BEING USED?

The agency usually asks companies to deliver data on vaccines' safety and side effects every six months, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, it will be asking companies for that data every month.

"We need to consider how (these vaccines) perform once they are once they are deployed in a mass vaccination situation," Cooke said, explaining that the EMA is adopting extra surveillance measures to detect any rare or serious side effects.

Although tests of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine suggested the shot is safe and about 95% effective in preventing COVID-19, there is still limited long-term safety data on it.

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

Respiratory therapist receives Puerto Rico's 1st vaccine

By DÁNICA COTO Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — A respiratory therapist who treated the first two COVID-19 patients hospitalized in Puerto Rico became the first person in the U.S. territory to be vaccinated against the virus on Tuesday.

Yahaira Alicea had treated an Italian couple who visited the island aboard a cruise ship in March. The woman later died. Alicea said it was a fearful moment for her that wore her down physically and emotionally as she urged everyone to get vaccinated.

"This is what we want, for this pandemic to end," Alicea said. "Don't be afraid."

A health official approached Alicea with the needle as both smiled: "Let's make history."

The event was cheered by many on the island of 3.2 million people that recently imposed more severe measures to fight an increase in coronavirus cases and deaths. Puerto Rico has reported more than 107,000 confirmed and probable coronavirus cases and more than 1,280 deaths.

Alicea was immunized a day after FedEx planes carrying more than 16,500 Pfizer vaccine doses landed in Puerto Rico, with another more than 13,600 expected later this week. The vaccine will be distributed to 65 hospitals around the island, according to Gov. Wanda Vázquez.

Alicea was supposed to be vaccinated on Monday, but hospital officials said Vázquez's office had requested that the event wait until Tuesday, which drew scathing criticism from many on social media who questioned the reasons behind the delay and said there was no time to be lost.

First in line to be vaccinated are health workers, emergency responders, hospital employees and those who live or work in shelters or nursing homes. Next will be police officers, employees of the island's Department of Education and other workers considered essential, followed by people with compromised immune systems, cardiac problems or chronic health conditions including diabetes.

Overall, the vaccination process is expected to continue into mid-2021, with the government aiming to immunize 70% of Puerto Rico's population.

Among those celebrating the arrival of the vaccine was Daniel Colón-Ramos, co-founder of CienciaPR, a nonprofit group of Puerto Rican scientists who also will co-chair a coalition of scientists to inform policy of the island's incoming governor.

"It's the light at the end of the tunnel after a year in which we saw what a world without vaccines looks like ... a world of fear, a world of a lot of suffering," he said. "Finally, we have a tool based on science ... that allows us to face the pandemic of the century."

Many in Puerto Rico have questioned whether the government is prepared to store the vaccines at a far colder temperature than most freezers can handle, given that the island's power company still struggles

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with outages more than three years after Hurricane Maria hit as a powerful Category 4 storm. Officials have said that Puerto Rico's National Guard has bought four freezers with the capacity to store 300,000 vaccine doses each.

Electoral College makes it official: Biden won, Trump lost

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Electoral College decisively confirmed Joe Biden as the nation's next president, ratifying his November victory in an authoritative state-by-state repudiation of President Donald Trump's refusal to concede he had lost.

The presidential electors on Monday gave Biden a solid majority of 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232, the same margin that Trump bragged was a landslide when he won the White House four years ago.

Heightened security was in place in some states as electors met to cast paper ballots, with masks, social distancing and other pandemic precautions the order of the day. 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.

For all Trump's unsupported claims of fraud, there was little suspense and no change as every one of the electoral votes allocated to Biden and the president in last month's popular vote went officially to each man. On Election Day, the Democrat topped the incumbent Republican by more than 7 million in the popular vote nationwide.

California's 55 electoral votes put Biden over the top. Vermont, with 3 votes, was the first state to report. Hawaii, with 4 votes, was the last.

"Once again in America, the rule of law, our Constitution, and the will of the people have prevailed. Our democracy — pushed, tested, threatened — proved to be resilient, true, and strong," Biden said in an evening speech in which he stressed the size of his win and the record 81 million people who voted for him.

He renewed his campaign promise to be a president for all Americans, whether they voted for him or not, and said the country has hard work ahead on the virus and economy.

But there was no concession from the White House, where Trump has continued to make unsupported allegations of fraud.

Trump remained in the Oval Office long after the sun set in Washington, calling allies and fellow Republicans while keeping track of the running Electoral College tally, according to White House and campaign aides. The president frequently ducked into the private dining room off the Oval Office to watch on TV, complaining that the cable networks were treating it like a mini-Election Night while not giving his challenges any airtime.

The president had grown increasingly disappointed with the size of "Stop the Steal" rallies across the nation as well as efforts for the GOP to field its own slates of electors in states. A presidential wish for a fierce administration defense led to TV appearances early Monday by Stephen Miller, one of his most ferocious advocates, to try to downplay the importance of the Electoral College vote and suggest that Trump's legal challenges would continue all the way to Inauguration Day on Jan. 20.

Late in the day, he took to Twitter to announce that Attorney General William Barr was leaving the administration before Christmas. Barr's departure comes amid lingering tension over Trump's unsupported fraud claims, especially after Barr's statement this month to The Associated Press that the election results were unaffected by any fraud.

In a Fox News Channel interview taped over the weekend, Trump said that "I worry about the country having an illegitimate president, that's what I worry about. A president that lost and lost badly."

On Monday in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — the six battleground states that Biden won and Trump contested — electors gave Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris their votes in low-key proceedings. Nevada's electors met via Zoom because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump's efforts to undermine the election results also led to concerns about safety for the electors, virtually unheard of in previous years. In Michigan, lawmakers from both parties reported receiving threats,

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and legislative offices were closed over threats of violence. Biden won the state by 154,000 votes, or 2.8 percentage points, over Trump.

Georgia state police were out in force at the state Capitol in Atlanta before Democratic electors pledged to Biden met. There were no protesters seen.

Even with the Electoral College's confirmation of Biden's victory, some Republicans continued to refuse to acknowledge that reality. Yet their opposition to Biden had no practical effect on the electoral process, with the Democrat to be sworn in next month.

Republicans who would have been Trump electors met anyway in a handful of states Biden won. Pennsylvania Republicans said they cast a "procedural vote" for Trump and Pence in case courts that have repeatedly rejected challenges to Biden's victory were to somehow still determine that Trump had won.

In North Carolina, Utah and other states across the country where Trump won, his electors turned out to duly cast their ballots for him. Electors in North Carolina had their temperatures checked before being allowed to enter the Capitol to vote. Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes withdrew as a Trump elector and was in quarantine because he was exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom Trump defeated four years ago, were among New York's 29 electors for Biden and Harris.

In New Hampshire, before the state's four electors voted for Biden at the State House in Concord, 13-year-old Brayden Harrington led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance. He had delivered a moving speech at the Democratic National Convention in August about the struggle with stuttering he shares with Biden.

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.

The Electoral College was the product of compromise during the drafting of the Constitution between those who favored electing the president by popular vote and those who opposed giving the people the power to directly choose their leader.

Each state gets a number of electors equal to its 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.

Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire and AP writers across the United States contributed to this report.

Japan 'Twitter killer' sentenced to death for serial murders

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese court on Tuesday sentenced a man to death for killing and dismembering nine people, most of whom had posted suicidal thoughts on social media, in a case that shocked the country.

The Tachikawa branch of the Tokyo District Court found Takahiro Shiraishi, known as the "Twitter killer," guilty of killing, dismembering and storing the bodies of the victims in his apartment in Zama, near Tokyo. Shiraishi, 30, pleaded guilty and said he would not appeal his death sentence.

Police arrested Shiraishi in 2017 after finding the bodies of eight females and one male in cold-storage cases in his apartment.

Investigators said Shiraishi approached the victims via Twitter, offering to assist them with their suicidal wishes. He killed the women, including teenagers, after raping them, and also killed a boyfriend of one of the women to silence him, investigators said.

On Twitter, Shiraishi used the name "Hangman," promising to help his victims die and inviting them to his apartment.

Although his defense lawyers argued that he assisted the victims' suicidal wishes, Shiraishi later said he killed them without their consent.

In the ruling, presiding Judge Naokuni Yano said none of the victims agreed to be killed and that Shiraishi was fully responsible for their deaths, according to media reports.

He said the crime was extremely heinous and had caused fear and concern in a society where social media have become an indispensable part of everyday life, NHK public television reported.

Japan's suicide rate ranks among the world's highest. Following a recent decline, the number has climbed back this year as people were hit by the effects of the pandemic.

Japan's crime rate is relatively low, but it has experienced some recent high-profile killings. In July 2016, a former employee of a home for the disabled allegedly killed 19 residents and injured more than 20 others.

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

Russia's Putin congratulates Biden on winning U.S. election

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday congratulated Joe Biden on winning the U.S. presidential election after weeks of holding out.

Putin's message to Biden came a day after the Electoral College confirmed Biden as the nation's next president, ratifying his November victory in an authoritative state-by-state repudiation of President Donald Trump's refusal to concede that he had lost.

The Kremlin had said earlier that the Russian president would hold off on congratulating Biden until the winner was officially confirmed. "We are just waiting for the end of the internal political confrontation," Putin said last month, referring to numerous Republican challenges to the vote count.

In his message, Putin wished Biden "every success," according to a Kremlin statement Tuesday, and expressed confidence that "Russia and the U.S., which bear special responsibility for global security and stability can, despite the differences, really contribute to solving many problems and challenges that the world is currently facing."

The Russian president noted that "the Russian-American cooperation based on the principles of equality and mutual respect would meet the interests of the people in both countries and the entire international community."

"For my part, I am ready for interaction and contact with you," Putin was quoted by the Kremlin as saying.

The Latest: Germany pushes for quick EU vaccine approval

The Associated Press undefined

BERLIN — Germany's health minister has increased his pressure on the European Union's regulatory agency and demanded that a coronavirus vaccine will be approved before Christmas.

The news agency dpa reported Tuesday that health minister Jens Spahn said "our goal is an approval before Christmas so that we can still start vaccinating this year, also in Germany."

Spahn is pushing for a quick approval of a new vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer that has already been authorized for use in Britain, the United States and other countries. But Germany cannot use it because it is still waiting for approval by the European Medicines Agency, or EMA.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- COVID-19 vaccine shipments begin in historic US effort
- Tens of thousands of new child brides are being married off as their families struggle amid the pandemic's economic fallout
- London and nearby areas will be placed under the highest level of restrictions starting Wednesday
- AP PHOTOS: Italian health workers still under enormous strain. One says "Christmas I will be here. Just like I had Easter here, just like August here, just like every day."

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- Scientists focus on bats for clues to prevent next pandemic
- After 110,000 virus deaths, U.S. nursing homes face vaccine fears

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

PARIS — As the holiday season approaches, French Prime Minister Jean Castex is encouraging the French to self-confine for 10 days before Christmas, rather than taking an automated coronavirus test.

Speaking on Europe-1 radio on Tuesday, Castex said such an approach prevents laboratories and pharmacies from becoming clogged. He also indicated that children can choose to skip school on Thursday and Friday so that they can begin self containment.

France on Tuesday is lifting a lockdown imposed on Oct. 28, but strict measures are still in place as infections are still high. There will be a nationwide curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., which will be lifted on Christmas Eve but not on New Year's Eve. Theaters and cinemas will remain shut as will bars and restaurants.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Authorities in Sri Lanka said on Tuesday that more than 3,000 COVID-19 cases have been detected in the country's highly congested prisons, as infections also surge in the capital and its suburbs.

They said that 2,984 inmates and 103 guards have been confirmed to have the disease in seven prisons around the country.

Sri Lankan prisons are highly congested, with more than 26,000 inmates crowded in facilities with a capacity of 10,000.

Eleven inmates were killed in pandemic-related riots inside a prison early this month. Unrest has been growing, with prisoners demanding better facilities and care as COVID-19 cases increase. Inmates have staged several protests inside prisons in recent weeks.

Sri Lanka's confirmed cases since March reached 33,477 on Tuesday, including 154 fatalities.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — The Maldives president's office says it is discussing how to provide a "humane response" to a request from neighboring Sri Lanka to allow burials for Muslims who die of COVID-19.

Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Hood said Tuesday that President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih has received a request from Sri Lanka to look into the possibility of allowing such burials.

"The request has been received. At present we are considering and discussions are ongoing with regard to what would be the appropriate and humane response," Hood told The Associated Press.

There was no immediate confirmation from Sri Lanka of such a request.

Sri Lanka's government in March announced it will cremate the bodies of all people who die of COVID-19, saying the coronavirus could contaminate underground water.

Sri Lankan Muslims have urged the government to allow burials, citing their religious beliefs. They accuse the government of denying Muslims a basic right without scientific grounds, since many countries in the world allow burials.

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Taiwan has set a goal to vaccinate 60% of its population with a COVID-19 vaccine, or 15 million people, a health official said Tuesday.

Taiwan has signed an agreement with COVAX to purchase a COVID-19 vaccine, but is also actively in talks with vaccine companies who have candidates in phase 3 trials for a potential bilateral agreement as well, said Jing-Hui Yang, a deputy director at the Central Epidemic Command Center. COVAX, a global plan to distribute vaccines equally, has not yet started sending out shipments of vaccines.

The island will prioritize frontline health workers and essential personnel to receive the vaccine first, Yang said. Later on, the immunization campaign will target the elderly as well as those who have existing

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chronic illnesses.

Officials expect the vaccines to arrive early next year. Still, an immunization campaign will take time, and will not be finished in just a month or two, Yang warned.

SEOUL, South Korea -- South Korea has reported another 880 new cases of the coronavirus as it slipped deeper into its worst wave of the pandemic yet.

That brought the country's caseload to 44,364 on Tuesday, which was the 38th consecutive day of triple-digit daily increases. More than 10,000 infections have been reported in the last 15 days alone, mostly from the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area where health workers are struggling to stem transmissions tied to various places, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, restaurants, churches and schools.

The death toll was at 600 after 13 COVID-19 patients died in the past 24 hours. The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said 205 among 11,205 active patients were in serious or critical condition as fears grow over possible shortages in intensive-care units.

Critics say the country's viral resurgence underscores the risk of encouraging economic activity when vaccines are at least months away. The government had lowered social distancing restrictions to the lowest tier in October out of concerns about sluggish growth rates despite experts warning of a viral surge during winter when people spend longer hours indoors.

The government restored some restrictions over the past weeks, such as shutting down nightclubs, halting in-person school classes and requiring restaurants to provide only deliveries and take-outs after 9 p.m.

WASHINGTON — Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and Surgeon General Jerome Adams stressed the vaccine's safety and effectiveness, while raising issues of social equity.

The officials spoke Monday at a George Washington University Hospital event Monday to launch the vaccination of health care workers in the nation's capital.

Adams, who is Black, said it would be a tragedy if the disparate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color got worse because of hesitancy to get the vaccine. "We know that lack of trust is a major cause for reluctance, especially in communities of color," said Adams.

Azar said the vaccines bring hope, but "all of that hope doesn't matter if we don't bridge to that point" where widespread vaccination puts an end to the pandemic. So he called on Americans to double down on practicing responsible behaviors such as avoiding travel and gatherings, maintaining social distance, wearing masks and washing their hands frequently.

TORONTO — Canada has administered its first doses of COVID-19 vaccine.

Five front-line workers in Ontario are among the first Canadians to receive the vaccine at one of Toronto's hospitals.

Three personal support workers, a registered nurse, and a registered practical nurse who work at the Rejai Centre nursing home are among the first to receive it.

Ontario received 6,000 doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine Sunday night and plans to give them to about 2,500 health-care workers.

Residents of two long-term care homes Quebec will be the first to receive the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in that province.

NEW YORK — Coronavirus vaccinations have begun in New York.

A nurse at Long Island Jewish Medical Center in Queens got what Gov. Andrew Cuomo called the first shot given in the state's campaign to vaccinate front line health care workers.

"I feel hopeful today. Relieved," said critical care nurse Sandra Lindsay after getting a shot in the arm.

The head of the hospital system, Michael Dowling, stood over Lindsay as a doctor, Michelle Chester, administered the dose. Cuomo watched via a livestream.

All four applauded after the shot was given. "This is the light at the end of the tunnel. But it's a long

tunnel," Cuomo said.

Pandemic backlash jeopardizes public health powers, leaders

By ANNA MARIA BARRY-JESTER, HANNAH RECHT, MICHELLE R. SMITH, and LAUREN WEBER Associated Press and KHN

Tisha Coleman has lived in close-knit Linn County, Kansas, for 42 years and never felt so alone.

As the public health administrator, she's struggled every day of the coronavirus pandemic to keep her rural county along the Missouri border safe. In this community with no hospital, she's failed to persuade her neighbors to wear masks and take precautions against COVID-19, even as cases rise. In return, she's been harassed, sued, vilified and called a Democrat, an insult in her circles.

Even her husband hasn't listened to her, refusing to require customers to wear masks at the family's hardware store in Mound City.

"People have shown their true colors," Coleman said. "I'm sure that I've lost some friends over this situation."

By November, the months of fighting over masks and quarantines were already wearing her down. Then she got COVID-19, likely from her husband, who she thinks picked it up at the hardware store.

Her mother got it, too, and died Sunday, 11 days after she was put on a ventilator.

Across the United States, state and local public health officials such as Coleman have found themselves at the center of a political storm as they combat the worst pandemic in a century. Amid a fractured federal response, the usually invisible army of workers charged with preventing the spread of infectious diseases has become a public punching bag. Their expertise on how to fight the coronavirus is often disregarded.

Some have become the target of far-right activists, conservative groups and anti-vaccination extremists who have coalesced around common goals: fighting mask orders, quarantines and contact tracing with protests, threats and personal attacks.

The backlash has moved beyond the angry fringe. In the courts, public health powers are being undermined. Lawmakers in at least 24 states have crafted legislation to weaken public health powers, which could make it more difficult for communities to respond to other health emergencies in the future.

"What we've taken for granted for 100 years in public health is now very much in doubt," said Lawrence Gostin, an expert in public health law at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C.

It is a further erosion of the nation's already fragile public health infrastructure. At least 181 state and local public health leaders in 38 states have resigned, retired or been fired since April 1, according to an ongoing investigation by The Associated Press and KHN. According to experts, this is the largest exodus of public health leaders in American history. An untold number of lower-level staffers have also left.

"I've never seen or studied a pandemic that has been as politicized, as vitriolic and as challenged as this one, and I've studied a lot of epidemics," said Dr. Howard Markel, a medical historian at the University of Michigan. "All of that has been very demoralizing for the men and women who don't make a great deal of money, don't get a lot of fame, but work 24/7."

One in 8 Americans — 40 million people — lives in a community that has lost its local public health department leader during the pandemic. Top public health officials in 20 states have left state-level departments, including in North Dakota, which has lost three state health officers since May, one after another.

Many of the state and local officials left due to political blowback or pandemic pressure. Some departed to take higher-profile positions or due to health concerns. Others were fired for poor performance. Dozens retired.

KHN and AP reached out to public health workers and experts in every state and the National Association of County and City Health Officials; examined public records and news reports; and interviewed hundreds to gather the list.

Collectively, the loss of expertise and experience has created a leadership vacuum in the profession, public health experts say. Many health departments are in flux as the nation rolls out the largest vaccination campaign in its history and faces what are expected to be the worst months of the pandemic.

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"We don't have a long line of people outside of the door who want those jobs," said Dr. Gianfranco Pezino, health officer in Shawnee County, Kansas, who is retiring from his job earlier than planned because, he said, he's burned out. "It's a huge loss that will be felt probably for generations to come."

EXISTING PROBLEMS

The departures accelerate problems that had already weakened the nation's public health system. AP and KHN reported that per capita spending for state public health departments had dropped by 16%, and for local health departments by 18%, since 2010. At least 38,000 state and local public health jobs have disappeared since the 2008 recession.

Those diminishing resources were already prompting high turnover. Before the pandemic, nearly half of public health workers said in a survey they planned to retire or leave in the next five years. The top reason given was low pay.

Such reduced staffing in departments that have the power and responsibility to manage everything from water inspections to childhood immunizations left public health workforces ill-equipped when COVID-19 arrived. Then, when pandemic shutdowns reduced tax revenues, some state and local governments cut their public health workforces further.

"Now we're at this moment where we need this knowledge and leadership the most, everything has come together to cause that brain drain," said Chrissie Juliano, executive director of the Big Cities Health Coalition, which represents leaders of more than two dozen public health departments.

POLITICS AS PUBLIC HEALTH POISON

Public health experts broadly agree that masks are a simple and cost-effective way to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and save lives and livelihoods. Scientists say that physical distancing and curtailing indoor activities can also help.

But with the pandemic coinciding with a divisive presidential election, simple acts such as wearing a mask morphed into political statements, with some on the right saying such requirements stomped on individual freedom.

During the 2020 campaign, President Donald Trump ridiculed Democratic challenger Joe Biden for wearing a mask and egged on armed people who stormed Michigan's Capitol to protest coronavirus restrictions by tweeting "LIBERATE MICHIGAN!"

Kansas official Coleman, a Christian and a Republican, said that's just what happened in Linn County. "A lot of people are shamed into not wearing a mask ... because you're considered a Democrat," she said. "I've been called a 'sheep.'"

The politicization has put some local governments at odds with their own health officials.

In California, near Lake Tahoe, the Placer County Board of Supervisors voted to end a local health emergency and declared support for a widely discredited "herd immunity" strategy, which would let the virus spread. The idea is endorsed by many conservatives, including former Trump adviser Dr. Scott Atlas, as a way to keep the economy running, but it has been denounced by public health experts who say millions more people will unnecessarily suffer and die. The supervisors also endorsed a false conspiracy theory claiming many COVID-19 deaths are not actually from COVID-19.

The meeting occurred just days after the county public health officer, Dr. Aimee Sisson, explained to the board the rigorous standards used for counting COVID-19 deaths. Sisson quit the next day.

In Idaho, protests against public health measures are intensifying. Hundreds of protesters, some armed, swarmed health district offices and health board members' homes in Boise on Dec. 8, screaming and blaring air horns. They included members of the anti-vaccination group Health Freedom Idaho.

Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine, has tracked the anti-vaccine movement. He said it has linked up with political extremists on the right and taken on a larger anti-science role, pushing back against other public health measures such as contact tracing and physical distancing.

Members of a group called the Freedom Angels in California, which sprung up in 2019 around a state law to tighten vaccine requirements, have been organizing protests at health departments, posing with

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guns and calling themselves a militia on the group's Facebook page.

The latest Idaho protests came after a July skirmish in which Ammon Bundy shoved a public health employee who tried to stop him and his maskless supporters from entering a health meeting.

Bundy, whose family led armed standoffs against federal agents in 2014 and 2016, has become an icon for paramilitary groups and right-wing extremists, most recently forming a multistate network called People's Rights that has organized protests against public health measures.

"We don't believe they have a right to tell us that we have to put a manmade filter over our face to go outside," Bundy said. "It's not about, you know, the mandates or the mask. It's about them not having that right to do it."

Kelly Aberasturi, vice chair for the Southwest District Health, which covers six counties, said the worker Bundy shoved was "just trying to do his job."

Aberasturi, a self-described "extremist" right-wing Republican, said he, too, has been subjected to the backlash. Aberasturi doesn't support mask mandates, but he did back the board's recommendation that people in the community wear masks. He said people who believe even a recommendation goes too far have threatened to protest at his house.

THE MASK FIGHT IN KANSAS

The public health workforce in Kansas has been hit hard, with 17 of the state's 100 health departments losing their leaders since the end of March.

Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly issued a mask mandate in July, but the Legislature allowed counties to opt out. A recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report showed the 24 Kansas counties that had upheld the mandate saw a 6% decrease in COVID-19, while the 81 counties that opted out entirely saw a 100% increase.

Coleman, who pushed unsuccessfully for Linn County to uphold the rule, was sued for putting a community member into quarantine. She won the lawsuit. In late November, she spoke at a county commissioner's meeting to discuss a new mask mandate. It was her first day back in the office after her own bout with COVID-19.

She pleaded for a plan to help stem the surge in cases. One resident referenced Thomas Jefferson, saying, "I prefer a dangerous freedom over a peaceful slavery." Another falsely argued that masks caused elevated carbon dioxide. Few, besides Coleman, wore a mask at the meeting.

Commissioner Mike Page supported the mask order, noting that a close friend was fighting COVID-19 in the hospital and saying he was "ashamed" that members of the community had sued their public health workers while other communities supported theirs.

In the end, the commissioners encouraged community members to wear masks but opted out of a countywide rule, writing they had determined that they are "not necessary to protect the public health and safety of the county."

Coleman was disappointed but not surprised. "At least I know I've done everything I can to attempt to protect the people," she said.

The next day, Coleman discussed Christmas decorations with her mother as she drove her to the hospital.

STRIPPING OF POWERS

The state bill that let Linn County opt out of the governor's mask mandate is one of dozens of efforts to erode public health powers in legislatures across the country.

For decades, government authorities have had the legal power to stop foodborne illnesses and infectious diseases by closing businesses and quarantining individuals, among other measures.

When people contract tuberculosis, for example, the local health department might isolate them, require them to wear a mask when they leave their homes, require family members to get tested, relocate them so they can isolate and make sure they take their medicine. Such measures are meant to protect everyone and avoid the shutdown of businesses and schools.

Now, opponents of those measures are turning to legislatures and even the Supreme Court to strip public officials of those powers, defund local health departments or even dissolve them. The American

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Legislative Exchange Council, a corporate-backed group of conservative lawmakers, has published model legislation for states to follow.

Lawmakers in Missouri, Louisiana, Ohio, Virginia and at least 20 other states have written bills to limit public health powers. In some states, the efforts have failed; in others, legislative leaders have embraced them enthusiastically.

Tennessee's Republican House leadership is backing a bill to constrain the state's six local health departments, granting their powers to mayors instead. The bill stems from clashes between the mayor of Knox County and the local health board over mask mandates and business closures.

In Idaho, lawmakers resolved to review the authority of local health districts in the next session. The move doesn't sit right with Aberasturi, who said it's hypocritical coming from state lawmakers who profess to believe in local control.

Governors in Wisconsin, Kansas and Michigan, among others, have been sued by their own legislators, state think tanks or others for using their executive powers to restrict business operations and require masks. In Ohio, a group of lawmakers is seeking to impeach Republican Gov. Mike DeWine over his pandemic rules.

The Supreme Court in 1905 found it was constitutional for officials to issue orders to protect the public health, in a case upholding a Cambridge, Massachusetts, requirement to get a smallpox vaccine. But a 5-4 ruling last month indicated the majority of justices are willing to put new constraints on those powers.

"It is time — past time — to make plain that, while the pandemic poses many grave challenges, there is no world in which the Constitution tolerates color-coded executive edicts that reopen liquor stores and bike shops but shutter churches, synagogues, and mosques," Justice Neil Gorsuch wrote.

Gostin, the health law professor, said the decision could embolden legislators and governors to weaken public health authority, creating "a snowballing effect on the erosion of public health powers and, ultimately, public's trust in public health and science."

WHO IS LEFT

Many health officials who have stayed in their jobs have faced not only political backlash but also threats of personal violence. Armed paramilitary groups have put public health in their sights.

In California, a man with ties to the right-wing, anti-government Boogaloo movement was accused of stalking and threatening Santa Clara's health officer. The suspect was arrested and has pleaded not guilty. The Boogaloo movement is associated with multiple murders, including of a Bay Area sheriff deputy and federal security officer.

Linda Vail, health officer for Michigan's Ingham County, has received emails and letters at her home saying she would be "taken down like the governor," which Vail took to be a reference to the thwarted attempt to kidnap Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer. Even as other health officials are leaving, Vail is choosing to stay despite the threats.

"I can completely understand why some people, they're just done," she said. "There are other places to go work."

In mid-November, Danielle Swanson, public health administrator in Republic County, Kansas, said she was planning to resign as soon as she and enough of her COVID-19-positive staff emerged from isolation. Someone threatened to go to her department with a gun because of a quarantine, and she's received hand-delivered hate mail and calls from screaming residents.

"It's very stressful. It's hard on me; it's hard on my family that I do not see," she said. "For the longest time, I held through it thinking there's got to be an end in sight."

Swanson said some of her employees have told her once she goes, they probably will not stay.

As public health officials depart, the question of who takes their places has plagued Dr. Oxiris Barbot, who left her job as commissioner of New York City's health department in August amid a clash with Democratic Mayor Bill de Blasio. During the height of the pandemic, the mayor empowered the city's hospital system to lead the fight against COVID-19, passing over her highly regarded department.

"I'm concerned about the degree to which they will have the fortitude to tell elected officials what they need to hear instead of what they want to hear," Barbot said.

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In Kentucky, 189 employees, about 1 in 10, left local health departments from March through Nov. 21, according to Sara Jo Best, public health director of the Lincoln Trail District Health Department. That comes after a decade of decline: Staff numbers fell 49% from 2009 to 2019. She said workers are exhausted and can't catch up on the overwhelming number of contact tracing investigations, much less run COVID-19 testing, combat flu season and prepare for COVID-19 vaccinations.

The remaining workforce is aging. According to the de Beaumont Foundation, which advocates for local public health, 42% of governmental public health workers are over 50.

Back in Linn County, cases are rising. As of Dec. 14, 1 out of every 24 residents has tested positive.

The day after her mother was put on a ventilator, Coleman fought to hold back tears as she described the 71-year-old former health care worker with a strong work ethic.

"Of course, I could give up and throw in the towel, but I'm not there yet," she said, adding that she will "continue to fight to prevent this happening to someone else."

Coleman, whose mother died Sunday, has noticed more people are wearing masks these days.

But at the family hardware store, they are still not required.

Michelle R. Smith is an Associated Press reporter. Anna Maria Barry-Jester, Hannah Recht and Lauren Weber are reporters for KHN.

This story is a collaboration between The Associated Press and KHN (Kaiser Health News), which is a nonprofit news service covering health issues. It is an editorially independent program of KFF (Kaiser Family Foundation) that is not affiliated with Kaiser Permanente.

METHODOLOGY

KHN and AP counted how many state and local public health leaders have left their jobs since April 1, or who plan to leave by Dec. 31.

The analysis includes the exits of top department officials regardless of reason. Some departments have more than one top position and some had multiple top officials leave from the same position over the course of the pandemic.

To compile the list, reporters reached out to public health associations and experts in every state and interviewed hundreds of public health employees. They also received information from the National Association of County and City Health Officials, and combed news reports and public records, such as meeting minutes and news releases.

The population served by each local health department is calculated using the Census Bureau 2019 Population Estimates based on each department's jurisdiction.

The count of legislation came from reviewing bills in every state, prefiled bills for 2021 sessions, where available, and news reports. The bills include limits on quarantines, contact tracing, vaccine requirements and emergency executive powers.

After Arab Spring, a decade of upheaval and lost hopes

By LEE KEATH Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Was it real?

It's all been erased so completely, so much blood has been shed and destruction wreaked over the past decade. The idea that there was a moment when millions across the Middle East wanted freedom and change so much that they took to the streets seems like romantic nostalgia.

"It was very brief, man. It was so brief," said Badr Elbendary, an Egyptian activist.

Elbendary was blinded on the third day of his country's revolt in 2011, when security forces shot him in the face. It happened during a clash that became iconic among Egypt's "revolutionaries," when protesters and police battled on a bridge over the Nile in Cairo for hours, ending with the police scattering.

Today, he's in the United States. He can't return home. Many of his comrades from the protests languish

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in prisons in Egypt.

In December 2010, the uprising began in Tunisia and quickly spread from country to country in revolts against longtime authoritarian rulers. It became known as the Arab Spring, but for those who took to the streets, the call was "revolution."

The uprisings were about more than just removing autocrats. At their heart, they were a mass demand by the public for better governance and economies, rule of law, greater rights and, most of all, a voice in how their countries are run.

For a time after 2011, the surge toward those dreams seemed irreversible. Now they are further than ever. Those who keep the faith are convinced that yearning was real and remains — or is even growing as people across the Arab world struggle with worsening economies and heavier repression. Eventually, they say, it will emerge again.

"We have lowered our dreams," said Amani Ballour, a Syrian doctor who ran an underground clinic treating casualties in the opposition enclave of Ghouta outside Damascus until it collapsed under a long, brutal siege by Syrian government forces in 2018. She was evacuated with other residents to northwest Syria, and from there she left the country.

"The spirit of the demonstrations may be over for now ... But all those who suffered from the war, from the regime's repression, they won't put up with it," she said from Germany. "Even in the areas controlled by the regime, there is great frustration and anger building up among the people."

"Eventually" could be years.

The region is traumatized and exhausted by its most destructive decade of the modern era, perhaps the most destructive in centuries.

Across Syria, Yemen and Iraq, millions have lost their homes in war and struggle to find livelihoods, educate their children or even to feed themselves. Armed factions have proliferated in those countries and Libya, raking in money and recruiting young people who find few other options. Poverty rates have risen around the region, especially with the coronavirus pandemic.

Activists and analysts have had a decade to pore over why it went wrong.

Secular liberals failed to present a cohesive front or leadership. Islamists like the Muslim Brotherhood overplayed their hand. Labor organizations, neutered by decades of autocratic rule, couldn't step up as a powerful mobilizer or political force. It's perhaps no coincidence that the countries with some success, Tunisia and Sudan, both had strong labor and professional movements.

The international scene was pitted against the uprisings. The United States and Europe were muddled in their responses, torn between their rhetoric about backing democracy and their interest in stability and worries about Islamists. In the end, they largely listened to the latter.

Gulf monarchies used oil wealth to smother any revolutionary tide and back reactionary powers. Russia, Iran, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates waded into the region's wars, either sending their own forces or arming factions.

Ultimately, few expected just how wide some leaders were willing to throw open the gates of Hell to keep power.

Syria's Bashar Assad proved the most ruthless. Faced with armed rebellion, he and his Russian and Iranian allies decimated cities, and he used chemical weapons on his own people, clawing back Syria's heartland and main cities and preserving his rule.

In Yemen, strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh was forced to step down in late 2011 in the face of the protests. But he soon tried to regain power by allying with his longtime enemy, the Iranian-backed Shiite Houthi rebels. Together, they captured the capital and Yemen's north, pulling Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries into a U.S.-backed campaign to rescue the government.

The resulting civil war has been catastrophic, killing tens of thousands and pushing the population toward starvation in the world's worst ongoing humanitarian disaster. Saleh himself was killed by the Houthis when they suspected him of turning on them.

In Libya, the U.S. and European countries retreated from involvement after their bombardment helped

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bring down Moammar Gadhafi. The oil-rich Mediterranean nation promptly collapsed into a constantly shape-shifting civil war. Over the years, it has involved the many local militias, units of the old national army, al-Qaida, the Islamic State group, Russian mercenaries and Turkish-backed Syrian fighters, with at least two — at one point three — rival claimant governments.

Europe's main priority has been to stop the flow of African migrants from Libya across the Mediterranean. So Libya has become a horrific dead end for thousands of men and women trying to migrate from Central and East Africa only to find themselves locked up and tortured by militiamen.

Syria's civil war gave al-Qaida's former Iraq branch, rebranded as the Islamic State group, a theater in which to build strength. From there it overran a swath of Syria and Iraq and declare the creation of an Islamic "caliphate" — opening up yet another war that wreaked destruction in Iraq.

In Egypt, President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi often points to the wreckage around the region to bolster one of his key claims to legitimacy — "without me, chaos."

El-Sissi has taken the lesson from 2011 that even the slightest opening gives a foothold for turmoil, often saying stability is needed while he reshapes the economy. It's an argument that resonates among many Egyptians, shaken not only by wars in Syria and Libya but also Egypt's turmoil for years after Hosni Mubarak's fall.

The result has been repression of dissent far beyond what was seen under Mubarak. The crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists included a brutal attack on a sit-in that left hundreds dead. In recent years, his government has arrested secular activists and others, often bringing them before terrorism court.

Still, even with much of the region deep in the counter-Arab Spring era, uprisings for change erupt.

Massive protests spread around Lebanon and Iraq in late 2019 and early 2020, with crowds demanding entire ruling classes be removed.

In Sudan, protesters forced out longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir. Learning a lesson from 2011, they kept up their protests, trying to dislodge the military from power as well. They were only partially successful.

Those revolts point to how the ambitions of the initial uprisings still echo around the region. But for the time being, even incremental change often seems too much to hope for.

Rather than real democracy, "my dream before I die is to see less torture, fewer arrests, and a real, better economy," said Ramy Yaacoub, who was involved in Egypt's protests and post-revolution politics during the heady days after Mubarak's fall.

"This is as realistic as I can be."

"Change is not overnight. I don't want to be all wonky and say the French Revolution took decades, but it did. It doesn't happen over a year or two," said Yaacoub, who founded and now heads the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Studies in Washington.

Some activists have turned to improving themselves, studying and building skills, keeping away despair.

Elbendary has regained partial sight in one eye — though he said it jarred him after getting accustomed to blindness. In the years since leaving Egypt, he has been doing consulting work on community organizing, policy research, independent media development and conflict resolution around the region. A brief visit home to Egypt in late 2018 and early 2019 made it clear it wasn't safe for him to stay.

Now in Washington, he wrestles with exile. He still celebrates the uprising as "my rebirth" in his Twitter bio. The hope lies with a generation gaining knowledge that can one day benefit their homelands.

But when?

Several years at the most optimistic, he said — not for real change, "for a slight opening, a slight margin where we can breathe."

Jackson returns to save Ravens with 47-42 win over Browns

By TOM WITHERS AP Sports Writer

CLEVELAND (AP) — Lamar Jackson's only thought was to rescue his teammates.

Like any other superhero.

Jackson emerged from the locker room, saved the game and maybe Baltimore's season with a 47-42

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win over the Cleveland Browns in a wild, back-and-forth Monday night game in which the teams combined to tie a 98-year-old NFL record.

Back on the field after being sidelined by cramps, Jackson threw a 44-yard touchdown pass to Marquise Brown and then set up Justin Tucker's 55-yard field goal with two seconds left as the Ravens (8-5) stayed in the playoff picture.

A game dripping with playoff intensity delivered with endless drama and numerous twists, none bigger than Jackson running back onto the field for a fourth-down play after his backup, Trace McSorley, had suffered a knee injury.

Jackson, who missed a recent game with COVID-19, said he received fluids in the locker room and was getting stretched when he saw McSorley get hurt.

"I'm still stretching and I'm like, 'We gotta go out there,'" he said. "It was fourth down, my guys were making great catches and we came out with the victory. As soon as I saw him go down, I came out of the locker room."

Jackson first hit Brown for the TD and then, after getting the ball back with 1:04 left, got Baltimore in position for Tucker, who made 70 straight field goals inside 40 yards before missing last week. He made this one look pretty routine, providing an uplifting moment for the Ravens after they spent the past two weeks dealing with a virus outbreak and numerous scheduling changes.

"It's definitely good that we made that kick, given everything this team is going through right now," Tucker said. "It keeps us in the playoff picture. We definitely needed to have this one. What the world saw on Monday Night Football was a Ravens team playing with guts."

It was a gut punch for the Browns (9-4), who had rallied from a 14-point deficit to take the lead while Jackson was out.

The Browns had one last chance after Tucker's kick, but a series of laterals on the final play ended with a safety that affected gamblers all over the country. The Ravens were favored by three on the opening line.

"There can either be good or bad to come from this," said Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield, whose 22-yard TD pass to Kareem Hunt with 1:04 left tied it. "You can start pointing fingers, but that's not this team. We know that we need to fight and make the plays to win when we need to."

The NFL's top two rushing teams combined for nine rushing touchdowns, tying a league record set in 1922 by Rock Island and Evansville and then Racine and Louisville.

Jackson rushed for two touchdowns and 124 yards. He completed just 11 passes, but five of them came after he returned from the cramps.

With the Ravens down 42-35, Jackson came running back onto the field after McSorley suffered what looked like a serious leg injury when he slipped on a slick FirstEnergy Stadium field that was tough for players to cut on all night.

Jackson spent the first half slipping all over the place before changing cleats.

With no margin for error on fourth-and-5, Jackson calmly rolled to his right — and after getting the Browns to think he was going to run — he found a wide-open Brown in the middle of the field.

"That was a big-time play. We needed that," tight end Mark Andrews said. "It's hard to describe this game because everyone was doing their thing. Just a lot of fun."

Even after Jackson's throw, Mayfield wasn't going to be denied. He drove the Browns 75 yards, hitting Hunt for the score.

Jackson then showed why he's a superstar.

The reigning NFL MVP completed two straight passes to Andrews, who missed the past two games with COVID-19, for 28 yards and moved the Ravens in range for Tucker, one of the most accurate kickers in league history.

Mayfield had shaken off a costly interception and brought the Browns back, scrambling from the pocket at Jackson and scoring on a run with 6:33 left.

The Browns were beaten 38-6 by the Ravens in Week 1, but Cleveland looked like a different team — like a playoff team.

"That's a really good football team with a lot of heart," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "It's a game

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that's going to go down in history. Our guys had faith and trust and belief and sometimes that's what it takes."

Nick Chubb had two TD runs for the Browns, while Gus Edwards had two for the Ravens.

CORNER CONCERNS

Injured Browns cornerback Greedy Williams revealed on Twitter that he's been dealing with axillary nerve damage in his shoulder since getting hurt in training camp. He hasn't played this season.

Cleveland was counting on Williams to handle the starting cornerback spot opposite Denzel Ward, who missed his third straight game with a calf injury.

INJURIES

Ravens: CB Jimmy Smith left in the second half with a shoulder injury. ... CB Marcus Peters left with a calf injury in the fourth quarter.

Browns: Defensive star Myles Garrett missed one play in the first half with an elbow injury. ... Rookie LT Jedrick Wills went off briefly in the third quarter with a leg injury, but came back.

UP NEXT

Ravens: Host the Jacksonville Jaguars (1-12) on Dec. 20.

Browns: Make the first of two straight weekend visits to the New York area and play the Giants on Dec. 20. Cleveland visits the winless Jets on Dec. 27.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

US vaccinations ramp up as feds weigh 2nd COVID-19 shot

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds more U.S. hospitals will begin vaccinating their workers Tuesday as federal health officials review a second COVID-19 shot needed to boost the nation's largest vaccination campaign.

Packed in dry ice to stay at ultra-frozen temperatures, shipments of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine are set to arrive at 400 additional hospitals and other distribution sites, one day after the nation's death toll surpassed a staggering 300,000. The first 3 million shots are being strictly rationed to front-line health workers and elder-care patients, with hundreds of millions more shots needed over the coming months to protect most Americans.

The Food and Drug Administration is set to publish its analysis of a second rigorously studied COVID-19 vaccine, which could soon join Pfizer-BioNTech's in the fight against the pandemic. If FDA advisers give it a positive recommendation on Thursday, the agency could greenlight the vaccine from drugmaker Moderna later this week.

A second vaccine can't come soon enough as the country's daily death count continues to top 2,400 amid over 210,000 new daily cases, based on weekly averages of data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. The devastating toll is only expected to grow in coming weeks, fueled by holiday travel, family gatherings and lax adherence to basic public health measures.

The first vaccine deliveries have provided a measure of encouragement to exhausted doctors, nurses and hospital staffers around the country.

Johnnie Peoples, a 43-year-old survival flight nurse, was excited and a little nervous Monday afternoon as he unzipped his flight suit and stuck out his left arm to become the first person to receive the vaccine at the University of Michigan Medical Center in Ann Arbor.

"Just to be a part of it is a good feeling," he said.

Since March, he's transported critically ill COVID-19 patients by jet from smaller hospitals around the state to the university medical center. It's up-close-and-personal work that requires him to adjust ventilator settings and administer infusions to keep blood pressure from plummeting.

In Florida, government officials expect to have 100,000 doses of the vaccine by Tuesday at five hospitals across the state.

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"This is 20,000 doses of hope," said John Couris, president and chief executive officer, Tampa General Hospital, after the delivery of 3,900 vaccine vials on Monday. Each vial has five doses.

Because the vaccine requires two rounds, the people getting injections now will need a second shot in about three weeks.

Vaccinations were also expected to kick off Tuesday in New Jersey, which is dividing some 76,000 doses among health workers and nursing home residents. The federal government is coordinating the massive delivery operation by private shipping and distribution companies based on locations chosen by state governors.

Following another initial set of deliveries Wednesday, officials with the Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed in Washington said they will begin moving 580 more shipments through the weekend.

"We're starting our drumbeat of continuous execution of vaccine as it is available," Army Gen. Gustave Perna, chief operating officer for Warp Speed, told reporters Monday. "We package and we deliver. It is a constant flow of available vaccine."

Shots for nursing home residents won't begin in most states until next Monday, when some 1,100 facilities are set to begin vaccinations.

Perna and other U.S. officials reiterated their projection that 20 million Americans will be able to get their first shots by the end of December, and 30 million more in January.

That projection assumes swift authorization of the vaccine up for review this week, co-developed by Moderna and the National Institutes of Health. Like the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, Moderna's requires two shots for full protection.

Last month, Moderna and NIH reported that their shot appeared to be nearly 95% effective across various ages and racial groups, according to results from an ongoing 30,000-person study. The main side effects were fatigue, muscle aches and injection-site pain after the second dose. Those flu-like reactions are common to many vaccines and are a sign the vaccine is revving up the immune system to help fight off the virus.

Moderna reported no major safety problems from its study. But FDA's panel is certain to scrutinize the data for any indications of possible severe allergic reactions or other rare side effects. Officials in the U.K. are investigating several adverse reactions there with Pfizer's vaccine and FDA is closely monitoring the rollout here for similar reports.

Both Moderna's and Pfizer-BioNTech's shots are so-called mRNA vaccines, a brand-new technology. They aren't made with the coronavirus itself, meaning there's no chance anyone could catch it from the shots. Instead, the vaccine contains a piece of genetic code that trains the immune system to recognize the spiked protein on the surface of the virus.

Associated Press writers Lindsey Tanner, Tamara Lush, Candice Choi and Lauran Neergaard contributed to this report.

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Trump says Barr resigning, will leave before Christmas

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General William Barr, one of President Donald Trump's staunchest allies, is departing amid lingering tension over the president's baseless claims of election fraud and the investigation into President-elect Joe Biden's son.

Barr went Monday to the White House, where Trump said the attorney general submitted his letter of resignation. "As per letter, Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family," Trump tweeted.

Trump has publicly expressed his anger about Barr's statement to The Associated Press earlier this month

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that the Justice Department had found no widespread fraud that would change the outcome of the election. Trump has also been angry that the Justice Department did not publicly announce it was investigating Hunter Biden ahead of the election, despite department policy against such a pronouncement.

Barr told the AP that U.S. attorneys and FBI agents have been working to follow up specific complaints and information they've received, but "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election."

Barr's resignation leaves Trump without a critical ally as he winds down his final weeks in office, and it throws into question open Justice Department investigations, especially the probe into Hunter Biden's taxes.

In his resignation letter, Barr said he updated Trump Monday on the department's "review of voter fraud allegations in the 2020 election and how these allegations will continue to be pursued." He added that his last day on the job would be Dec. 23.

Trump said Deputy Attorney General Jeff Rosen, whom he labeled "an outstanding person," will become acting attorney general. As the current second in command at the Justice Department, Rosen's appointment is not likely to change much in the final weeks before the administration departs.

Trump spent much of the day watching the Electoral College tally and calling allies but broke away to meet with Barr. His tweet about the Attorney General's exit was a sober message from a president who is notoriously cold to his departing staff and quick to name-call and deride them once they say they are leaving.

Trump has also has previously claimed he fired staffers who resigned to make himself appear more powerful, and others, like former attorney general Jeff Sessions, were mocked by the president for weeks before they left office.

But despite Trump's obvious disdain for those who publicly disagree with him, Barr had generally remained in the president's good graces and has been one of the president's most ardent allies. Before the election, he had repeatedly raised the notion that mail-in voting could be especially vulnerable to fraud during the coronavirus pandemic as Americans feared going to polls.

But Trump has a low tolerance for criticism, especially public criticism, from his allies and often fires back in kind. The two had been at odds in the past few months and Barr was said to have been frustrated by Trump's tweeting.

Trump said on Fox News over the weekend that he was disappointed that the Hunter Biden investigation had not been disclosed. Hunter Biden himself announced it last week.

"Bill Barr should have stepped up," Trump said.

One senior administration official not authorized to speak publicly and speaking to The AP on condition of anonymity said Barr had resigned of his own accord and described the meeting as amicable.

Barr, who was serving in his second stint as attorney general, sought to paint himself as an independent leader who would not bow to political pressure. But Democrats have repeatedly accused Barr of acting more like the president's personal attorney than the attorney general, and Barr had proved to be a largely reliable Trump ally and defender of presidential power.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, the Republican leader of the judiciary committee, told reporters at the Capitol he was surprised by the news.

"I think he did an incredibly good job trying to repair damage done to the Department of Justice, trying to be fair and faithful to the law. I think he's got a lot to be proud of," Graham said. "He fought for the president where he could, as every attorney general and administration should, but he also didn't cross lines that he shouldn't have crossed." He said he was referring to disclosing the Biden investigation.

Graham also praised Rosen as a "good man" who he said would "be an ethical leader and a steady hand" at the Justice Department.

Democrats who had long criticized Barr did not lament his departure. "Good riddance," tweeted House intelligence committee chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., who said the attorney general had "lied to cover for Trump, launched political investigations, subverted justice and the rule of law and violently cracked down on protestors."

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., who led an investigation of politicization of

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the department, said that "whomever Joe Biden chooses as the new Attorney General will have a tremendous amount of work to do to repair the integrity of the Department of Justice."

Before releasing special counsel Robert Mueller's full report on the Russia investigation last year, Barr framed the results in a manner favorable to Trump even though Mueller pointedly said he couldn't exonerate the president of obstruction of justice.

He also appointed as special counsel the U.S. attorney who is conducting a criminal investigation into the origins of the FBI's probe of the 2016 election that morphed into Mueller's investigation of possible Trump-Russia cooperation, following Trump's repeated calls to "investigate the investigators."

Barr also ordered Justice Department prosecutors to review the handling of the federal investigation into Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn and then sought to dismiss the criminal charges against Flynn, who had twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI. Trump later pardoned Flynn.

Barr's break from Trump over election fraud wasn't the first. Earlier this year, Barr told ABC News that the president's tweets about Justice Department cases "make it impossible for me to do my job," and tensions flared just a few months ago when the two were increasingly at odds over the pace of the Durham investigation.

Trump had been increasingly critical about a lack of arrests and Barr was privately telling people he was frustrated by Trump's public pronouncements about the case.

Trump was also said to blame Barr for comments from FBI Director Chris Wray on election fraud and mail-in voting that didn't jibe with the president's alarmist rhetoric.

Associated Press writers Colleen Long, Eric Tucker, Jonathan Lemire, Mary Clare Jalonick and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

In a first, leading Republicans call Biden president-elect

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time, a groundswell of leading Republicans said Monday that Democrat Joe Biden is the winner of the presidential election, essentially abandoning President Donald Trump's assault on the outcome after the Electoral College certified the vote.

With states affirming the results, the Republicans faced a pivotal choice - to declare Biden the president-elect, as the tally showed, or keep standing silently by as Trump wages a potentially damaging campaign to overturn the election.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., was quiet on the issue Monday. But a number of senators said the time has come.

"At some point you have to face the music," said Sen. John Thune of South Dakota, the second-ranking GOP leader. "Once the Electoral College settles the issue today, it's time for everybody to move on."

Sen. Roy Blunt of Missouri, the chairman of the inaugural committee, said the panel will now "deal with Vice President Biden as the president-elect."

Just last week, the Republicans on the inauguration committee had declined to publicly do so. He said Monday's Electoral College vote "was significant."

Texas GOP Sen. John Cornyn said barring further legal challenges it appears Biden will be president.

"That's sort of the nature of these elections. You got to have a winner. You got to have a loser," Cornyn said, adding that once Trump's legal arguments are exhausted, "Joe Biden's on a path to be president of the United States."

The turnaround comes nearly six weeks after Election Day. Many Republicans have ridden out the time in silence, enabling Trump to wage an unprecedented challenge to the nation's cherished system of voting.

Some GOP lawmakers have vowed to carry the fight to Jan. 6 when Congress votes to accept or reject the Electoral College results. Others have said Trump's legal battles should continue toward resolution by inauguration day, Jan. 20.

"It's a very, very narrow path for the president," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a top Trump ally. "But having said that, I think we'll let those legal challenges play out."

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Historians and election officials have warned that Trump's unfounded claims of voter fraud threaten to erode Americans' faith in the election system, and that lawmakers have a responsibility under the oath of office to defend the Constitution.

"The campaign to overturn the outcome is a dangerous thing," said Julian Zelizer, a professor of history and public policy at Princeton.

"This is a Republican operation, not a presidential operation," Zelizer said. "Without their silence, he couldn't do what he is doing."

Trump is trying to throw out the ballots of thousands of Americans, particularly those who voted by mail, in dozens of lawsuits that have mostly failed. His legal team is claiming irregularities, even though Attorney General William Barr, who abruptly resigned Monday, has said there is no evidence of widespread fraud that would alter the election results. State election officials, including Republicans, have said the election was fair and valid.

In a decisive blow to Trump's legal efforts, the Supreme Court last week declined to take up two of his cases challenging the election process in key states.

Former Senate GOP leader Trent Lott said Monday there is little reason for Trump to continue the fight.

"I don't see many avenues left for the president to pursue," Lott said in an interview. "Once the Electoral College has voted, most people are going to recognize Joe Biden as the president-elect."

Former House Speaker John Boehner, a Republican, has also said it's clear that Biden is the winner, stating in a forum last month that, "The election is over, in everybody's mind except Donald Trump."

Before Monday, just a handful of current Republican elected officials in Congress had acknowledged Biden as president-elect. Even fewer have reached out to congratulate him.

Among GOP senators, Susan Collins, Mitt Romney and Lisa Murkowski have been most outspoken in declaring Biden the winner.

Others said they were waiting for the Electoral College vote, which is normally a routine step in the elections process but has been amplified by Trump's refusal to concede.

"Although I supported President Trump, the Electoral College vote today makes clear that Joe Biden is now President-Elect," said Sen. Rob Portman, R-Ohio, in a statement.

"The presidential election is over," said Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn.

Still, many Republicans in Congress are backing Trump's legal battles. Some 120 House Republicans signed on to the failed Texas lawsuit last week asking the Supreme Court to take up the case seeking to throw out election results in the swing-states of Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Georgia.

GOP Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas, who volunteered to argue the case before the Supreme Court, was holding a telephone town hall Monday urging "participation in the fight to defend the integrity" of the election.

One House Republican, Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama, has vowed to challenge the Electoral College results on Jan. 6, when Congress convenes a joint session to receive the outcome.

At that time, any challenge in Congress would need to be raised by at least one member of the House and Senate. It's unclear if any GOP senator will join in making the case. It appears highly unlikely there is enough congressional support to overturn the election.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said Monday that it's as if Biden has to win "again and again and again" before Republicans will accept it.

Many Republicans are unwilling to declare Biden the winner for the same reasons they avoided standing up to Trump during his presidency.

The president remains popular back home, and they are reluctant to cross him or risk public retribution from him on Twitter and beyond. As Trump prepares to leave office, his supporters are voters lawmakers need for their own reelections.

Rep. Alex Mooney, R-W.Va., introduced a resolution in Congress last week suggesting no one be declared president-elect until all investigations are completed. He proposed it after constituents confronted him last month demanding he do more to support Trump.

Overhanging their calculations is the Georgia runoff elections Jan. 5 that will decide control of the Sen-

ate. Incumbent GOP senators David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler need Trump's support to defend their seats against Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Rafael Warnock.

EXPLAINER: How bad is the hack that targeted US agencies?

By MATT O'BRIEN and FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writers

Governments and major corporations worldwide are scrambling to see if they, too, were victims of a global cyberespionage campaign that penetrated multiple U.S. government agencies and involved a common software product used by thousands of organizations. Russia, the prime suspect, denies involvement. Cybersecurity investigators said the hack's impact extends far beyond the affected U.S. agencies, which include the Treasury and Commerce departments, though they haven't disclosed which companies or what other governments were targeted.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The hack began as early as March when malicious code was snuck into updates to popular software that monitors computer networks of businesses and governments. The malware, affecting a product made by U.S. company SolarWinds, gave elite hackers remote access into an organization's networks so they could steal information. It wasn't discovered until the prominent cybersecurity company FireEye determined it had been hacked. Whoever broke into FireEye was seeking data on its government clients, the company said — and made off with hacking tools it uses to probe its customers' defenses.

"There's no evidence that this was meant to be destructive," said Ben Buchanan, Georgetown University cyberespionage expert and author of "The Hacker and The State." He called the campaign's scope, "impressive, surprising and alarming."

Its apparent monthslong timeline gave the hackers ample time to extract information from a lot of different targets. Buchanan compared its magnitude to the 2015 Chinese hack of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, in which the records of 22 million federal employees and government job applicants were stolen.

FireEye executive Charles Carmakal said the company was aware of "dozens of incredibly high-value targets" compromised by the hackers and was helping "a number of organizations respond to their intrusions." He would not name any, and said he expected many more to learn in coming days that they, too, were infiltrated.

WHAT IS SOLARWINDS?

SolarWinds, of Austin, Texas, provides network-monitoring and other technical services to hundreds of thousands of organizations around the world, including most Fortune 500 companies and government agencies in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

Its compromised product, called Orion, accounts for nearly half SolarWinds' annual revenue. The company's revenue totaled \$753.9 million over the first nine months of this year. Its centralized monitoring looks for problems in an organization's computer networks, which means that breaking in gave the attackers a "God-view" of those networks.

SolarWinds, whose stock fell 17% on Monday, said in a financial filing that it sent an advisory to about 33,000 of its Orion customers that might have been affected, though it estimated a smaller number of customers — fewer than 18,000 — had actually installed the compromised product update earlier this year.

FireEye described the malware's dizzying capabilities — from initially lying dormant up to two weeks, to hiding in plain sight by masquerading its reconnaissance forays as Orion activity.

WAS MY WORKPLACE AFFECTED?

Neither SolarWinds nor U.S. cybersecurity authorities have publicly identified which organizations were breached. Just because a company or agency uses SolarWinds as a vendor doesn't necessarily mean they were vulnerable to the hacking. The malware that opened remote-access backdoors was injected into So-

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larWinds' Orion product updates released between March and June, but not every customer installed them.

The hackers would have also had to want to target the organization. Hacking on their level is expensive and the disciplined intruders only they chose targets with highly coveted information because the risk of being detected rose any time they activated the malware, said FireEye's Carmakal.

The so-called supply-chain method used to distribute the malware via SolarWinds' software recalled the technique Russian military hackers used in 2016 to infect companies that do business in Ukraine with the hard drive-wiping NotPetya virus — the most damaging cyberattack to date. In that case, the hackers inserted a self-propagating worm into a tax preparation software company's updates to infect its customers. In this case, any actual infiltration of an infected organization required "meticulous planning and manual interaction," according to FireEye.

WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?

SolarWinds said it was advised that an "outside nation state" infiltrated its systems with malware. Neither the U.S. government nor the affected companies have publicly said which nation state they think is responsible.

A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of an ongoing investigation, told The Associated Press on Monday that Russian hackers are suspected. Russia said Monday it had "nothing to do with" the hacking.

"Once again, I can reject these accusations," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry 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."

Buchanan, the Georgetown expert, said the hackers were "adept at finding a systemic weakness and then exploiting it quietly for months." Supporting the consensus in the cyberthreat analysis community that Russians are responsible are the tactics, techniques and procedures used, which bear their digital fingerprints, said Brandon Valeriano, a Marine Corps University technology scholar.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT AND COUNTERACT SUCH HACKS?

Espionage does not violate international law — and cyber defense is hard. But retaliation against governments responsible for egregious hacks happens. Diplomats can be expelled. Sanctions can be imposed. The Obama administration expelled Russian diplomats in retaliation for the meddling of Kremlin military hackers in Donald Trump's favor in the 2016 election. Cybersecurity "has not been a presidential priority" during the Trump administration and the outgoing president has been unable or unwilling to hold Russia to account for aggressive action in cyberspace, said Chris Painter, who coordinated cyberpolicy in the State Department during the Obama administration.

"I think that contributes to Russia's bravado," he said. The incoming Biden national security team has indicated it will be less tolerant, and is expected to restore the position of the White House cybersecurity coordinator eliminated by Trump.

The greater White House cybersecurity focus will be crucial, industry experts say.

An advisory issued by Microsoft, which assisted FireEye in the hack response, said it had "delivered more than 13,000 notifications to customers attacked by nation states over the past two years and observed a rapid increase in (their) sophistication and operational security capabilities."

Associated Press reporter Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Under attack from Trump, institutions bend but don't break

By JULIE PACE, THOMAS BEAUMONT and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For weeks, President Donald Trump has put America's democratic institutions under unprecedented strain as he fights to hold power despite losing his bid for reelection. But the institutions so far are holding firm.

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On Monday, the Electoral College did its part, formally confirming President-elect Joe Biden's victory over Trump. Electors in all 50 states cast ballots that reflected the will of their voters, despite pressure from Trump to subvert the results.

"The flame of democracy was lit in this nation a long time ago, We now know nothing, not even a pandemic or an abuse of power, can extinguish that flame," Biden said shortly after the final electors cast their votes.

The Electoral College vote was indeed the most important affirmation to date of Biden's victory and the integrity of the U.S. election, which has come under sustained and baseless assault from Trump and his allies. Yet historians and democracy experts said they feared that the tumultuous post-election period had exposed the fragility of the instruments of democracy set up to protect the will of the voters.

"There's certainly some relief in the short term but I am deeply worried about how these institutions could buckle under further strain," said Alex Keyssar, a professor of history and public policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. "We've seen a willingness to depart from norms that are necessary to keep fairly creaky institutions functioning well."

Trump and some of his allies made clear Monday that their attack on the election will continue — perhaps up until Biden takes the oath of office on Jan. 20. They signaled they intend to challenge the electors and may contest their final approval by Congress on Jan. 6.

Anything less than certification of Biden's victory would amount to an unprecedented undermining of a free and fair American election. Yet many Republicans have indeed stood with Trump's efforts thus far, including 126 House GOP lawmakers who backed his calls for the Supreme Court to overturn Biden's wins in four battleground states.

There were signs Monday that some Republicans were ready to move on. Several GOP senators who have previously refused to plainly acknowledge Biden's victory affirmed Monday evening that the Democrat was indeed the president-elect, including South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally of Trump.

That was little comfort to Edward Watts, a history professor at the University of California San Diego, who said Trump has likely laid the predicate for future leaders to challenge election results with little evidence to back up their claims.

Trump's tactics "are quite likely to be tried again by other people," Watts said. "And when they are, the attempt will be more effective and powerful and we need to be prepared for that."

Trump's attempts to derail Biden's victory were thwarted from the start, with the courts and a handful of Republicans in key positions forming the guardrails of American democracy.

The courts were particularly aggressive in fending off Trump's baseless charges of election fraud, which is notable because the president has pointed to his packing the federal courts with Republican judges as a signature achievement of his time in office. Nearly every lawsuit filed by the president and his allies has been rejected, with some judges showing little patience with GOP attorneys.

"Voters, not lawyers, choose the president. Ballots, not briefs, decide elections," Judge Stephanos Bibas wrote when the 3rd U.S. Circuit panel refused to stop Michigan from certifying its results for Biden. Bibas, a Trump-appointed judge, called the demand "breathtaking."

Some Republican officials have also stood up to the president, including the governors of Georgia and Arizona, two key states carried by Biden. After both governors certified the Democrat's victory, Trump cast them as traitors to his cause.

Attorney General William Barr, one of Trump's closest allies and most forceful defenders in the administration, said in an interview with The Associated Press that there was no evidence of fraud that would overturn the outcome of the election. Shortly after Biden's Electoral College victory was confirmed, Trump announced that Barr was departing the administration before Christmas.

Barr and other Republicans, however, have been outliers. Huge swaths of Trump's party have either rallied to his side or stayed silent, giving him space to attack the integrity of the election and challenge Biden's legitimacy. Last week, 126 House Republicans backed a lawsuit asking the Supreme Court to invalidate the vote in four states Biden won. The high court rejected the request.

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Former Rep. Jim Leach, an Iowa Republican who backed Biden in the election, said the GOP lawmakers who backed Trump's legal efforts have been "very injurious to our country."

"I've never known an institution of governance that has so embarrassed the country as this one has at this time," said Leach, a moderate who served for 30 years before his defeat in 2006. "It also appears to have a movement that's going to continue. How long-lasting and embittered it's going to be is a question mark."

The nation's democratic elections have come under serious strain before. In 1876, as the nation was still working past the divisiveness of the Civil War, both Republicans and Democrats claimed victory in the presidential election and each submitted their own slate of electors. That election is widely viewed as one of the most contentious in U.S. history, with a congressional committee ultimately deciding the election in favor of Rutherford B. Hayes, whose supporters had made a dubious bargain to effectively end Reconstruction in exchange for support.

More recently, the 2000 election between Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore hinged on the outcome of an exceedingly close contest in Florida and ultimately landed before the Supreme Court. The court ruling gave Bush the edge, and Gore quickly conceded and issued a call for national unity.

It's all but certain that Trump won't follow Gore's example in the weeks to come. It's unclear even whether he'll attend Biden's inauguration and he has floated the prospect of immediately starting a campaign for the 2024 Republican nomination.

Steven Feldstein, a former State Department official during Barack Obama's presidency who is now a senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the scope of the strain on America's institutions will depend on what happens after Biden is sworn in.

"The question is, is this a moment in time that fades away as Trump leaves the presidency, or is this the beginning of a new authoritarian foundation that people build upon and use in the future to undermine the essence of democracy," Feldstein said.

AP writer Colleen Long contributed to this report.

US agencies, companies secure networks after huge hack

By BEN FOX and FRANK BAJAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. government agencies and private companies rushed Monday to secure their computer networks following the disclosure of a sophisticated and long-running cyber-espionage intrusion suspected of being carried out by Russian hackers.

The full extent of the damage is not yet clear. But the potential threat was significant enough that the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity unit directed all federal agencies to remove compromised network management software and thousands of companies were expected to do the same.

What was striking about the operation was its potential scope as well as the manner in which the perpetrators managed to pierce cyber defenses and gain access to email and internal files at the Treasury and Commerce departments and potentially elsewhere.

The intrusion was stark evidence of the vulnerability of even supposedly secure government networks, even after well-known previous attacks.

"It's a reminder that offense is easier than defense and we still have a lot of work to do," said Suzanne Spaulding, a former U.S. cybersecurity official who is now a senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The identity of the perpetrator remained unclear. A U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of an ongoing investigation, told The Associated Press on Monday that Russian hackers are suspected.

The Washington Post, citing unnamed sources, said the attack was carried out by Russian government hackers who go by the nicknames APT29 or Cozy Bear and are part of that nation's foreign intelligence service.

The intrusion came to light after a prominent cybersecurity firm, FireEye, determined it had been breached

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and alerted that foreign governments and major corporations were also compromised. The company did not say who it suspected, though many experts believed Russia was responsible given the level of skill involved.

A FireEye senior vice president, Charles Carmakal said the company was aware of “dozens of incredibly high-value targets that have been compromised” by the hackers and was “pro-actively helping a number of organizations respond to their intrusions.”

He said he expects many more to learn in coming days that they, too, were hacked.

U.S. authorities acknowledged that federal agencies were affected by the breach on Sunday, providing few details. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, known as CISA, said in an unusual directive that the widely used network software SolarWinds had been compromised and should be removed from any system using it.

The national cybersecurity agencies of Britain and Ireland issued similar alerts.

SolarWinds is used by hundreds of thousands of organizations around the world, including most Fortune 500 companies and multiple U.S. federal agencies. The perpetrators were able to embed malware in a security update issued by the company, based in Austin, Texas. Though SolarWinds estimated 18,000 customers were infected, most of the malware was not activated.

When it was, the hackers could impersonate system administrators and have total access to the infected networks.

Carmakal said the highly disciplined hackers — though they made few mistakes in masking their presence in networks — only chose targets with highly coveted information because every time they activate the tool remotely the likelihood of detection increases.

“Quite honestly, my heart sank when I saw some of the details, just the amount of information they could potentially have if they are reading everyone’s emails and they are accessing sensitive files within places like Treasury or Commerce,” said Ben Johnson, a former National Security Agency cyber-engineer who is now chief technology officer of software security firm Obsidian.

SolarWinds has said its customers include 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, along with the top U.S. telecommunications and accounting firms.

National Security Council spokesman John Ulliyot said Monday that the Trump administration was working with CISA, U.S. intelligence agencies, the FBI and government departments affected by the intrusion to coordinate a response.

“It’s obviously incredibly significant and widespread,” said Chris Painter, who coordinated cyber-policy at the State Department during the Obama administration. “How much was compromised? How much was exfiltrated? There are lots of open questions now.”

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday that Russia had “nothing to do with” the hack.

“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.”

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.

Cybersecurity experts said the goal of the months-long effort appeared to be espionage and not profit or inflicting damage.

In terms of scale alone, the operation seems similar to the 2105 Office of Personnel Management hack that authorities blame on the Chinese government, said Ben Buchanan, a Georgetown University cyber-espionage expert.

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"These operators are experienced and capable, adept at finding a systemic weakness and then exploiting it quietly for months," said Buchanan, author of "The Hacker and The State."

Members of Congress were pressing the government for more information. "If reports are true and state-sponsored hackers successfully snuck malware-riddled software into scores of federal government systems, our country has suffered a massive national security failure that could have ramifications for years to come," said Sen. Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat who is a prominent voice on cyber issues.

If it was carried out by a foreign government, and the U.S. has the proof, then it becomes a question of what to do about it.

Some obvious options would include expelling diplomats of the offending country, imposing sanctions or filing criminal charges for cyber-espionage, steps that Washington and the European Union have taken against Russia in the past.

"I'm sure that the departments like NSA and Cyber Command are coming up with options, that the Treasury Department is looking at sanction options, that the State Department is looking for how they will send a strong signal," Spaulding said. "Whether they will get approval for all these things from the White House remains to be seen."

In the meantime, SolarWinds and its many private-sector clients were working to close any breaches and repair the damage.

The company said in a financial filing that it believed fewer than 18,000 customers installed the compromised product update earlier this year.

"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.

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Bajak reported from Boston.

Electoral College makes it official: Biden won, Trump lost

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Electoral College decisively confirmed Joe Biden on Monday as the nation's next president, ratifying his November victory in an authoritative state-by-state repudiation of President Donald Trump's refusal to concede he had lost.

The presidential electors gave Biden a solid majority of 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232, the same margin that Trump bragged was a landslide when he won the White House four years ago.

Heightened security was in place in some states as electors met to cast paper ballots, with masks, social distancing and other pandemic precautions the order of the day. 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.

For all Trump's unsupported claims of fraud, there was little suspense and no change as every one of the electoral votes allocated to Biden and the president in last month's popular vote went officially to each man. On Election Day, the Democrat topped the incumbent Republican by more than 7 million in the popular vote nationwide.

California's 55 electoral votes put Biden over the top. Vermont, with 3 votes, was the first state to report. Hawaii, with 4 votes, was the last.

"Once again in America, the rule of law, our Constitution, and the will of the people have prevailed. Our democracy — pushed, tested, threatened — proved to be resilient, true, and strong," Biden said in an evening speech in which he stressed the size of his win and the record 81 million people who voted for him.

He renewed his campaign promise to be a president for all Americans, whether they voted for him or not, and said the country has hard work ahead on the virus and economy.

But there was no concession from the White House, where Trump has continued to make unsupported allegations of fraud.

Trump remained in the Oval Office long after the sun set in Washington, calling allies and fellow Repub-

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icans while keeping track of the running Electoral College tally, according to White House and campaign aides. The president frequently ducked into the private dining room off the Oval Office to watch on TV, complaining that the cable networks were treating it like a mini-Election Night while not giving his challenges any airtime.

The president had grown increasingly disappointed with the size of "Stop the Steal" rallies across the nation as well as efforts for the GOP to field its own slates of electors in states. A presidential wish for a fierce administration defense led to TV appearances early Monday by Stephen Miller, one of his most ferocious advocates, to try to downplay the importance of the Electoral College vote and suggest that Trump's legal challenges would continue all the way to Inauguration Day on Jan. 20.

Late in the day, he took to Twitter to announce that Attorney General William Barr was leaving the administration before Christmas. Barr's departure comes amid lingering tension over Trump's unsupported fraud claims, especially after Barr's statement this month to The Associated Press that the election results were unaffected by any fraud.

In a Fox News interview taped over the weekend, Trump said that "I worry about the country having an illegitimate president, that's what I worry about. A president that lost and lost badly."

On Monday in Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin — the six battleground states that Biden won and Trump contested — electors gave Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris their votes in low-key proceedings. Nevada's electors met via Zoom because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump's efforts to undermine the election results also led to concerns about safety for the electors, virtually unheard of in previous years. In Michigan, lawmakers from both parties reported receiving threats, and legislative offices were closed over threats of violence. Biden won the state by 154,000 votes, or 2.8 percentage points, over Trump.

Georgia state police were out in force at the state Capitol in Atlanta before Democratic electors pledged to Biden met. There were no protesters seen.

Even with the Electoral College's confirmation of Biden's victory, some Republicans continued to refuse to acknowledge that reality. Yet their opposition to Biden had no practical effect on the electoral process, with the Democrat to be sworn in next month.

Republicans who would have been Trump electors met anyway in a handful of states Biden won. Pennsylvania Republicans said they cast a "procedural vote" for Trump and Pence in case courts that have repeatedly rejected challenges to Biden's victory were to somehow still determine that Trump had won.

In North Carolina, Utah and other states across the country where Trump won, his electors turned out to duly cast their ballots for him. Electors in North Carolina had their temperatures checked before being allowed to enter the Capitol to vote. Utah Attorney General Sean Reyes withdrew as a Trump elector and was in quarantine because he was exposed to someone with COVID-19.

Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, whom Trump defeated four years ago, were among New York's 29 electors for Biden and Harris.

In New Hampshire, before the state's four electors voted for Biden at the State House in Concord, 13-year-old Brayden Harrington led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance. He had delivered a moving speech at the Democratic National Convention in August about the struggle with stuttering he shares with Biden.

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.

The Electoral College was the product of compromise during the drafting of the Constitution between those who favored electing the president by popular vote and those who opposed giving the people the power to directly choose their leader.

Each state gets a number of electors equal to its 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.

Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire and AP writers across the United States contributed to this report.

'Democracy prevailed': Biden aims to unify divided nation

By AAMER MADHANI and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden pointedly criticized President Donald Trump on Monday for threatening core principles of democracy even as he told Americans that their form of self-government ultimately "prevailed."

Speaking from his longtime home of Wilmington, Delaware, on the day that electors nationwide cast votes affirming his victory, Biden was blunt in critiquing the damage done by Trump's baseless allegations that the contest was stolen. Such arguments have been roundly rejected by judges across the political spectrum, including the justices at the Supreme Court.

Democracy, Biden said, has been "pushed, tested, threatened." But he said it proved to be "resilient, true, and strong."

"The flame of democracy was lit in this nation a long time ago," Biden said. "And we now know that nothing, not even a pandemic or an abuse of power, can extinguish that flame."

Biden and his team hope that the formal victory in the Electoral College combined with his record-setting 81 million-vote count will help the country unify and accept his presidency. But the challenge facing Biden was evident as many congressional Republicans, including some of the party's top leaders, refused to officially accept Biden's win. Trump, meanwhile, shows no sign of conceding.

The president-elect acknowledged an irony in the circumstances, noting that he won with the same number of electoral votes — 306 — as Trump did four years ago. Trump hailed that win as a "landslide."

"By his own standards, these numbers represent a clear victory then, and I respectfully suggest they do so now," Biden said.

A candidate needs to win 270 electoral votes to clinch the presidency.

The fact that Biden had to even give such a speech shortly after electors voted to make him the president — a usually routine and even mundane step — shows how extraordinary the post-election period has been, with Trump trying to thwart Biden at every turn.

Despite that, Biden struck a familiar theme of his presidential campaign, pledging to be "a president for all Americans" who will "work just as hard for those of you who didn't vote for me as I will for those who did."

"Now it is time to turn the page as we've done throughout our history," he said. "To unite. To heal."

He said that was the only way the country could overcome the worst health crisis in more than a century, saying that in the face of the pandemic, "we need to work together, give each other a chance and lower the temperature."

Whether his message will have any effect remains to be seen. Top Republicans have mostly continued to back Trump and his unsubstantiated claims of a rigged election and, even once Biden takes power, are unlikely to give him any of the traditional honeymoon period.

Biden recalled that one of his jobs as vice president four years ago was to formally recognize Trump's electoral victory in the Senate after 2016, and he said he expected the same process to occur this time — saluting the small number of GOP senators who have acknowledged his victory. But there are many other leading Republicans who have continued to side with Trump.

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 says he expects five more lawsuits at the state level.

Even after he takes the White House, Biden faces a narrowly divided Senate. Next month's runoff elections in Georgia will decide which party controls the chamber. There's also a thinned Democratic majority

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in the House as the GOP picked up seats even as Trump lost.

Meanwhile, Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin is set to hold a hearing Wednesday on election "irregularities." Johnson has 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.

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.

Biden's deputy chief of staff, Jen 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," O'Malley Dillon 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.

Tony-winning choreographer, actress Ann Reinking dies at 71

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Ann Reinking, the Tony Award-winning choreographer, actress and Bob Fosse collaborator who helped spread a cool, muscular hybrid of jazz and burlesque movement to Broadway and beyond, has died. She was 71.

Reinking died Saturday while visiting family in Seattle, said her manager, Lee Gross. No cause of death was disclosed.

Tributes poured in from the Broadway community, including from Tony Yazbeck, who called her "an absolute inspiration" and Leslie Odom, Jr., who thanked Reinking for being a mentor: "She honored the calling for real. RIP to a legend." Bernadette Peters took to Twitter to say her heart was broken and Billy Eichner said she was "one of the most mesmerizing people I've ever seen on stage. A singular genius. RIP."

Trained as a ballet dancer, Reinking was known for her bold style of dance epitomized by her work in the revival of the Kander and Ebb musical "Chicago," complete with net stockings, chair dancing and plenty of pelvic thrusts.

Reinking co-starred as Roxie Hart along with Bebe Neuwirth's Velma, and created the choreography "in the style of Bob Fosse," the show's original director and choreographer who died in 1987. She and Fosse worked together for 15 years and she was also his lover for several of them.

"I'm beyond words to hear of the sudden and untimely passing of my dear friend Ann Reinking. The world has lost such a beautiful soul and talent," said Chita Rivera. "I loved sharing the stage with her whenever we could. Her spirit and razzle-dazzle will be with me forever."

Reinking's work on "Chicago" earned her a 1997 Tony, Drama Desk and Outer Critics Circle awards. Reinking replicated its choreography in productions throughout the world — England, Australia, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands and elsewhere. She was portrayed by Margaret Qualley in the recent FX series "Fosse/Verdon."

The musical's revival was first done in a concert version at City Center's "Encores" series in 1996 and then moved to Broadway, where in 2011 it became the second longest-running show in Broadway history.

"You know how you hear sometimes a woman goes into labor and 10 minutes later she's got this beautiful baby? You couldn't believe that it was materializing in such a beautiful way," she told The Associated Press in 2011 about the early days of the revival.

In 1998, she co-directed "Fosse," a salute to the man who had the largest influence, both professionally and personally, on her life. He once called her "one of the finest dancers in the jazz-modern idiom."

Her movie credits include "Annie" (1982), "Movie, Movie" (1978) and the documentary "Mad Hot Ballroom"

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(2005), which portrayed Reinking as a ballroom-dance competition judge for New York City kids.

Reinking's career began in Seattle, where she grew up. In the beginning, she wanted to be a ballet dancer, "like all girls," she said. As a student, she won a scholarship in San Francisco with the Joffrey Ballet, but at many of the students' after-hours improvisations, she would just sing and not dance.

Robert Joffrey said that with her outgoing personality and other abilities, she should pursue musical theater. "I waited tables to save up enough money to get here," she said of New York City, where she arrived with a round-trip ticket back to Seattle and \$500. She didn't need the return trip.

"You wouldn't get into this if you had a guarantee. People who get into this have a certain sense of the high stakes," she said. "You need the break and when you get it, you'd better be ready for it."

Reinking's break was strung out over several shows. She was in the ensemble for Broadway's "Coco," which starred Katharine Hepburn as Coco Chanel, in 1969, and was in the chorus of "Pippin" in 1972, picked by its director and choreographer, Fosse. The ensemble was so small — there were only eight — that the dancers were really seen.

Choreographer Pat Birch was one who noticed, and in 1974 put her in "Over Here," a World War II musical starring two of the three Andrews Sisters and featuring another unknown, John Travolta.

It led to a starring role in "Goodtime Charley," a musical about Joan of Arc opposite Joel Grey. The musical was not a success, but it did make theatergoers look at Reinking as a principal performer and not just a member of the chorus.

Her other big break, she said, was in "Dancin'" in 1978, "because I realized you had to be in an original part and that show has to be a hit." The music-and-dance revue directed and choreographed by Fosse was, running more than three years and earned her a 1978 Tony nomination.

But it was her work on the revival of "Chicago" where Reinking basked in the most attention. The original, a dark indictment of celebrity and hucksterism, opened in the summer of 1975 and ran for about 900 performances. Though not in the opening night cast, Reinking eventually slipped into the role of Roxie Hart, taking over the part from Gwen Verdon, Fosse's third wife and dancing alter ego. In the 1996 revival, which is still on Broadway, Reinking kept the part of Hart opposite Gray and Neuwirth.

Lin-Manuel Miranda was among those praising her talent. "A singular talent has left us," he wrote on Twitter. Jason Alexander added: "She was a pure joy — fun and funny and endlessly kind and talented. Heaven's chorus line just got a star."

Reinking also gained experience — and stayed in shape — by replacing stars in hit shows: Donna McKechnie in "A Chorus Line"; Gwen Verdon in Fosse's original "Chicago"; and Debbie Allen in the 1986 revival of "Sweet Charity."

And she embarked on an eclectic film career — from playing Roy Scheider's lover in Fosse's 1979 semi-autobiographical film "All That Jazz," to the screen version of "Annie" to Blake Edwards' "Micki and Maude."

She also created dances for a revival of "Pal Joey" at Chicago's Goodman Theater and a musical about first lady Eleanor Roosevelt called "Eleanor." She was on the national tour of "Bye Bye Birdie" opposite Tommy Tune.

After "Eleanor," offers to choreograph "kept falling in my lap," Reinking said. She created dances for a pre-Encores "Chicago" in Long Beach, California, with Neuwirth and Juliet Prowse.

In one of the more cringe-worthy moments in her career, Reinking was asked to sing and perform the Oscar nominated song "Against All Odds" by Phil Collins at the 1985 telecast. Reinking lip-synched as she danced a bombastic, cheesy rendition marred by fog.

In recent years, she choreographed "The Look of Love" on Broadway and the Roger Rees-directed off-Broadway "Here Lies Jenny" (2004), starring Neuwirth. In 2011, she helped choreograph "An Evening with Patti LuPone and Mandy Patinkin" on Broadway.

Reinking also produced a documentary called "In My Hands," about working with children of Marfan's Syndrome, a rare genetic disorder of the connective tissues that often leaves its victims with limbs that are disproportionately long. She also produced the film "Two Worlds, One Planet," about "high-functioning" autism.

Reinking's first three marriages ended in divorce. Since 1994, she had been married to Peter Talbert.

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She also is survived by a son, Christopher, who has been diagnosed with Marfan syndrome and autism. "If there is a heaven, I think Bob can look down and be satisfied. He really did have an exponential effect on the next generation of choreographers and dancers," Reinking once said.

"He demanded the best from you and you wanted to give it. So you got better. All great directors — however, they do it — make you want to be good. I hope I do it. It's like being a parent, a psychiatrist, a disciplinarian and a friend. You really have to know when to hold them and when to show them."

Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

Under attack from Trump, institutions bend but don't break

By JULIE PACE, THOMAS BEAUMONT and BRIAN SLODYSKO The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For weeks, President Donald Trump has put America's democratic institutions under unprecedented strain as he fights to hold power despite losing his bid for reelection. But the institutions so far are holding firm.

On Monday, the Electoral College did its part, formally confirming President-elect Joe Biden's victory over Trump. Electors in all 50 states cast ballots that reflected the will of their voters, despite pressure from Trump to subvert the results.

"The flame of democracy was lit in this nation a long time ago, We now know nothing, not even a pandemic or an abuse of power, can extinguish that flame," Biden said shortly after the final electors cast their votes.

The Electoral College vote was indeed the most important affirmation to date of Biden's victory and the integrity of the U.S. election, which has come under sustained and baseless assault from Trump and his allies. Yet historians and democracy experts said they feared that the tumultuous post-election period had exposed the fragility of the instruments of democracy set up to protect the will of the voters.

"There's certainly some relief in the short term but I am deeply worried about how these institutions could buckle under further strain," said Alex Keyssar, a professor of history and public policy at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government. "We've seen a willingness to depart from norms that are necessary to keep fairly creaky institutions functioning well."

Trump and some of his allies made clear Monday that their attack on the election will continue — perhaps up until Biden takes the oath of office on Jan. 20. They signaled they intend to challenge the electors and may contest their final approval by Congress on Jan. 6.

Anything less than certification of Biden's victory would amount to an unprecedented undermining of a free and fair American election. Yet many Republicans have indeed stood with Trump's efforts thus far, including 126 House GOP lawmakers who backed his calls for the Supreme Court to overturn Biden's wins in four battleground states.

There were signs Monday that some Republicans were ready to move on. Several GOP senators who have previously refused to plainly acknowledge Biden's victory affirmed Monday evening that the Democrat was indeed the president-elect, including South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, a close ally of Trump.

That was little comfort to Edward Watts, a history professor at the University of California San Diego, who said Trump has likely laid the predicate for future leaders to challenge election results with little evidence to back up their claims.

Trump's tactics "are quite likely to be tried again by other people," Watts said. "And when they are, the attempt will be more effective and powerful and we need to be prepared for that."

Trump's attempts to derail Biden's victory were thwarted from the start, with the courts and a handful of Republicans in key positions forming the guardrails of American democracy.

The courts were particularly aggressive in fending off Trump's baseless charges of election fraud, which is notable because the president has pointed to his packing the federal courts with Republican judges as a signature achievement of his time in office. Nearly every lawsuit filed by the president and his allies has been rejected, with some judges showing little patience with GOP attorneys.

"Voters, not lawyers, choose the president. Ballots, not briefs, decide elections," Judge Stephanos Bibas

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wrote when the 3rd U.S. Circuit panel refused to stop Michigan from certifying its results for Biden. Bibas, a Trump-appointed judge, called the demand "breathtaking."

Some Republican officials have also stood up to the president, including the governors of Georgia and Arizona, two key states carried by Biden. After both governors certified the Democrat's victory, Trump cast them as traitors to his cause.

Attorney General William Barr, one of Trump's closest allies and most forceful defenders in the administration, said in an interview with The Associated Press that there was no evidence of fraud that would overturn the outcome of the election. Shortly after Biden's Electoral College victory was confirmed, Trump announced that Barr was departing the administration before Christmas.

Barr and other Republicans, however, have been outliers. Huge swaths of Trump's party have either rallied to his side or stayed silent, giving him space to attack the integrity of the election and challenge Biden's legitimacy. Last week, 126 House Republicans backed a lawsuit asking the Supreme Court to invalidate the vote in four states Biden won. The high court rejected the request.

Former Rep. Jim Leach, an Iowa Republican who backed Biden in the election, said the GOP lawmakers who backed Trump's legal efforts have been "very injurious to our country."

"I've never known an institution of governance that has so embarrassed the country as this one has at this time," said Leach, a moderate who served for 30 years before his defeat in 2006. "It also appears to have a movement that's going to continue. How long-lasting and embittered it's going to be is a question mark."

The nation's democratic elections have come under serious strain before. In 1876, as the nation was still working past the divisiveness of the Civil War, both Republicans and Democrats claimed victory in the presidential election and each submitted their own slate of electors. That election is widely viewed as one of the most contentious in U.S. history, with a congressional committee ultimately deciding the election in favor of Rutherford B. Hayes, whose supporters had made a dubious bargain to effectively end Reconstruction in exchange for support.

More recently, the 2000 election between Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Al Gore hinged on the outcome of an exceedingly close contest in Florida and ultimately landed before the Supreme Court. The court ruling gave Bush the edge, and Gore quickly conceded and issued a call for national unity.

It's all but certain that Trump won't follow Gore's example in the weeks to come. It's unclear even whether he'll attend Biden's inauguration and he has floated the prospect of immediately starting a campaign for the 2024 Republican nomination.

Steven Feldstein, a former State Department official during Barack Obama's presidency who is now a senior fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said the scope of the strain on America's institutions will depend on what happens after Biden is sworn in.

"The question is, is this a moment in time that fades away as Trump leaves the presidency, or is this the beginning of a new authoritarian foundation that people build upon and use in the future to undermine the essence of democracy," Feldstein said.

AP writer Colleen Long contributed to this report.

'Healing is coming': US health workers start getting vaccine

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Health care workers around the country rolled up their sleeves for the first COVID-19 shots Monday as hope that an all-out vaccination effort can defeat the coronavirus smacked up against the heartbreaking reality of 300,000 U.S. deaths.

"Relieved," proclaimed critical care nurse Sandra Lindsay after becoming one of the first to be inoculated at Long Island Jewish Medical Center in New York. "I feel like healing is coming."

With a countdown of "3-2-1," workers at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center gave initial injections to applause.

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And in Colorado, Gov. Jared Polis personally opened a delivery door to the FedEx driver and signed for a package holding 975 precious frozen doses of vaccine made by Pfizer Inc. and its German partner BioNTech.

The shots kicked off what will become the largest vaccination effort in U.S. history, one that could finally conquer the outbreak.

Dr. Valerie Briones-Pryor, who has worked in a COVID-19 unit at University of Louisville Hospital since March and recently lost her 27th patient to the virus, was among the first recipients.

"I want to get back to seeing my family," she said. "I want families to be able to get back to seeing their loved ones."

Some 145 sites around the country, from Rhode Island to Alaska, received shipments, with more deliveries set for the coming days. High-risk health care workers were first in line.

"This is 20,000 doses of hope," John Couris, president and chief executive of Tampa General Hospital said of the first delivery.

Nursing home residents also get priority, and a Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Bedford, Massachusetts, announced via Twitter that its first dose went to a 96-year-old World War II veteran, Margaret Klessens. Other nursing homes around the U.S. expect inoculations in the coming days.

The campaign began the same day the U.S. death toll from the surging outbreak crossed the 300,000 threshold, according to the count kept by Johns Hopkins University. The number of dead rivals the population of St. Louis or Pittsburgh. It is more than five times the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War. It is equal to a 9/11 attack every day for more than 100 days.

"To think, now we can just absorb in our country 3,000 deaths a day as though it were just business as usual. It just represents a moral failing," said Jennifer Nuzzo, a public health researcher at Johns Hopkins.

Health experts know a wary public is watching the vaccination campaign, especially communities of color that have been hit hard by the pandemic but, because of the nation's legacy of racial health disparities and research abuses against Black people, have doubts about the vaccine.

Getting vaccinated is "a privilege," said Dr. Leonardo Seoane, chief academic officer at Ochsner Health in suburban New Orleans, after getting his dose. Seoane, who is Cuban American, urged "all of my Hispanic brothers and sisters to do it. It's OK."

The nearly 3 million doses now being shipped are just a down payment on the amount needed. More of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will arrive each week. And later this week, the FDA will decide whether to greenlight the world's second rigorously studied COVID-19 vaccine, made by Moderna Inc.

While the U.S. hopes for enough of both vaccines together to vaccinate 20 million people by the end of the month, and 30 million more in January, there won't be enough for the average person to get a shot until spring.

For 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.

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.

"I know it's going to be a big hurdle to convince people because it's new, it's uncertain," said intensive care nurse Helen Cordova, who received a vaccination card after getting a shot at Kaiser Permanente Los Angeles Medical Center. "This can be encouraging for others."

The FDA, considered the world's strictest medical regulator, said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which was developed at breakneck speed less than a year after the virus was identified, appears safe and strongly protective, and the agency laid out the data in a daylong public meeting last week for scientists and con-

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sumers alike to see.

"We know it works well," said Ochsner infectious-disease expert Dr. Katherine Baumgarten, who got her shot on Day 1. "As soon as you can get it, please do so."

Still, the vaccine was cleared for emergency use before a final study in nearly 44,000 people was complete. That research is continuing to try to answer additional questions.

For example, while the vaccine is effective at preventing COVID-19 illness, it is not clear if it 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 Sunday that vaccination should not be withheld from pregnant women who otherwise would qualify.

Also, regulators in Britain are investigating a few severe allergic reactions. The FDA instructed providers not to give the vaccine to those with a known history of severe allergic reactions to any of its ingredients.

Associated Press writers Marion Renault, Andrew Welsh-Huggins, Rebecca Santana, Dylan Lovan, Tamara Lush, Jeff Turner and Kathy Young contributed to this report.

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Democrats squeezed as COVID-19 relief talks continue

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Washington negotiators continued to reach for a long-delayed agreement on COVID-19 relief on Monday, but rank-and-file Democrats appeared increasingly resigned to having to drop, for now, a scaled-back demand for fiscal relief for states and local governments whose budgets have been thrown out of balance by the pandemic.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., spoke with Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin by phone Monday evening and continues to press for help for struggling states and localities. But top Democratic allies of President-elect Joe Biden came out in support of a \$748 billion plan offered by a bipartisan group of lawmakers and hinted they won't insist on a pitched battle for state and local aid now.

"We cannot afford to wait any longer to act. This should not be Congress' last COVID relief bill, but it is a strong compromise that deserves support from both Republicans and Democrats in the Senate," said Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del. "We cannot leave for the holidays without getting relief to those Americans who need it."

The message from Coons, a confidant of Biden, and a similar message from Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, D-Ill., came as a bipartisan group of lawmakers unveiled a detailed COVID-19 aid proposal on Monday in hopes it would serve as a model for their battling leaders to follow as they try to negotiate a final agreement.

But the group was unable to forge a compromise on GOP-sought provisions shielding businesses from COVID-related lawsuits, a key priority of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. The Kentucky Republican is pressing a lowest-common-denominator approach that would drop the lawsuit shield idea for now if Democrats agree to drop a \$160 billion state and local aid package.

Pelosi has insisted for months that state and local aid would be in any final bill, but as time is running out, Democrats appear unwilling to hold the rest of the package hostage over the demand. Several Democrats appeared at the bipartisan news conference endorsing the \$748 billion package.

"I found it interesting that they separated out the state and local and liability provisions. Senator McConnell had suggested that earlier," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas. "Seems to me that we're making some progress on it."

Cornyn, a McConnell lieutenant, spoke after a dozen or so lawmakers unveiled two bills. One is a \$748 billion aid package containing money for struggling businesses, the unemployed, schools and vaccine

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distribution. There is also \$45 billion for transportation and transit assistance, funding for rural internet service and help for the Postal Service, among other provisions. The other bill proposes a \$160 billion aid package for state and local governments and a modified liability shield that is backed by Republicans and Democratic moderate Joe Manchin of West Virginia, but it is probably too politically freighted to advance.

The path forward for their proposals — and for COVID-19 aid more generally — remains unclear, though Cornyn said the bipartisan plan has lots of “good stuff” for any yearend agreement.

Any agreement is likely to be forged in parallel negotiations between Pelosi and Mnuchin — closely watched by McConnell.

Outstanding issues in the leadership talks include a potential second round of direct payments to individuals, a plan for \$300-per-week bonus unemployment benefits, state and local aid, and the GOP-sought liability shield against COVID-19-related lawsuits.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said she hoped that top Capitol Hill leaders and the administration will use the proposals as the basis for a COVID-relief package “that is urgently needed by our struggling families, our hard-hit small businesses, our stressed-out health care providers, our overwhelmed Postal Service, our challenged schools, and so many others.”

Lawmakers also worked to finalize a yearend catchall funding package that will be the basis for the last significant legislation of the Trump presidency.

There’s a hoped-for deadline of midnight Friday to deliver the completed package to President Donald Trump, which is when a partial government shutdown would arrive with the expiration of last week’s temporary funding bill. But there’s no guarantee that the massive yearend measure will be completed in time. If the talks drag, further temporary bills could be needed.

Negotiations on the \$1.4 trillion catchall spending bill are “essentially finished,” said a congressional aide participating in the talks. While details are closely held, “the status quo is prevailing.” That means Trump would get another \$1.4 billion or so for a final installment to continue construction of his long-sought U.S.-Mexico border wall.

Republicans have succeeded in killing a \$12 billion plan to break last year’s budget mini-agreement by using accounting maneuvers to pad veterans health care funding to accommodate big cost increases from expanding access to health care services from private providers. Instead, a different set of moves is being employed to provide for equivalent spending increases for other domestic programs.

The post-election lame-duck session is the last chance to wrap up the unfinished work this year, a goal of all involved, though they have been slow until now to forge the often-tricky compromises required to pull the measure together.

Pelosi has not thrown in the towel on her drive to obtain state and local aid, which was part of the almost \$2 trillion CARES Act that passed the Senate unanimously in March. But many Republicans are adamantly against the idea now.

President-elect Joe Biden wants as much COVID relief as possible but has no direct influence on the negotiations. While he’ll empower Democrats after taking office next year, GOP leaders like McConnell are playing hardball and have forced Pelosi to scale back her demands. And while McConnell supported a \$300-per-week bonus unemployment benefit this summer, he’s pulled back since the November election.

No. 2 House Democrat Steny Hoyer of Maryland displayed flexibility in an appearance on CNN on Sunday that Republicans interpreted as a harbinger of further Democratic retreat.

“The legislative process is a give and take and the items that I just mentioned are absolutely critical to get done, and although I think state and local assistance is critically important, the others are critically important too,” Hoyer said.

Trump says Barr resigning, will leave before Christmas

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorney General William Barr, one of President Donald Trump’s staunchest allies, is departing amid lingering tension over the president’s baseless claims of election fraud and the investiga-

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tion into President-elect Joe Biden's son.

Barr went Monday to the White House, where Trump said the attorney general submitted his letter of resignation. "As per letter, Bill will be leaving just before Christmas to spend the holidays with his family," Trump tweeted.

Trump has publicly expressed his anger about Barr's statement to The Associated Press earlier this month that the Justice Department had found no widespread fraud that would change the outcome of the election. Trump has also been angry that the Justice Department did not publicly announce it was investigating Hunter Biden ahead of the election, despite department policy against such a pronouncement.

Barr told the AP that U.S. attorneys and FBI agents have been working to follow up specific complaints and information they've received, but "to date, we have not seen fraud on a scale that could have effected a different outcome in the election."

Barr's resignation leaves Trump without a critical ally as he winds down his final weeks in office, and it throws into question open Justice Department investigations, especially the probe into Hunter Biden's taxes.

In his resignation letter, Barr said he updated Trump Monday on the department's "review of voter fraud allegations in the 2020 election and how these allegations will continue to be pursued." He added that his last day on the job would be Dec. 23.

Trump said Deputy Attorney General Jeff Rosen, whom he labeled "an outstanding person," will become acting attorney general. As the current second in command at the Justice Department, Rosen's appointment is not likely to change much in the final weeks before the administration departs.

Trump spent much of the day watching the Electoral College tally and calling allies but broke away to meet with Barr. His tweet about the Attorney General's exit was a sober message from a president who is notoriously cold to his departing staff and quick to name-call and deride them once they say they are leaving.

Trump has also has previously claimed he fired staffers who resigned to make himself appear more powerful, and others, like former attorney general Jeff Sessions, were mocked by the president for weeks before they left office.

But despite Trump's obvious disdain for those who publicly disagree with him, Barr had generally remained in the president's good graces and has been one of the president's most ardent allies. Before the election, he had repeatedly raised the notion that mail-in voting could be especially vulnerable to fraud during the coronavirus pandemic as Americans feared going to polls.

But Trump has a low tolerance for criticism, especially public criticism, from his allies and often fires back in kind. The two had been at odds in the past few months and Barr was said to have been frustrated by Trump's tweeting.

Trump said on Fox News over the weekend that he was disappointed that the Hunter Biden investigation had not been disclosed. Hunter Biden himself announced it last week.

"Bill Barr should have stepped up," Trump said.

One senior administration official not authorized to speak publicly and speaking to The AP on condition of anonymity said Barr had resigned of his own accord and described the meeting as amicable.

Barr, who was serving in his second stint as attorney general, sought to paint himself as an independent leader who would not bow to political pressure. But Democrats have repeatedly accused Barr of acting more like the president's personal attorney than the attorney general, and Barr had proved to be a largely reliable Trump ally and defender of presidential power.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, the Republican leader of the judiciary committee, told reporters at the Capitol he was surprised by the news.

"I think he did an incredibly good job trying to repair damage done to the Department of Justice, trying to be fair and faithful to the law. I think he's got a lot to be proud of," Graham said. "He fought for the president where he could, as every attorney general and administration should, but he also didn't cross lines that he shouldn't have crossed." He said he was referring to disclosing the Biden investigation.

Graham also praised Rosen as a "good man" who he said would "be an ethical leader and a steady hand" at the Justice Department.

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Democrats who had long criticized Barr did not lament his departure. "Good riddance," tweeted House intelligence committee chairman Adam Schiff, D-Calif., who said the attorney general had "lied to cover for Trump, launched political investigations, subverted justice and the rule of law and violently cracked down on protestors."

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., who led an investigation of politicization of the department, said that "whomever Joe Biden chooses as the new Attorney General will have a tremendous amount of work to do to repair the integrity of the Department of Justice."

Before releasing special counsel Robert Mueller's full report on the Russia investigation last year, Barr framed the results in a manner favorable to Trump even though Mueller pointedly said he couldn't exonerate the president of obstruction of justice.

He also appointed as special counsel the U.S. attorney who is conducting a criminal investigation into the origins of the FBI's probe of the 2016 election that morphed into Mueller's investigation of possible Trump-Russia cooperation, following Trump's repeated calls to "investigate the investigators."

Barr also ordered Justice Department prosecutors to review the handling of the federal investigation into Trump's former national security adviser Michael Flynn and then sought to dismiss the criminal charges against Flynn, who had twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI. Trump later pardoned Flynn.

Barr's break from Trump over election fraud wasn't the first. Earlier this year, Barr told ABC News that the president's tweets about Justice Department cases "make it impossible for me to do my job," and tensions flared just a few months ago when the two were increasingly at odds over the pace of the Durham investigation.

Trump had been increasingly critical about a lack of arrests and Barr was privately telling people he was frustrated by Trump's public pronouncements about the case.

Trump was also said to blame Barr for comments from FBI Director Chris Wray on election fraud and mail-in voting that didn't jibe with the president's alarmist rhetoric.

Associated Press writers Colleen Long, Eric Tucker, Jonathan Lemire, Mary Clare Jalonick and Zeke Miller contributed to this report.

Interest is lively at deadline for 'Obamacare' sign-ups

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A crush of sign-ups expected Tuesday on the last day of open enrollment for HealthCare.gov could help solidify the standing of "Obamacare" as an improbable survivor in the Donald Trump years.

In 36 states that use HealthCare.gov, Dec. 15 is deadline day for coverage that starts Jan. 1, while another 14 states and Washington, D.C., have later dates. Analysts and advocates who follow the annual insurance sign-ups say interest has gotten stronger with the coronavirus pandemic gripping the nation.

Also, the legal cloud hanging over the Affordable Care Act seemed to start lifting last month when Supreme Court justices gave a skeptical reception to the latest challenge from the Trump administration and conservative-led states seeking to overturn the law in its entirety.

"The safety net is working," said Chris Sloan of the consulting firm Avalere Health. When final numbers are released next year, Sloan says the ACA could surpass its current enrollment of 11.4 million people. "I think it's just reflective of the need being greater for people who have lost their jobs and need to find some other form of health insurance," he said.

The insurance markets offer taxpayer subsidized private plans to people who don't have job-based coverage. Insurers cannot turn away customers with pre-existing medical conditions. Medicaid expansion, another component of the health law, covers about 12 million people.

Stephanie Burton, a solo practitioner lawyer from Kansas City, Missouri, said she recently renewed her coverage for 2021. For about \$150 a month, after subsidies, Burton is also able to cover two young adult children as they negotiate their transition to self-sufficiency in a shaky economy.

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But Burton said she's noticed that the annual enrollment season gets very little promotion. After Trump failed to repeal former President Barack Obama's signature law, not even the rising need for coverage amid coronavirus layoffs has persuaded his administration to rethink its opposition. Trump administration officials say what they have done is to focus on the smooth operation of the HealthCare.gov website for those who may want the coverage.

"Since I've always had it, I get reminders by email," said Burton, but "there are a lot of people who may not even know how to find this information."

That's expected to change under the incoming Biden administration, which plans to build on the health law to expand coverage to more than 30 million who still lack it.

Some former Obama officials who closely monitor the Trump administration's operation of the program say they have reason to hope in this sign-up season.

Joshua Peck, who used to be chief marketing officer for Obamacare, says traffic is clearly up from current customers actively renewing their coverage, and the number of new consumers is tracking with previous years. Active renewals are seen an indicator that people are eager to keep their plans from lapsing. Those who take no action are automatically renewed, but they have to follow through to retain coverage by paying their premiums.

"It gives us reason to think that the end of this open enrollment period could be a strong one," said Peck. "We're cautiously optimistic."

But Tuesday could get anxious for procrastinators because deadline day usually brings long waits for personal assistance via the call center and the website may run slow. Typically people who start the enrollment process before the end of deadline day are given a chance to complete it.

Of some 28 million uninsured Americans before the pandemic, the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation estimates more than 16 million were eligible for some form of subsidized coverage through the health law.

EXPLAINER: What to know about COVID-19 vaccination in the US

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The first shots of COVID-19 vaccine are being delivered, but it will likely be months before doses are widely available for everyone at U.S. drugstores and doctor's office.

Details are still being worked out, but officials expect widespread availability by the middle of next year. A second coronavirus vaccine is being reviewed this week by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and others are in development.

Even with vaccination, you'll still need to take precautions, like wearing a mask and social distancing, health officials say. That's because there's still some unknowns, including how much it reduces spread or how long protection lasts.

WHO'S GETTING THE SHOTS FIRST?

The limited doses of Pfizer's vaccine are going to the most vulnerable first — health care workers and nursing home residents. That means the shipments are going to sites selected in advance by state officials. Hospitals are doling out the shots to their employees. For nursing homes, the government is partnering with CVS and Walgreens, which will be giving the shots in the homes.

Some top U.S. government officials will also be vaccinated in the first wave, according to the National Security Council.

WHO'S NEXT?

Health officials are still working through that question. Possibilities include anyone 65 and older, teachers, police and workers in other essential fields, such as food production, and those with health conditions that make them more susceptible to complications.

An expert panel that advises the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on vaccines will meet this month and make its recommendations. As with the first wave of shipments, it will ultimately be up to state officials to ultimately decide who's next and work out the specifics. For example, Arkansas has planned to put poultry workers in its next group for vaccinations.

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WHEN IS IT MY TURN?

For the rest of Americans, it could be a few months. U.S. officials say they expect to be able to give 20 million people their first shots in December. But with more vaccines in the pipeline, the shots could be widely available by the middle of next year.

State and local health departments will get the word out on eligibility as supplies ramp up.

WHERE WILL I GET A SHOT?

States are signing up pharmacies, health clinics and doctor's offices to give the shots. Health departments will also probably run mass vaccination clinics. CVS said people will be asked to schedule their shots online, through an app or by phone.

Once doses are widely available, people should be able to use an existing government website, www.vaccinefinder.org, to find COVID-19 shots. The website is already used to find vaccines for the flu and other diseases.

ARE THERE ANY RESTRICTIONS?

Pfizer's vaccine is for people 16 and older. Testing is just getting underway in children to determine if they can be given shots as well.

The CDC panel said pregnant women could get the shot, but said they might want to talk to their doctor first. The panel also suggests avoiding getting other vaccinations for two weeks before and after a COVID-19 shot.

HOW MUCH WILL IT COST?

It should be free. The government is paying for the vaccine itself. And you shouldn't be charged a copay or other fee to get it.

The cost for giving the shot will be covered by private and government insurance. If you don't have insurance, providers can tap a government fund to cover costs.

WHEN WILL I GET MY SECOND SHOT?

It depends on the brand of vaccine. Pfizer's is three weeks later. You'll get a vaccination record card as a reminder. You might also get reminder texts, calls or letters in the mail, depending on the location.

Shots will be recorded in state and local vaccine registries that already keep track of other vaccinations. COVID-19 vaccines can't be mixed and matched, so if a second dose is needed, providers will be checking to make sure you get the right one.

The CDC said it can take one to two weeks after the second shot to be fully vaccinated.

Not all vaccines in development require two shots. Johnson & Johnson is testing a single-dose vaccine.

WHAT ABOUT SIDE EFFECTS?

There could be temporary side effects right after the shot, including fever, fatigue, chills or soreness in the arm where you got the shot. Health officials will be watching for any serious side effects as more people get vaccinated, as well as for any potential longer-term issues.

People who have had severe allergic reactions to other vaccines or drugs should talk to their doctors first, the CDC panel said. Those who've had any kind of severe allergic reaction in the past should be watched for 30 minutes after vaccination. Others should be watched for 15 minutes.

WHAT IF I HAD COVID-19?

Vaccinations should be offered to people regardless of whether they've been infected with coronavirus, the CDC panel said. People who are currently infected and have symptoms should wait until they've recovered.

If you've been recently exposed to the virus, the panel recommends waiting until after the quarantine period of 14 days. It says getting vaccinated shortly after an exposure is unlikely to prevent you from getting infected.

AP Health Writer Tom Murphy contributed from Indianapolis.

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A Lim Kim wins US Women's Open debut with record-tying rally

HOUSTON (AP) — The Bermuda grass of south Texas was unlike anything A Lim Kim had ever seen. The U.S. Women's Open, with its reputation as the toughest test, was a major she had never played.

What didn't change in a frigid final round at Champions Golf Club was how to keep score. And when the 25-year-old from South Korea saw she was trailing and running out of holes, she started attacking flags.

Kim birdied her final three holes and tied the record for the largest comeback in a U.S. Women's Open, rallying from five shots behind with the a 4-under 67 to win the biggest event in women's golf.

"Still can't really soak in that I'm the champion," she said, minutes after being soaked in champagne on a day with temperatures in the 40s.

She won by one shot over Jin Young Ko, the top-ranked player in women's golf, and Amy Olson, who played her heart out while coping with the grief of her father-in-law's unexpected death Saturday night in South Dakota.

"I felt very weak and helpless the last couple days, and probably today on the golf course," Olson said, fighting back tears after a 72. "I really believe the Lord just carried me through. It just makes you realize how much bigger life is than golf. But pleased with my finish overall and my performance."

Kim's spectacular finish made it tough for anyone to catch her. Two shots behind Olson, she hit 5-iron to 4 feet on the par-3 16th hole to get to 1-under. Then she hit 8-iron that rolled out to just inside 2 feet on the 17th for a tap-in birdie and a share of the lead. She capped it off with a pitching wedge to just inside 10 feet.

Behind her mask — fitting that the final major champion of this pandemic-disrupted year in golf was wearing one — the thrill was evident. So was the fist pump, a rare show of emotion for Kim.

"I've been eyeing the leaderboard throughout the round and I knew how many shots I was back," she said through a translator. "That's probably the reason why I tried to hit more aggressive, tried to attack the pins."

Kim started the final round, delayed to Monday because of rain, in a tie for ninth. No one had ever started in a position that far back and won the U.S. Women's Open. She became the seventh player to rally from five shots behind in the final round, and the first since Annika Sorenstam at The Broadmoor in 1995.

Olson held her own amid her heavy heart. Winless in seven years on the LPGA Tour, she had a two-shot lead on the back nine after 54-hole leader Hinako Shibuno faltered. But she couldn't do anything about Kim's late charge, and Olson fell back when her hybrid on the par-3 16th bounded over the green and into thick, brown rough, leading to bogey.

She birdied the final hole for a 72 after Kim had already secured the title.

Olson was singing Josh Groban's "You Raise Me Up" to keep her in the right frame of mind. She couldn't think of many shots she wanted back after three early bogeys. The cold weather, the mud-splotched golf balls and the U.S. Women's Open test helped keep her mind from wandering.

"I knew I had to stay very mentally disciplined just to get through the day," Olson said. "I allowed myself to think about what I'm grateful for, and I've got a long list."

Ko, the No. 1 player who only recently returned from South Korea where she rode out the COVID-19 pandemic, also birdied the 18th when it was too late to catch Kim.

Ko closed with a 68, one of only six players to break par in the final round.

Kim finished at 3-under 281 and won \$1 million. She added to South Korean dominance of this major, the ninth winner in the last 13 years.

Shibuno was trying to win in her first try at a second major, having won the Women's British Open last year in her first tournament outside Japan. Her short game only carried her for so long, however, and she fell out of the lead by starting the back nine with consecutive bogeys.

Shibuno birdied the 18th hole for a 74 and finished two behind. Only four players finished under par.

A two-time winner on the Korean LPGA, Kim got into the U.S. Women's Open off the world ranking when the pandemic kept the USGA from conducting open qualifying. She had slipped to No. 94, the lowest-ranked player to win the Open since the women's world ranking began in 2006.

She is the second non-LPGA member to win a major this year, joining Sophia Popov at the Women's

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British Open. She also is the third South Korean to win a major. Second-ranked Sei Young Kim won the Women's PGA and Mirim Lee won the ANA Inspiration — also at No. 94 in the world.

Texas senior Kaitlyn Papp birdied the 18th for a 74 to finish at 3-over 287, six shots behind in a tie for ninth, to be the low amateur.

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

VIRUS TODAY: US begins biggest vaccination effort in history

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— The biggest vaccination campaign in U.S. history kicked off Monday as health workers rolled up their sleeves for shots to protect them from COVID-19 and start beating back the pandemic — a day of optimism even as the nation's death toll closed in on 300,000.

— Senior U.S. officials will begin receiving coronavirus vaccines this week as part of updated federal continuity of government plans that now include pandemics as threats to the nation and its leaders.

— Economic fallout from the pandemic has set back decades of progress against the most severe forms of malnutrition and is likely to kill 168,000 children before any global recovery takes hold, according to a study released by 30 international organizations.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new cases in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from about 162,000 on Nov. 29 to 214,000 on Sunday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll of over 300,000 rivals the population of St. Louis or Pittsburgh. It is equivalent to repeating a tragedy on the scale of Hurricane Katrina every day for 5 1/2 months.

QUOTABLE: "I feel hopeful today. Relieved. I feel like healing is coming. I hope this marks the beginning of the end of a very painful time in our history." — Sandra Lindsay, registered nurse at Long Island Jewish Medical Center and recipient of the COVID-19 vaccine.

ICYMI: As deaths from the coronavirus spike across the country, 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.

ON THE HORIZON: Food and Drug Administration advisers are set to meet this week to debate evidence behind the vaccine being offered by drugmaker Moderna. The FDA will weigh those recommendations in deciding whether to authorize emergency use sometime after the meeting.

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

Supreme Court won't revive Kansas voter registration ID law

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Monday rejected an appeal from Kansas that sought to revive a law requiring proof of citizenship to register to vote. A federal appeals court had declared the law unconstitutional.

Kansas had been the only state to require people to show a physical document such as a birth certificate or passport when applying to register to vote. The issue is distinct from state laws that call for people to produce driver licenses or other photo IDs to cast a vote in person.

The law was championed by former Kansas Secretary of State Kris Kobach, who led President Donald Trump's now-defunct voter fraud commission. Kobach was a leading source for Trump's unsubstantiated claim that millions of immigrants living in the U.S. illegally may have voted in the 2016 election.

Roughly 30,000 people were prevented from registering to vote during the three years the law was in effect, and the state's own expert estimated that almost all of those were U.S. citizens who were eligible to vote.

Dale Ho, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Voting Rights Project who argued the case, said

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the Supreme Court's decision not to review the case will "finally close this chapter on Kris Kobach's sorry legacy of voter suppression."

Kansas Secretary of State Scott Schwab, who supported the law when he was in the state Legislature, pursued the Supreme Court appeal over the objection of Kansas Gov. Laura Kelly.

The 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declared the law unconstitutional in April, affirming a trial court ruling. Justice Neil Gorsuch, who used to be a 10th Circuit judge, sat out the Supreme Court's consideration of the case.

Schwab said Monday he was hoping for some guidance from the nation's highest court on how far the state can go in imposing a proof-of-citizenship requirement and suggested it would take another lawsuit to get it.

But he downplayed the ruling's practical effect on the administration of elections in Kansas. `

"We don't have massive voter fraud in the state of Kansas. I think we found that out during this election," he told reporters after a meeting of the state's presidential electors at the Statehouse. "As it relates to the outcome, the way we do elections going forward, it's not going to change a lot, but it does limit what states can do."

US COVID-19 deaths top 300,000 just as vaccinations begin

By ADAM GELLER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

The U.S. death toll from the coronavirus topped 300,000 Monday just as the country began dispensing COVID-19 shots in a monumental campaign to conquer the outbreak.

The number of dead rivals the population of St. Louis or Pittsburgh. It is equivalent to repeating a tragedy on the scale of Hurricane Katrina every day for 5 1/2 months. It is more than five times the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War. It is equal to a 9/11 attack every day for more than 100 days.

"The numbers are staggering -- the most impactful respiratory pandemic that we have experienced in over 102 years, since the iconic 1918 Spanish flu," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious-disease expert, said days before the milestone.

The U.S. crossed the threshold on the same day health care workers rolled up their sleeves for Pfizer's COVID-19 shot, marking the start of the biggest vaccination campaign in American history. If a second vaccine is authorized soon, as expected, 20 million people could be immunized by month's end.

Meanwhile, a sea change in Washington is fast approaching after an election that was, in large part, a referendum on the Trump administration's handling of the virus. President-elect Joe Biden has made clear that his first priority will be a comprehensive and disciplined effort to defeat the outbreak.

The death toll was reported by Johns Hopkins University from data supplied by health authorities across the U.S. The real number of lives lost is believed to be much higher, in part because of deaths that were not accurately recorded as coronavirus-related during the early stages of the crisis.

Globally the virus is blamed for more than 1.6 million deaths.

Experts say it could take well into spring for the shots and other measures to bring cases and deaths under control in the U.S.

With cold weather driving people inside, where the virus spreads more easily, and many Americans disdainful of masks and other precautions, some public health authorities project 100,000 more could die before the end of January.

"We are heading into probably the worst period possible because of all the things we had in the spring, which is fatigue, political resistance, maybe the loss of all the good will we had about people doing their part," said Jennifer Nuzzo, a public health researcher at Johns Hopkins.

Nuzzo contrasted the government's scattershot response with the massive mobilization undertaken after nearly 3,000 Americans were killed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"To think now we can just absorb in our country 3,000 deaths a day as though it were just business as usual, it just represents a moral failing," she said.

Vaccine comes too late for the 300,000 US dead

By ADAM GELLER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

When Brittany Palomo was hired as a nurse in March, her parents tried to talk her out of it, fearful of the fast-spreading coronavirus. All the more reason, she told them, to start the career that had been her long-held dream.

The pandemic, though, is a nightmare -- one that has now claimed 300,000 lives in the U.S. and counting. "Wake up, my little girl, wake up!" Palomo's mother, Maria Palomo Salinas, screamed, her grief echoing through a Harlingen, Texas, hospital, when her daughter died of COVID-19 complications around 2 a.m. on a Saturday in late November.

Palomo was 27 and, as a health care worker, was probably weeks away from getting the new vaccine that could have protected her from the virus. Instead, she became yet another victim of the relentless outbreak whose U.S. toll is accelerating as it eclipses another round-number mark.

"The numbers are staggering -- the most impactful respiratory pandemic that we have experienced in over 102 years, since the iconic 1918 Spanish flu," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top infectious-disease expert, said days before the U.S. reached the milestone.

The U.S. crossed the 300,000 threshold on the same day it launched the biggest vaccination campaign in American history, with health care workers rolling up their sleeves for COVID-19 shots Monday.

The death toll was reported by Johns Hopkins University from data supplied by health authorities across the U.S. The real number of lives lost is believed to be much higher, in part because of deaths that were not accurately recorded as coronavirus-related during the early stages of the crisis.

It took four months for the virus to claim its first 100,000 American lives. But with cold weather driving people inside, where the virus spreads more easily, months of reluctance in many states to require masks, and an increase in gatherings over the holidays, some public health experts project 100,000 more could die before the end of January.

"It can certainly feel like you're standing on the beach and sandbagging a tsunami," said Dr. Leon Kelly, who attends to both the dead and the living as coroner for El Paso County, Colorado, and deputy medical director of its public health department.

Already, the number of dead in the U.S. rivals the population of St. Louis or Pittsburgh. The toll is equivalent to repeating a tragedy on the scale of Hurricane Katrina every day for 5 1/2 months.

"To me it represents an extraordinary failure in our response," said Jennifer Nuzzo, a public health researcher at Johns Hopkins, contrasting U.S. officials' scattershot response with the massive mobilization after nearly 3,000 Americans were killed in the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

"To think, now we can just absorb in our country 3,000 deaths a day as though it were just business as usual. It just represents a moral failing."

The U.S. accounts for nearly 1 out of 5 confirmed virus deaths worldwide, far more than any other country despite its wealth and medical resources.

While the pandemic's toll continues to soar, much has changed since the U.S. surpassed 200,000 deaths in late September.

Scientists' furious pursuit of a vaccine is finally delivering results, beginning with the rollout of Pfizer's formula. If a second vaccine is authorized soon, as expected, 20 million people could be vaccinated by month's end.

At the same time, the country is poised for a major shift after an election that was, in large part, a referendum on the Trump administration's handling of the virus. President-elect Joe Biden has made clear his first priority upon taking office next month will be a comprehensive overhaul of efforts to defeat the infection.

Still, experts said, it could take well into the new year for the first wave of vaccines and other precautions to bring cases and deaths under control. Experts are warning the country must steel itself for a deadly winter.

"We are heading into probably the worst period possible because of all the things we had in the spring, which is fatigue, political resistance, maybe the loss of all the good will we had about people doing their

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part," Nuzzo said.

More than 109,000 people with the virus are now in U.S. hospitals, according to the COVID Tracking Project, far eclipsing the 60,000 who filled wards during the previous peaks in April and July.

On a single day last week, the U.S. recorded more than 3,300 COVID-19 deaths, easily exceeding the heights reached in April, when the New York City area was the epicenter.

Doctors now have far more experience in treating patients, and a few drugs have been approved to speed recovery. But the toll now is far more widespread, reaching into rural areas and small and medium-size communities that don't have big-city resources.

In Waterloo, Iowa, Dr. Stacey Marlow called the wife of an 89-year-old COVID-19 patient in his final hours, not realizing until well into the conversation that the couple's son had also died of the virus in her hospital just two days earlier.

"We see these horror stories every day so they start to run together," said Marlow, who works in the emergency room at UnityPoint Allen Hospital.

In Los Angeles, the county's health director, Barbara Ferrer, fought tears during a televised briefing last week as she reported a steep rise in local deaths, up to an average of 43 each day, compared with roughly a dozen in mid-November.

"Over 8,000 people who were beloved members of their families are not coming back," Ferrer said.

In Columbia, South Carolina, the family of a third-grade teacher, Staci Blakely, asked the school district to announce her death in hopes of persuading the public to take the virus seriously.

"One of the ways we can celebrate her life is being sure that we continue to take care of each other," schools Superintendent Greg Little said.

And then there are the families and colleagues of health care workers who are still being lost to COVID-19, even as hope draws within view.

For weeks now, Dr. James Williams has been hearing the voice of his friend Dr. Juan Fitz, an emergency room physician in Lubbock, Texas, who was hospitalized for the virus this fall after months of triaging COVID-19 patients.

"I am airborne. I am cavalry," the 67-year-old Fitz said over the summer, describing his role in taking on the pandemic. "I go into the thick of it and, challenged by the situation, find ways to improve and sort things out."

He died on Nov. 3.

"I'm sorry, it still gets me," a distraught Williams said Friday, hours before the first vaccine won approval. Choking back tears, he recalled his last text message to Fitz, one the soldier-in-scrubs never answered.

Please know, he wrote, "you have an Army of friends and colleagues pulling for you."

Associated Press writers Jeffrey Collins in Columbia, South Carolina, and Christopher Weber in Los Angeles contributed to this story.

US sanctions NATO ally Turkey over Russian missile defense

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration on Monday imposed sanctions on its NATO ally Turkey over its purchase of a Russian air defense system, in a striking move against a longtime partner that sets the stage for further confrontation between the two nations as President-elect Joe Biden prepares to take office.

The extraordinary step against a treaty ally comes at a delicate time in relations between Washington and Ankara, which have been at odds for years over Turkey's acquisition from Russia of the S-400 missile defense system, along with Turkish actions in Syria, the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan and in the eastern Mediterranean.

The sanctions, which were required under a 2017 U.S. law aimed at pushing back on Russia if the administration deemed there was significant cause, add another element of uncertainty to the relationship

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as Trump winds down his term. The move is the first time that law, known as CAATSA, has been used to penalize a U.S. ally.

Prior to Monday, the U.S. had kicked Turkey out of its F-35 stealth fighter development and training program over the S-400 purchase, but had taken no further steps despite persistent warnings from American officials who have long complained about that the system is incompatible with NATO equipment and a potential threat to allied security.

"The United States made clear to Turkey at the highest levels and on numerous occasions that its purchase of the S-400 system would endanger the security of U.S. military technology and personnel and provide substantial funds to Russia's defense sector, as well as Russian access to the Turkish armed forces and defense industry," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

"Turkey nevertheless decided to move ahead with the procurement and testing of the S-400, despite the availability of alternative, NATO-interoperable systems to meet its defense requirements," he said in a statement.

"I urge Turkey to resolve the S-400 problem immediately in coordination with the United States," he said. "Turkey is a valued ally and an important regional security partner for the United States, and we seek to continue our decades-long history of productive defense-sector cooperation by removing the obstacle of Turkey's S-400 possession as soon as possible."

Turkey's foreign ministry said in a statement it "condemns and rejects" the U.S. sanctions, saying Washington's one-sided sanctions were beyond understanding.

"Turkey will take the necessary steps against this decision, which will inevitably affect our relations in a negative way, and reciprocate in a way and time it sees fit," the statement said.

The statement repeated Turkey's claim that the S-400s would not affect NATO systems.

The ministry called on the U.S. to "turn back as soon as possible from this bad mistake," adding that Ankara was ready for dialogue and diplomacy.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, meanwhile, said the sanctions were evidence of American "arrogance" and would hurt U.S. standing internationally.

"It's yet more evidence of the arrogant attitude (of the U.S.) toward international law, and a manifestation of the illegitimate, unilateral and coercive measures that the U.S. has practiced for many decades now all over the world," he said during a visit to Bosnia. "Of course, I do not think this does any favors to the United States' international reputation as a responsible participant in international negotiations, including in military-technical cooperation."

The sanctions target Turkey's Presidency of Defense Industries, the country's military procurement agency, its chief Ismail Demir and three other senior officials. The penalties block any assets the four officials may have in U.S. jurisdictions and bar their entry into the U.S. They also include a ban on most export licenses, loans and credits to the agency.

The administration had held off on imposing punitive sanctions outside of the fighter program for months, in part to give Turkish officials time to reconsider deploying it and, some suspect, due to President Donald Trump's personal relationship with Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Congress, though, was growing impatient with the delays and had demanded action.

Despite the U.S. warnings, Turkey in past months had moved ahead with deployment and testing of the S-400 system, drawing criticism from lawmakers and others who have demanded the sanctions be imposed under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, or CAATSA, which mandates penalties for transactions deemed harmful to U.S. interests.

Coming just weeks before Biden assumes office, the sanctions pose a potential dilemma for the incoming administration, although the president-elect's team has signaled it is opposed to Turkey's use of the S-400 and the disunity within NATO it may cause.

"We very much regret that this has been necessary," said Chris Ford, one of the State Department's most senior arms control officials.

"Imposing sanctions on a NATO ally is not something we take lightly," said Matthew Palmer, a senior

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official in the State Department's Bureau of European Affairs.

Last month, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said Turkey was prepared to discuss with the U.S. its "anxiety" over the interoperability of the S-400s and the F-35s. The U.S. reacted coolly to the suggestion and Pompeo shortly thereafter pointedly did not meet with any Turkish government officials on a visit to Istanbul.

Turkey tested the missile defense system in October for the first time, drawing a condemnation from the Pentagon.

Ankara says it was forced to buy the Russian system because the U.S. refused to sell it American-made Patriot missiles. The Turkish government has also pointed to what it considers a double standard, as NATO member Greece uses Russian-made missiles.

Early in-person voting begins in Georgia Senate runoffs

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Early in-person voting began Monday in the runoff elections for Georgia's two U.S. Senate seats, with lines reported to be shorter than in the first days of early voting for the general election last month.

More than half of the record 5 million votes in the Nov. 3 general election were cast during its three-week early voting period. Early in-person voting could be even more important in the Jan. 5 runoffs because of the short period for voters to request and return ballots by mail.

The two races in which Democrats Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff try to oust Republican Sens. Kelly Loeffler and David Perdue, respectively, will decide which party controls the U.S. Senate.

No one expects turnout to be as high as it was for the general election. But Bernard Fraga, an Emory University professor who studies voting, said overall turnout could reach 4 million.

President Donald Trump has relentlessly pushed baseless claims of widespread fraud in the general election, in which he lost in the state of Georgia. In an overnight tweet just hours before early voting began, he continued his attack on Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, pushing him to take action or risk harming the chances for Perdue and Loeffler.

"What a fool Governor @BrianKempGA of Georgia is," the president tweeted. "Could have been so easy, but now we have to do it the hard way. Demand this clown call a Special Session and open up signature verification, NOW. Otherwise, could be a bad day for two GREAT Senators on January 5th."

In contrast to the first day of early voting in October, when more than 125,000 people cast ballots and some people lined up for hours, few long lines were reported Monday.

One question was how many mail-in ballots will be cast in the election. By Friday, 1.2 million mail-in ballots had been requested and 200,000 returned. In the general election, Democrat Joe Biden won 65% of the 1.3 million absentee ballots that were returned in Georgia, a record fueled by the coronavirus pandemic.

Fraga said it's possible that mailed ballots will be even more favorable for Democrats in the runoff because of attacks on the integrity of mail-in voting by Trump and many Georgia Republicans.

That means early in-person voting, which Trump narrowly won in November, could be even more important for Republicans. Both parties may also drive voters toward the early polls with the Christmas and New Year's holidays looming.

Republican attacks on mail-in voting also worry some Democrats. Meghan Shannon, 36, voted in person for Ossoff and Warnock on Monday at State Farm Arena in downtown Atlanta, partly driven by fears that absentee ballots will be overly scrutinized.

"I think the absentee ballots are going to be questioned when they count the votes," the architect said. "I wanted to be here in person so my vote is counted and it's uncontested."

Melissa McJunkin, 40, voted in Rome, a solidly Republican area in northwest Georgia, and cast her ballot for Perdue and Loeffler, saying they "will help make decisions based on what I think is the right choice." She'd heard allegations of voter fraud in the general election and was a bit worried about the integrity of the runoff vote.

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"I've never had a problem before now trusting it, but now I feel like there may be something going on that I don't trust," she said.

Towanda Jones voted in downtown Atlanta for Ossoff and Warnock and dismissed the fraud allegations, which have been repeatedly denied by election officials.

"The system is working as it should, and I think our current president is just a sore loser," she said.

The 54-year-old Black hairstylist said police reform was her main priority.

"I have two grown sons," Jones said. "The amount of Black lives that have been lost due to police brutality upset me."

Deborah Harp Gibbs of Lilburn said she voted for Perdue and Loeffler "to keep America great."

Gibbs said it's important for people to acknowledge the United States as a Christian nation. "I want prayer in school and 'God Bless America' and apple pie," Gibbs said, adding that she thinks the Republicans could keep things on "the right track."

Tony Christy, 62, said he was concerned about the balance of power in Washington as he voted in Kennesaw, a conservative-leaning city just northwest of Atlanta, for the two Republicans. If the Democrats win, there will be 50 senators from each party and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris would be the tie-breaking vote in the chamber.

That would give too much power to the Democrats, Christy said, because "then not only will they have the presidency, but they'll have the House and the Senate, which is not a good balance to have."

But Araya Araya of Lilburn said he voted for Warnock in part to give Biden a chance to get things done.

"I didn't want the Senate to be majority Republican where everything President-elect Biden is preparing to do is going to get blocked," Araya said.

Each of Georgia's 159 counties must offer at least one early voting location during business hours, with many in metro Atlanta offering multiple sites, extended hours and weekend voting. Early voting will continue through Dec. 31 in some places.

Preparation for early voting saw squabbles over cuts to the number of early polling places. The Center for New Data, a nonprofit group, counted 42 early polling sites statewide scheduled to close for the runoff. In some cases, polling places were relocated.

Associated Press writers Haleluya Hadero and Kate Brumback in Atlanta; Jeff Martin in Kennesaw, Georgia; and Sophia Tulp in Rome, Georgia; contributed.

Many African, Asian families marry off daughters amid virus

By KRISTA LARSON Associated Press

KOIDU, Sierra Leone (AP) — The man first caught a glimpse of Marie Kamara as she ran with her friends past his house near the village primary school. Soon after, he proposed to the fifth-grader.

"I'm going to school now. I don't want to get married and stay in the house," she told him.

But the pressures of a global pandemic on this remote corner of Sierra Leone were greater than the wishes of a schoolgirl. Nearby mining operations had slowed with the global economy. Business fell off at her stepfather's tailoring shop, where outfits he had sewn now gathered dust. The family needed money.

Her suitor was a small-scale miner in his mid-20s, but his parents could provide rice for Marie's four younger sisters and access to their watering hole. They could pay cash.

Before long, Marie was seated on a floor mat in a new dress as his family presented hers with 500,000 leones (\$50) inside a calabash bowl along with the traditional kola nut.

"The day they paid for me was on a Friday and then I went to his house to stay," she says flatly, adding that at least now she gets to eat something twice a day.

Many countries had made progress against such traditional and transactional marriages of girls in recent decades, but COVID-19's economic havoc has caused significant backsliding: The United Nations estimates that hardships resulting from COVID-19 will drive 13 million more girls to marry before the age of 18.

Though most such marriages take place in secret, Save the Children estimates that this year alone, nearly

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half a million more girls under 18 are at risk of being married off worldwide, most in Africa and Asia, but also in the Middle East. One aid organization said staffers in a remote corner of Sierra Leone overheard a relative offering up a girl as young as 8 for marriage earlier this year. When chastised, the grandmother later denied doing so.

In most cases, needy parents receive a dowry for their daughter — a bit of land or livestock that can provide income, or cash and a promise to take over financial responsibility for the young bride. The girl, in turn, takes on the household chores of her husband's family and often farm work too.

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In pre-pandemic Jordan, only about 10% of girls were married before the age of 18, a much lower percentage than in Africa or South Asia. The number, though, was greater among Palestinian and Syrian refugees there and they are ever more vulnerable, according to the Girls Not Brides organization.

"Sadly, we have seen an increase in child marriage in refugee camps since the beginning of the pandemic as families struggle to cope," said Tanya Chapuisat, the UNICEF representative for Jordan.

India's harsh lockdown to contain the virus in late March caused millions of impoverished migrants to lose their jobs in cities and many journeyed back to the towns and villages they had left in search of work.

With schools closed and pressure on household finances mounting, marrying off young girls has become a more viable option for reducing expenses.

The ChildLine India recorded 5,214 early marriages in just four months of lockdown between March and June 2020 across India, considered to be a vast undercount as the majority of cases are not reported, the organization says.

In one instance, a 13-year-old girl in Uttar Pradesh notified police that her unemployed father intended to forcibly marry her, said officer Narendra Nath Srivastava. The marriage was averted but not before he took 50,000 rupees (about \$675) from the boy's family.

"As the money transaction had taken place, the father was arrested because we feared that the poor girl could have been pushed to child trafficking," the police officer said.

Similarly, in Pakistan's southern Sindh province, child protection services reported 17 child marriages that were stopped or later dissolved in the first 10 months of the year.

"It's a small number compared to reality. We know that," said Fauzia Masoom, director of Sindh Child Protection Authority.

Intervention is only sometimes effective at preventing the marriages, even where they are illegal. In many countries the legal age to marry is 19, often there are loopholes for parental consent that are used in cases of economic need and early pregnancy to blunt social stigma.

Child protection authorities in Bangladesh said they received an 8:30 p.m. call back in June warning that a child marriage was to take place within the hour.

The girl's family thought they could use the lockdown to marry off their daughter in secret. As soon as the officials arrived, however, the groom and his family ran away.

Authorities counseled the girl's family on the consequences of early marriage for their daughter — an end to her education and likely a pregnancy before she is ready. The family said they were desperate because the father was out of work due to the COVID-19 crisis, but promised not to have her marry before she becomes an adult.

Then they simply waited for officials to leave and held the wedding at two in the morning.

In Sierra Leone, the rate of marriage under 18 had dropped from 56% in 2006 to 39% in 2017 — a major achievement in the eyes of child protection activists. Then COVID-19 hit, schools closed in March and child marriages accelerated as many village girls who had been attending classes in nearby towns returned home to their parents.

It wasn't clear when or even if school ever would resume and many parents feared their idle daughters

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would get pregnant out of wedlock, said Isata Dumbaya, who manages reproductive and maternal health for Partners in Health Sierra Leone.

"When you marry, your father is no longer responsible for feeding you, for paying your fees or doing anything else for you," she said. "And if you come from a house with a lot of other children, indeed, this is one less person (to feed)."

The willingness to sacrifice a daughter in periods of economic hardship underscores the lives many young girls have in this part of Africa. They are largely seen as household help as children, sent out to gather firewood or water at sunrise, and often the last to be fed at mealtime, until they join their future husbands to perform the same chores and more.

Many of the girls' mothers were themselves married off as teenagers, said Dumbaya, and see early marriage as normal. "They do not see it as harming their children," she said.

It's a mindset that Sierra Leone's first lady, Fatima Maada Bio, knows first hand and has been working to change with her "Hands Off Our Girls" campaign since her husband took office in 2018.

Bio managed to escape to the United Kingdom as a teenager after learning her father intended to marry her off to someone. A cousin told her father the pair were headed upcountry. Instead, Bio was taken to the airport without his knowledge and did not marry the man chosen for her.

She has made it her life's work to help other underage girls: "Early marriage in all forms is legalized rape," she told The Associated Press in a recent interview.

Sex with underage girls is illegal in Sierra Leone, but it is rarely enforced. Police say cases aren't reported because the families already have agreed to the marriage whether the brides have or not.

While the billboards with the first lady's image and "Marriage is My Choice; Education is My Right" still line the roadsides, COVID-19 precautions mean the campaign has had to scale back many of its outreach efforts. That means fewer face-to-face meetings with Sierra Leone's traditional leaders who are known as paramount chiefs, some of whom govern swaths of the country so remote they lack an FM radio signal let alone internet.

"Unfortunately when you can't congregate, you are limited," she said. "Not everybody here is conversant with technology where you can say, 'Let's have a Zoom meeting.' And even if you have a community meeting, how many people can log in?"

As a result of the lack of contact and scrutiny, Sierra Leone's first lady acknowledges that she does not have a complete picture of the rising rate of child marriages.

"I believe that a whole lot of girls would have gone through early marriage silently because movements were restricted and we can't reach them," she said.

Sierra Leone closed its borders before the country had registered its first COVID-19 case. As a result, the country has seen only 2,434 confirmed cases and 74 deaths. Only 76 of those cases were confirmed in Kono district, but the economic toll here has brought many families already living on the edge to a breaking point.

Underage marriages are now on the rise across ethnic groups and religions, according to interviews with school officials, traditional leaders and the health workers who treat the young and pregnant.

The men are always older, though most child brides don't even know their husbands' ages. Some don't even know their own in a country where few have birth certificates. The schoolgirl Marie thought she might be 16, though most of her classmates are 12.

Gladys Katingor, a midwife in Koidu, has seen girls as young as 13 come in pregnant, some with husbands old enough to be their grandfathers. The nurses here say some of the youngest ones only develop breasts with their pregnancies.

Most of the time since COVID-19 there is not even a marriage ceremony at the local mosque or church: Parents simply accept suitors' proposals and then deliver their daughters to the groom's home, paramount chiefs say.

And even when the marriage turns violent, the girl is pressured to stay.

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Kadiatu Mansaray, now 15, says her widowed mother pushed her into marriage during the pandemic because of financial hardship and because the teenager's prospects for a husband already were considered limited as she had gotten pregnant once before at 12. She can't be sure just how much money was offered as a bride price: She was crying too hard at the ceremony to see straight.

"I was not ready to get married. I wanted to learn something first," she says.

The man had met her while she was washing clothes in a nearby brook in this forested corner near the border with Guinea. The divorce came as swiftly as the marriage.

A month after leaving her husband, Kadiatu's left eye is still blackened from his last beating. Her offense, he said, was sharing their limited food with others.

"He told me: 'We don't have money to buy food. I asked you not to give food to others and you did anyway.'"

Now she's back in the village with her mother, walking to the closest village of Kombayendeh on market days to sell oranges.

Early marriages were happening so often in this part of Sierra Leone that traditional leaders in the Lei chiefdom instituted a new bylaw imposing a 500,000 (\$50) fine on anyone having sex with a minor, even if the man is married to the child. Yet local leaders in Kombayendeh can't recall a single fine being issued.

On rare occasions, some teenagers manage to escape early marriage with the help of supportive relatives but that assistance is often temporary.

Naomi Mondeh was just 15 and had only finished the fifth grade when her parents said that they could no longer afford her schooling. A man from neighboring Liberia working in the timber trade offered the cash-strapped family a 50-kilogram bag of rice.

"They came and told me that someone wants my hand in marriage, and they said: 'Naomi, you know our situation now. We do not have anything. And there is a man who wants to marry you and help you,'" she recalled. "They told me that if I reject him, they would not take care of me anymore."

Naomi didn't know his age, or that he already had one wife. Soon she was competing for attention and money with another woman. Her husband often would leave her alone with no money for food. Only through the generosity of neighbors could she eat during his long absences.

She complained bitterly to her parents, but her fate was sealed.

"They said: 'Your husband already married you, so you must be patient.' But I told them that I can't be patient with this kind of marriage, this type of forced marriage that you put me into, I can't be patient with it."

Even amidst the rainy season when roads turn to sludge, isolating her village from the rest of the world, Naomi was able to escape in November by motorcycle taxi to Koidu, the largest nearby town, where an aunt was willing to take her in.

Only now her parents know where she is. They have told her she can stay while they try to work things out. Naomi is resolute, though, that she is done with her husband and is learning how to become a seamstress.

"There is nothing that will make me to return to him again because there will be more suffering for me. I will stand firm to not go back."

Since many rural areas in Sierra Leone do not have secondary schools, teenage girls often move in with relatives or friends in distant towns to continue their education. Mariama Conteh, who estimates her age at 17 but seems much younger, had left her remote village near the border with Guinea to live with an aunt in Koidu and attend school. Then in April a 28-year-old man in their compound expressed interest in her.

It took a month for Mariama to say yes over her aunt's threats to send her back to her village, where her father is struggling to feed two wives and 10 other children and her mother would be embarrassed by her return.

"The people in the village would mock us," she says. "It would be shameful for me and my mom."

She bursts into uncontrollable sobs when she thinks of the future she once hoped for. Her older sister

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was able to go on to senior secondary school before she was married, something now completely out of reach for Mariama.

"It is what it is," she says, now 7 months pregnant and soon to put a baby on her back instead of a schoolbag. "It has happened."

Mariama's husband senses her unhappiness but is enthusiastic about the pregnancy and hopes the baby will be a boy. So does Mariama.

If she has a daughter, one thing is certain, she says: "I will not give my child to anybody. I will take care of her."

Associated Press writers Kathy Gannon in Islamabad, Pakistan; Biswajeet Banerjee in Lucknow, India; Julhas Alam in Dhaka, Bangladesh; and Omar Akour in Amman, Jordan contributed to this report.

Daytime darkness: Total solar eclipse wows in Latin America

By ESTEBAN FELIX and EVA VERGARA undefined

CARAHUE, Chile (AP) — Thousands of people gathered in the Chilean region of La Araucanía on Monday to witness a solar eclipse, rejoicing in the rare experience even though visibility was limited because of cloudy skies. Skies were clear in northern Patagonia in Argentina, where people also watched the moon briefly block out the sun and plunge daytime into darkness.

Many people wore masks to curb the spread of COVID-19, though they crowded together in some places in Pucón and in other areas of La Araucanía, 700 kilometers (430 miles) south of Santiago, the Chilean capital.

"It was worth the two minutes," said witness Diego Fuentes, who traveled south with his family to see the eclipse.

"I liked it a lot and it was good that there were clouds because we could see it a little without glasses," said Catalina Morales, a girl who watched the eclipse with her father, Cristián Morales. He described it as "spectacular, a unique experience."

Thousands jumped and shouted happily in the drizzle when the sun was completely covered by the moon and then silence descended for a few moments. People again screamed and whooped excitedly when the sun appeared again.

During the brief period of darkness, only the lights of cell phones were visible.

About 500,000 Indigenous people of the Mapuche ethnic group live in La Araucanía. They traditionally believe that the eclipse signals the momentary death of the sun after a fight with the moon and leads to negative fallout.

Diego Ancalao, member of a Mapuche community and head of an Indigenous foundation that promotes development, noted that a total solar eclipse in July 2019 was followed by civil unrest in Chile and then the coronavirus pandemic.

Experts said the solar eclipse was partly visible in several other Latin American countries as well as parts of Africa and areas of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The next total solar eclipse in Chile is expected to occur in 28 years. Another is expected to be visible in Antarctica by the end of 2021.

Vergara reported from Santiago, Chile. AP journalist Mauricio Cuevas contributed from Pucón, Chile.

Virginia woman does 53 acts of kindness for 53rd birthday

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO Associated Press

The pandemic didn't allow Debra Ferrell to gather with her whole family for her birthday. So instead, she celebrated the day by giving back — with 53 gifts from her heart.

Ferrell went on social media and asked people for suggestions on acts of kindness that she could perform for others during her birth month, one for every year that she's been alive.

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"It's one of the hardest times in my history, so I figured why not make other people smile," said Ferrell, who is from Roanoke, Virginia.

The requests for her Oct. 4 birthday arrived from across the U.S.: Parents who hoped for words of encouragement for their kids on their first year of virtual school. A woman who wished for a gift basket for her fiancé, a doctor at a hospital's COVID-19 unit. A friend of a family in Minnesota that lost their 4-year-old to cancer, who wanted them to feel that they were not alone.

For them, Ferrell found a memorial wind chime with a note on the clapper that says, "When you hear the wind, I am with you."

"We just felt like that was appropriate to send to them with a letter about, you know, that someone hears and someone is there all the way from Roanoke, Virginia," Ferrell said. "We just want you to know someone cares."

This is not the first time she has shown her instinct for caring. On her birthday in 2014, she started "Love With Skin On," an organization that she runs with family and friends. According to its Facebook page, the group aims to "share tangible acts of love and kindness."

Its motto? "Be Love. Do Stuff."

"I know that might sound cheesy, but it's just one of my favorite things to do," said Ferrell, who works as a resident service coordinator at a retirement community. "I just feel that if we live our life trying to make other people smile, I'm the one who gets the most out of it."

Sometimes that includes taking donations of children's books for hospital waiting rooms, or leaving teddy bears and rubber duckies in random places to brighten strangers' days.

For her birthday, Ferrell also recruited her teenage granddaughters to paint signs with messages such as "Let your awesome out," "You're amazing" and "The world needs your light." They planted them in people's yards.

"One of the things that I see the most is posts about how hard it's been for everyone, people struggling with sadness and with grief and not able to see their families and not able to worship together, celebrate together, grieve together," Ferrell said.

"It's just a very painful time for people, our family included. And I mean, if one random act of a yard sign can make someone smile at this time, then ... it's more than worth it."

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

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

'Big Sky' stumbles in addressing Native American criticism

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — After ABC's "Big Sky" drew Native American censure for overlooking an epidemic of violence against Indigenous women and girls, its producers set about making changes. But the first, hurried steps were called "bumpy" and insulting by Native leaders.

The reaction illustrates how even well-meaning creators may struggle with growing demands for diversity and authenticity — especially with an ethnic group that Hollywood has at best ignored and at worst stereotyped beyond recognition.

Shelly R. Fyant, chairwoman of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana, said she was blindsided by a request to use a tribal seal on "Big Sky" when she was unaware the Flathead Nation tribe might be written into a scene.

The email inquiry to Fyant's office, from a Native American guest actor also tasked as a cultural adviser

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for the series, was sent Dec. 9 — three days before the proposed scene was to tape in Canada, where the Montana-set series is in production.

It was “insulting” to discover the show planned to depict the tribe absent consultation and a slap at efforts to combat crime against Indigenous people, she said. “Our tribe and our identity and our government is not going to be subcontracted out.”

The quick turnaround for episodic TV makes revisions possible but not advisable, especially when sensitive issues are at stake, said producer Tom Nunan (the Oscar-winning “Crash”), a former network and studio head.

Research and hard work can make “material ring incredibly true,” even for writers initially unfamiliar with people and environments, Nunan said, adding that it could be the case for “Big Sky” if its first priorities were Native Americans and the human trafficking toll.

“But it’s almost impossible to make something feel truly authentic if one tries somehow to ‘reverse engineer’ it after the fact,” said Nunan, a lecturer at the University of California, Los Angeles, graduate school for theater, film and TV.

“Big Sky” was a plum for Disney-owned ABC, marking writer-producer David E. Kelley’s return to network TV after a string of cable successes (“Big Little Lies,” “The Undoing”). The series is based on a 2013 novel, writer C.J. Box’s “The Highway,” which doesn’t address Native issues.

Producers, including ABC’s Disney sibling 20th Television and Kelley’s company, did not comment for this article.

The Tuesday night series, a standard private-eye drama, debuted in November with a plot about two sisters abducted by possible sex-traffickers. The sisters are white, and early episodes omitted any mention of the high rate of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, including in Montana.

After a succession of tribal leaders and Native advocates in the U.S. and Canada criticized the omission, producers said their “eyes have been opened” and they were working with Indigenous groups to bring attention to the ongoing tragedy. They sought guidance from National Congress of American Indians, the largest and oldest representative body for America’s nearly 600 tribal nations.

“In its failure to represent the life-or-death crisis of missing and murdered Indigenous women, Disney has erased tragedies that impact tribal Nations across North America,” Congress President Fawn Sharp said in a statement to The Associated Press.

The organization is fulfilling its job of supporting tribal nations’ sovereign governments by “educating Disney on the appropriate way to respectfully address this issue with impacted Nations and learn from their leaders” and experts on Indigenous subjects, Sharp said.

“This conversation and process is ongoing, and has been bumpy so far. We are counting on Disney to commit to this long-term dialogue with tribal Nations so that their incomparable media platform can be a force for understanding, equality, and accurate representation of Indigenous peoples and tribal nations globally,” she said.

Sharp did not detail her specific concerns.

The first “Big Sky” change was to add an on-screen message noting resources for victims of sexual or labor exploitation. Then came story revisions for the freshman drama, extended from its original eight-episode order to 16.

In a scene that was under consideration, for example, private detectives searching for the missing sisters meet with a tribal councilwoman who raises the crisis. Native actor Stefany Mathias was hired for the role and asked to act as a consultant, which she said included reviewing set decorations.

Among them: the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes seal that producers were considering depicting. Mathias’ copy of the script referred to the tribes, so she concluded they had already vetted the story before she emailed Chairwoman Fyant to find out if it would be appropriate to use the seal.

Surprised and stung by the curt reply she received, Mathias said, she apologized to Fyant and regrets not being better informed before reaching out. She doesn’t have second thoughts about being part of “Big Sky.”

“I have been working in this industry for a long time and have turned down parts and not auditioned because I didn’t agree with the portrayal or I was just simply not willing to play another stereotype,”

Mathias said. She was heartened by the prospect of a major network paying heed to the crucial issue of violence against Native women, she said, calling producers sincere in their efforts.

"I just feel in working with them and in talking with them that they had very good intentions and they wanted to do it in the best way possible and in a respectful way," she said. "My feeling is that, unfortunately, they simply didn't have the knowledge of working with Indigenous people."

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.

"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.

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.

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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 National Association of Health Care Assistants 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. 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."

London faces tightest restrictions; sees new virus variant

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — London and its surrounding areas will be placed under Britain's highest level of coronavirus restrictions beginning Wednesday as infections rise rapidly in the capital, the health secretary said Monday, adding that a new variant of the virus may be to blame for the spread.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the government must take swift action after seeing "very sharp, exponential rises" in Greater London and nearby Kent and Essex. He said in some areas cases are doubling

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every seven days.

The surge of COVID-19 cases in southern England may be associated with a new variant of coronavirus, Hancock told lawmakers. He said officials are assessing the new strand, but stressed there was nothing to suggest it was more likely to cause serious disease, or that it wouldn't respond to a vaccine.

"We've currently identified over 1,000 cases with this variant predominantly in the south of England, although cases have been identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas," he said. Initial analysis suggests that the new variant is growing faster than existing variants, he added.

"The medical advice that we have is that it is highly unlikely that this new variant will impinge the vaccine and the impact of the vaccine," he said.

Britain started vaccinating people over age 80 and health care workers on Dec. 8 with the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and its regulators are also evaluating other vaccines, including one developed by AstraZeneca and Oxford University. Thousands have been vaccinated so far, but they must return in 21 days for a second shot. The National Health Service said hundreds of medical clinics across England were getting vaccine deliveries on Monday and would be offering shots by Tuesday.

Under Tier 3 restrictions, the toughest level in England's three-tier system, people can't socialize indoors, and bars, pubs and restaurants must close except for takeout. People are told to minimize traveling within or to the area, and Hancock said people shouldn't take trips into central London to do Christmas shopping.

London is currently in Tier 2, or high alert, which applies to most of England.

In November, the capital was among the areas with the lowest regional infection rates in England but some areas in and around London have now become virus hot spots.

Dr. Michael Ryan, the chief of emergencies for the World Health Organization, said the U.N. health agency was aware of the new strain reported in the U.K. and was working with British and other health authorities to assess if the reported mutations might change how the virus is behaving.

"This kind of evolution and mutations like this are quite common," Ryan told reporters on Monday, adding there was "no information that suggests" this virus variant is more deadly or spreads more easily between people.

Viruses like COVID-19 mutate constantly as they spread between people and scientists say most mutations have little impact on human disease.

Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, said the agency had "no evidence this variant behaves differently" and that it was similar to a variant initially reported among mink in Europe. She said scientists would further study the new variant to see if there might be any difference in how it prompted an immune response in people.

Local officials in some of London's boroughs had already advised schools to close and move to online learning as coronavirus cases spiked. On Sunday, officials in southeast London's Greenwich said the borough was experiencing "exponential growth" in cases, with infection rates now at their highest since March.

London Mayor Sadiq Kahn has suggested that the Conservative government ask all secondary schools and colleges in London to shut down early before Christmas because of outbreaks among students from 10 to 19 years old.

The tougher restrictions will be a further blow to restaurants, pubs and the West End's famous theaters, which have just reopened for business in the busy Christmas period after a four-week national lockdown lifted on Dec. 2.

"We've already put so much money into restocking — that's where my heart bleeds a little bit," said Clover Eziashi, who runs restaurant and bar Lounge Brixton. "We've geared up for Christmas, what are we going to do with all of this stock?"

On Sunday, Italy surpassed Britain to become the nation with the highest number of confirmed coronavirus deaths in Europe, but both have over 64,000 deaths each, according to Johns Hopkins University. Experts say those tallies still undercount the impact of the virus, due to limited testing and missed cases.

AP medical writer Maria Cheng contributed from Toronto.

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

EXPLAINER: Allergic reactions to vaccines rare, short-lived

By The Associated Press undefined

Vaccines can sometimes cause allergic reactions, but they are usually rare and short-lived.

British regulators are looking into reports of allergic reactions in two people who received the new Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine Tuesday, the first day of a vaccination program. In the meantime, they're telling people to skip the vaccine if they've had a history of serious allergic reactions.

A look at allergic reactions to vaccines:

HOW OFTEN DO THEY HAPPEN?

Allergic reactions can occur with numerous vaccines and experts say they are not unexpected.

In the Pfizer-BioNTech study of 42,000 people, the rate was about the same in those who got the coronavirus vaccine versus those who got a dummy shot. U.S. Food and Drug Administration reviewers who examined the study's safety data found that 137 — or 0.63% — of vaccine recipients reported symptoms suggestive of an allergic reaction, compared to 111 — or 0.51% — in the placebo group.

A 2015 study in the U.S. examining the rate of anaphylaxis — a severe, life-threatening allergic reaction — found that it occurred about once per every million vaccine doses. The study evaluated children and adults who got vaccines against numerous diseases, including polio, measles and meningitis.

"For the general population this does not mean that they would need to be anxious about receiving the vaccination," said Stephen Evans, a vaccines expert at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

He noted that even common foods can provoke severe allergic reactions.

WHY DO THESE REACTIONS HAPPEN?

Scientists say people can be sensitive to components in the shot, like gelatin or egg protein, or to the vaccine itself. People with egg allergies are sometimes advised not to get the flu shot, since that vaccine is mostly grown in chicken eggs.

Common symptoms of an allergic reaction include a rash, skin irritation, coughing or trouble breathing.

Pfizer's new COVID-19 vaccine uses a new technology, and is coated in lipid nanoparticles, which have been used in drugs.

Some people react to almost any drug or vaccine, said Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University's school of public health. The key is whether reactions to the vaccine are more common or more severe — and that doesn't appear to be the case so far, he said.

WHAT ARE OTHER SIDE EFFECTS?

Typical side effects for many vaccines include things like a sore arm from the shot, fever and muscle aches. In the Pfizer study, participants also reported fatigue, headache and chills.

More serious side effects are reported to regulators or health officials for further investigation. But it can often take time to determine if the vaccine caused the side effect or if the person just coincidentally received the shot before becoming ill.

As for the COVID-19 vaccine, "It's just so high-profile that every little thing that happens all the time is going to get magnified," said Jha.

"We should talk about it, we should be honest with people, but we should put it into context and help people understand," he said.

"There is a small proportion of people who have an allergic reaction to almost any medicine."

This story was first published on Dec. 9. It was updated on Dec. 14 to delete erroneous reference to vaccine ingredients not being disclosed.

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.

"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

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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.

“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.”

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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."

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

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Fed to weigh further options for aiding US economy in peril

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve's policymakers face an unusual conundrum as they meet this week: A short-term economic outlook that is worsening even while the longer-term picture is brightening thanks to the emergence of coronavirus vaccines.

When its meeting concludes Wednesday, the Fed could announce steps to try to offset the pandemic's increasing drag on growth. Or it could choose to mostly watch and wait, for now.

The central bank's policy meeting coincides with a record-shattering resurgence of the coronavirus, which has caused an increase in business restrictions and made more Americans reluctant to shop, travel and dine out. Some analysts say the economy could shrink in early 2021 before recovering as vaccines combat the virus.

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Economists are divided on whether the Fed will announce any new actions this week. One option the policymakers could take would be to announce a shift in the Fed's bond purchases. The Fed has been buying \$80 billion in Treasury bonds and \$40 billion in mortgage bonds each month in an effort to keep borrowing rates down.

The idea of a shift would be to buy more longer-term bonds and fewer shorter-term securities, to hold down longer-term interest rates. The Fed has already cut its benchmark short-term rate to a record low near zero.

Yet the Fed's tools take time to support the economy, which adds a layer of complexity given the short-term gloom and longer-term optimism.

"Near-term downside risk may not be enough of a reason" to provide more stimulus "if the outlook for the economy in three to six months remains strong," Lewis Alexander, U.S. chief economist at Nomura Securities, said in a research note.

Another complicating factor is that even as negotiations continue, Congress has yet to agree on another round of urgently needed financial aid for millions of unemployed Americans, thousands of struggling businesses and cash-short states and cities.

Many Fed policymakers, including Chair Jerome Powell, have repeatedly urged Congress to provide more support. Most proposals on Capitol Hill include extending unemployment benefit programs that are scheduled to expire in about two weeks. At that point, roughly 9 million jobless people will lose all their unemployment aid, state or federal.

"They're all looking to fiscal stimulus," Tim Duy, an economics professor at the University of Oregon and author of the "Fed Watch" blog, referring to potential rescue aid from Congress.

Recent data is pointing to an economy that is getting worse. More Americans are seeking unemployment benefits, a sign that layoffs are likely rising, and overall hiring slowed in November to its slowest pace since April. Credit and debit card data suggests that holiday spending is weaker than it was last year.

Still, Fed officials may not yet be ready to take new steps, perhaps believing they have already provided nearly all the help they can for the economy through ultra-low rates.

At their meeting in November, Fed policymakers discussed the idea of buying more longer-term bonds, among other options, according to minutes published three weeks later. Doing so could further reduce the yield on 10-year Treasuries, which influence other borrowing costs, such as mortgage and credit card rates.

By contrast, the purchase of, say, two-year Treasuries has less effect on the most common loan rates, though it can help the Treasury market function more smoothly, which was the original goal of the Fed's bond-buying program this year.

While Fed officials worry that the pandemic will severely harm the economy this winter, not all are sold on more stimulus.

"We expect very strong growth next year," Robert Kaplan, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, told CNBC this month. "But I think the next three to six months are going to be challenging. And it appears to us that growth is decelerating, and if this resurgence keeps heading the wrong way, which it is, that slowing and deceleration could get worse."

But Kaplan, a voting member of the Fed's policymaking committee, said, "I would not want" to alter the bond-buying program "at this point."

He added: "I don't know that increasing the size or extending maturities of our bond purchases would help address this situation that I'm concerned about over the next three to six months."

"As always," though, Kaplan said, "I will go into the meeting with an open mind."

Other Fed bank presidents, including Charles Evans of the Chicago Fed and Mary Daly of the San Francisco Fed, have also suggested in recent weeks that a change to the bond-buying program at this point might not be necessary. Neither Evans nor Daly has a vote on the Fed's policy committee, but they will participate in this week's meeting.

Even if it doesn't announce a policy shift this week, the Fed will likely provide additional guidance about its bond purchases. After its November meeting, it said it would keep buying bonds "over coming months."

The minutes from that meeting said that most policymakers wanted to provide more specific guidance "fairly soon." Analysts have interpreted that to likely mean this week's meeting.

The Fed isn't expected to tie its bond purchases to any specific level of inflation or unemployment but instead suggest a more general goal. Alexander said it could be as simple as stating that bond purchases will continue "until the recovery is well-advanced."

The minutes of the November meeting also showed that the policymakers expect to start slowing their bond purchases before they begin raising interest rates. And economists foresee no Fed rate hikes until as late as 2024 or 2025. On Wednesday, the Fed will issue forecasts through 2023 that are expected to show no rate hikes at all.

Hunger study predicts 168,000 pandemic-linked child deaths

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Economic fallout from the coronavirus pandemic has set back decades of progress against the most severe forms of malnutrition and is likely to kill 168,000 children before any global recovery takes hold, according to a study released Monday by 30 international organizations.

The study from the Standing Together for Nutrition Consortium draws on economic and nutrition data gathered this year as well as targeted phone surveys. Saskia Osendarp, who led the research, estimates an additional 11.9 million children — most in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa — will suffer from stunting and wasting, the most severe forms of malnutrition.

Women who are pregnant now "will deliver children who are already malnourished at birth, and these children are disadvantaged from the very start," said Osendarp, executive director of the Micronutrient Forum. "An entire generation is at stake."

The fight against malnutrition had been an unheralded global success until the coronavirus pandemic struck.

"It may seem like it's a problem that is always with us but the numbers were going down prior to COVID," said Lawrence Haddad, executive director of the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition. "Ten years of progress eliminated in 9 to 10 months."

Before the pandemic, the number of stunted children declined globally each year, from 199.5 million in 2000 to 144 million in 2019. The number of children suffering from wasting stood at 54 million in 2010 and had dropped to 47 million last year. It's expected to rise again to 2010 levels, according to the study.

The research was released at the start of a year-long effort to raise money against malnutrition. Around \$3 billion was announced, though some of that includes prior commitments. Pakistan, which has some of the world's most widespread malnutrition, pledged to spend \$2.2 billion by 2025.

The consortium includes the World Bank, World Food Program, UNICEF and USAID as well as private health foundations and universities. UNICEF pledged to spend \$700 million on nutrition programs annually over the next five years, \$224 million more than it has spent over the past five years.

Haddad said the next step is holding governments accountable for their promises, especially those whose citizens suffer the most from malnutrition.

"A lot of hunger is about governance," he said. He added that the pandemic makes the benefits of nutrition clear, because malnutrition leaves the body vulnerable to all kinds of disease, including coronavirus. "Nutrition is everyone's best bet until the vaccine arrives."

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Over 300 students still missing after Nigeria school attack

By SAM OLUKOYA Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Anxiety is growing among the parents of hundreds of students who remain miss-

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ing three days after gunmen attacked their school in Katsina State in northern Nigeria.

More than 300 students are missing after the attack on the Government Science Secondary School, a boys' school in Kankara, on Friday night, Katsina governor Aminu Masari said.

A joint rescue operation was launched Saturday by Nigeria's police, air force and army, according to the government. The military was in gunfights with the bandits after locating their hideout in the Zango/Paula forest Saturday, according to a statement by President Muhammadu Buhari.

When the school was attacked, police engaged in a gunfight with the gunmen, allowing many students to scale the school's fence and run for safety, according to Katsina State police spokesman Gambo Isah. The school has more than 600 students.

Salish Masi said that two of his sons are among those still missing.

"I am worried that after three days I have no news about my children," he told The Associated Press Monday. "I have been waiting for the authorities to tell me what happened but till now, they have said nothing."

Another parent, Mustapha Gargaba, said he is very anxious because he does not know what has happened to his son.

No group or persons have claimed responsibility for the abduction of the students, the Katsina state governor said after meeting with security officials.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres Monday condemned the attack on the school and called "for the immediate and unconditional release of the abducted children and for their safe return to their families," in a statement issued in New York.

Several armed groups operate in northwestern Nigeria where Katsina state is located.

More than 1,100 people have been killed by bandits in an escalation of attacks during the first half of the year, according to Amnesty International, which said the government was failing to bring the attackers to justice.

While several groups of bandits are active there, the groups known to kidnap for ransom have links to the jihadist group Boko Haram and its breakaway faction, the Islamic State's West Africa Province, known as ISWAP.

Both Boko Haram and ISWAP have in the past carried out mass abduction of students. The most serious school attack took place in April 2014, when more than 270 schoolgirls were abducted from their dormitory at the Government Secondary School in Chibok in northeastern Borno State. About 100 of the girls are still missing.

The recent incident at the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara, is the worst attack on a boys school since February 2014, when 59 boys were killed during a Boko Haram attack on the Federal Government College Buni Yadi in Yobe State.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 15, the 350th day of 2020. There are 16 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 15, 2013, Nelson Mandela was laid to rest in his childhood hometown, ending a 10-day mourning period for South Africa's first Black president.

On this date:

In 1791, the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, went into effect following ratification by Virginia.

In 1890, Sioux Indian Chief Sitting Bull and 11 other tribe members were killed in Grand River, South Dakota, during a confrontation with Indian police.

In 1944, the U.S. Senate approved the promotions of Henry H. Arnold, Dwight D. Eisenhower, Douglas MacArthur and George C. Marshall to the five-star rank of General of the Army and the nominations of

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William D. Leahy, Ernest J. King and Chester W. Nimitz as Admirals of the Fleet.

In 1965, two U.S. manned spacecraft, Gemini 6A and Gemini 7, maneuvered toward each other while in orbit, at one point coming as close as one foot.

In 1967, the Silver Bridge between Gallipolis (gal-ih-puh-LEES'), Ohio, and Point Pleasant, West Virginia, collapsed into the Ohio River, killing 46 people.

In 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced he would grant diplomatic recognition to Communist China on New Year's Day and sever official relations with Taiwan.

In 1989, a popular uprising began in Romania that resulted in the downfall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHEHS'-koo).

In 2000, the long-troubled Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine was closed for good.

In 2001, with a crash and a large dust cloud, a 50-foot tall section of steel — the last standing piece of the World Trade Center's facade — was brought down in New York.

In 2009, evangelist Oral Roberts died in Newport Beach, California, at age 91.

In 2012, a day after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, President Barack Obama declared that "every parent in America has a heart heavy with hurt" and said it was time to "take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this."

In 2016, a federal jury in Charleston, South Carolina, convicted Dylann Roof of slaughtering nine Black church members who had welcomed him to their Bible study.

Ten years ago: The U.N. Security Council gave a unanimous vote of confidence to the government of Iraq by lifting 19-year-old sanctions on weapons and civilian nuclear power. Time magazine named Mark Zuckerberg, the 26-year-old co-founder and CEO of Facebook, its Person of the Year. Movie producer, director and writer Blake Edwards, 88, died in Santa Monica, California. Baseball Hall of Famer Bob Feller died in Cleveland at age 92.

Five years ago: Sens. Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio clashed over U.S. military intervention, government spying on Americans' communications and immigration as front-runner Donald Trump defended his provocative call for banning Muslims from the United States during a Republican presidential debate held in Las Vegas. In a major policy change, Secretary of State John Kerry accepted Russia's longstanding demand that Syrian President Bashar Assad's future be determined by his own people.

One year ago: The Hallmark Channel said it would reinstate commercials for a wedding-planning website featuring same-sex couples; the network had pulled the ads following a complaint from a conservative group.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Cindy Birdsong (The Supremes) is 81. Rock musician Dave Clark (The Dave Clark Five) is 78. Rock musician Carmine Appice (Vanilla Fudge) is 74. Actor Don Johnson is 71. Actor Melanie Chartoff is 70. Movie director Julie Taymor is 68. Movie director Alex Cox is 66. Rock musician Paul Simonon (The Clash) is 65. Movie director John Lee Hancock is 64. Democratic Party activist Donna Brazile is 61. Country singer Doug Phelps (Brother Phelps; Kentucky Headhunters) is 60. Movie producer-director Reginald Hudlin is 59. Actor Helen Slater is 57. Actor Paul Kaye (TV: "Game of Thrones") is 56. Actor Molly Price is 55. Actor Garrett Wang (wahng) is 52. Actor Michael Shanks is 50. Actor Stuart Townsend is 48. Figure skater Surya Bonaly is 47. Actor Geoff Stults is 44. Actor Adam Brody is 41. Actor Michelle Dockery is 39. Actor George O. Gore II is 38. Actor Camilla Luddington is 37. Rock musician Alana Haim (HYM) is 29. Actor Maude Apatow (AP'-ih-tow) is 23. Actor Stefania Owen is 23.