

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Death Notice: Martha Farmen

Martha Farmen, 80, of Groton passed away Wednesday, December 16, 2020 at Sun Dial Manor in Bristol. Services are pending with Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.



## 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 Mobridge-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.**



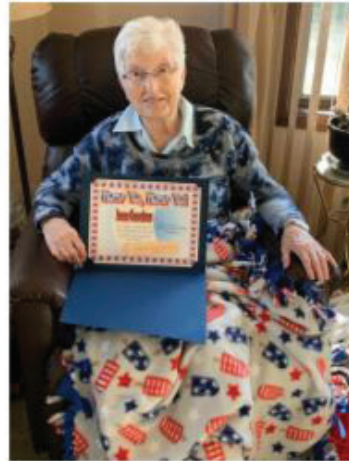
**Elementary  
Christmas Concert**  
Tuesday, Dec. 22, 2020  
10 a.m.  
**Livestreamed Only**  
GDILIVE.COM  
AND LOCALLY ON GDIRADIO AT 89.3 FM



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

**GDILIVE.COM**  
**GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM**

## Members to Remember



The Gingrich-Dixon #13 Wakonda Legion Auxiliary recently honored two long-time members with certificates and patriotic lap blankets. Pictured are members **Jean Mae Peterson** receiving her 70 year certificate and **JoAnn Ganschow** with her 65 year certificate.



Our Auxiliary Unit - Roy L. Hall Post #58 from Columbia would like to nominate **Kathie Vitense** "A Member to Remember." Kathie has been a member of the Legion Auxiliary for almost 20 years - joining in 2001! Even though Kathie has moved out of our community - she lives close enough by so that she can still be an integral part of our unit. Kathie volunteers many hours at the local hospital. She helps with our blood drive - checking donors in at this fall's drive. She understands how important it is that we give of ourselves to help others!

Kathie has "the gift of gab" which lends to being a great member of our unit. She is always willing to attend district meetings and makes anyone who attends events at our Legion feel welcome and comfortable. Unit 58 is proud of Kathie Vitense!

*There were five submissions for "Members to Remember" check the January Legionette for others.*

justice, freedom and democracy; to participate in and to the accomplishment of the aims and purposes of The American Legate our association by our devotion to mu



**Kathie Vitense** nominated for "Members to Remember." Vitense (right) is pictured with **Cara Dennert** of the **Columbia Legion Auxiliary**.

## #296 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

It's Tuesday, and we're back to regular reporting. The numbers reflect that. We're up to 16,762,100 cases, 1.2% more than yesterday. It is conceivable we'll hit 17 million tomorrow, but far more likely it will be Thursday—almost no chance it will hold off 'til Friday. There were 205,200 new case reports today. Hospitalizations are again at record levels—ninth day running—at 110,549. I really don't see how the system holds up much longer; we really, really need some relief here.

This next is an indicator of the problems we're facing today: The seven-day rolling test positivity rate for the country has risen in two weeks from 9.7 to 11.4 percent. Remember that the original guideline was that localities should not reopen until positivity had been below five percent for two weeks running and three percent is the benchmark for approaching control. Of course, nothing much is shut down these days, but these kinds of numbers—and the fact that they're going the wrong direction—still mean we're in trouble. Just in case we needed another indicator.

There were 2976 deaths reported today. We are now at 303,856, 10% more than yesterday. I expect this number will continue to grow at a faster and faster pace.

We've seen some pretty significant declines in new-case reports in the middle of the country, including Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, and Michigan, from two weeks ago; this has been more than offset by alarming increases on both coasts. And hospitalizations and deaths are accelerating yet, even where new-infection rates have tapered off; that can be expected to continue for a while yet.

Well, we're on the same merry-go-round this week as last, just substituting Moderna's mRNA vaccine candidate for Pfizer/BioNTech's mRNA vaccine candidate (which is no longer only a candidate). And it's Tuesday, so that means the FDA's analysis of the data set from the clinical trial has been released. And honestly, to no one's surprise, this analysis looks a lot like the one we got last week.

The vaccine has a "favorable safety profile" with "no specific safety concerns identified that would preclude issuance of an EUA." This means serious adverse reactions were thin on the ground, although they also found mild ones are quite frequent. We can expect to see side effects, just not bad ones; so there will be lots cases of of pain at the injection site, fatigue, and aches, but not scary stuff. After the possible allergic reactions reported in the UK last week after administration of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, the FDA looked carefully through these data for any sign of allergic reactions to this candidate and found no serious ones. They noted that around 1.5% of vaccine recipients and 1.1% of placebo recipients reported possible less serious "hypersensitivity" reactions. It is also effective, more than 94% effective, which is as remarkable as the outcome we looked at last week. It is less effective in older people, something that was not found with the Pfizer/BioNTech product. While effectiveness was 96% in people under 65, it drops off to 86% after 65.

The Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee will meet in public Thursday to discuss and craft their recommendation. They will answer the question whether the benefit outweighs the potential risk (spoiler: they'll say yes) and make whatever recommendations they deem necessary for ongoing studies by the company after the vaccine rolls out. Another one's getting close, folks.

This whole vaccine thing is very exciting, no doubt; but it's not an instant cure for the pandemic either. It is really important to recognize that, even after you've been vaccinated (you lucky dog!), you must still wear a mask and take all the other precautions. Why? Because, if you will cast your mind way back to what we've been told since the very beginning of this whole mask thing, we know masks do more to protect others than they do to protect the wearer. So even if you're vaccinated, and therefore protected, we still do not know whether the vaccine prevents you from transmitting the virus, that is, whether you still pose a risk to others.

It will help you to understand this if you will remember that the clinical trials looked for people with symptoms. There was no effort to identify people who may have been asymptotically infected—and I cannot imagine how much insisting on constant testing would have hamstrung the trials with our testing capacity still (after all these months, dammit!) still limited. So what we know about these vaccines is they

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effectively prevent you from getting sick, and they even more effectively prevent you from getting really seriously sick. But we do not know whether they prevent you from getting infected. Maybe they're going to create a whole new class of asymptomatic virus shedders to go around transmitting infection to others. Maybe not too, but right now, we just don't know. So you're going to have to keep wearing a mask and sanitizing and distancing and all until we do know. That's going to take a while yet. And absent that information, we need enough Americans vaccinated to provide herd immunity—probably around 230 million of us. So we need (a) that many people to agree to be vaccinated and (b) sufficient supplies of vaccine to get the job done. Probably be summer or after before that happens. But hang in there; it's coming.

There is another over-the-counter Covid-19 test which has received emergency use authorization (EUA), but this one can be completed entirely at home. The whole thing takes maybe 20 minutes, start to finish. Supplies will be limited for a couple of months, but are expected to grow rapidly next year.

Like other rapid tests, this one is not as accurate as the PCR done in labs, but it will be readily available and relatively inexpensive, which are pluses. I am not in the business of marketing for these companies, but I'm going to give you the name of this company so that you can avoid being scammed by fraudsters selling a "test" that is "FDA-approved" when it is nothing of the kind: This test is made by Ellume. The cost is expected to be around \$30, and it will be available at pharmacies and online. I'm no expert in insurance rules, but I'm going to guess the over-the-counter nature of the test may make it ineligible for insurance coverage. That is a question I recommend you ask before purchase.

Those who've been with us for a while may recall reading about an experimental rock concert held in Germany in the interest of studying transmission and mitigation of transmission in crowds. (If you missed those posts, check out my Update #150 posted July 22 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3796230603726651>, Update #181 posted August 22 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3894324017250642>, and Update #253 posted November 2 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4134986019851106>.) Well, now we have another experimental concert, this one in Barcelona, done with the intent to discover the effectiveness of same-day screening before an event.

What the researchers did was use an antigen test, the quicker, but less accurate kind, to screen volunteers. They then assigned 500 to attend a concert and another 500 to go home to live their lives. Additionally, both groups were tested with the more accurate RT-PCR molecular test so the researchers would know who was actually infected to begin with. Then the lucky concert-goers were treated to a free concert/music festival at an indoor venue. They were required to wear masks except when getting their one free drink at a bar upstairs from the venue and to use hand sanitizer, but were not required to socially distance. The event lasted five hours, so here was plenty of time to mingle and enjoy the music. A second RT-PCR test was done on all volunteers, both the concert-goers and those who went home, after eight days. The goal is to discover how many infected people the antigen test missed and whether those misses caused a problem in subsequent days. We'll see what the results show.

You know, occasionally I hear about someone celebrating their "birthday month," and I'm left to wonder what went wrong in that person's life, leaving them with the need to claim an entire month every year to celebrate the fact that they were still upright and breathing. This is the sort of thing we tend to sit around and mock, and that seems like a reasonable reaction to me. But I've discovered there's a way to take a "birthday month" for yourself without garnering any opprobrium at all.

Debra Ferrell turned 53 in October, and she decided to celebrate her birthday month in an unusual way. Since she couldn't get together with family and friends for the more traditional party, she put out a call on social media for suggestions: acts of kindness she could do for others during the month of October—53 of them to be precise, one for each year of her life. Now that's the kind of birthday month celebration I can get behind. She told the AP, "It's one of the hardest times in my history, so I figured why not make other people smile."

There were all kinds of suggestions from across the country: children needing encouragement, people who'd suffered a loss needing comfort, people who were stressed or worried or sad. And Ferrell set to work, producing small kindnesses throughout the month. She sent a windchime to the bereaved with a note on the clapper that said, "When you hear the wind, I am with you." Her granddaughters helped her to

paint yard signs with encouraging messages and plant them in yards. She reached out and touched lives 53 times, once for each year she's been lucky enough to live. Nice alternative to sitting alone at home, sad because you don't get a party. We could all use a bit of that.

Stay safe. We'll talk again.

## Johnson-Backed Surprise Medical Billing Proposal Advances

Washington, D.C. – On Friday evening, a bipartisan, bicameral surprise billing agreement was announced by the House Ways and Means Committee, the House Energy and Commerce Committee, the House Education and Labor Committee, and the Senate Health Committee. Surprise billing has been a priority of U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) during his first term and this package will be included in an end of year omnibus bill.

Surprise medical billing occurs when a person receives an unexpectedly high medical bill as a result of being out-of-network, this usually occurs in emergency situations.

The Consumer Protections Against Surprise Medical Bills Act, a Johnson-cosponsored bill, passed out of the Ways and Means Committee in February. Many provisions of this bill were included in the proposal. This legislation protects patients from unexpected medical bills for out-of-network services. Rather than establish a federal rate setting system, it would allow providers and insurance companies to resolve payments through arbitration.

"Our medical system will be fairer because of this package," said Johnson. "We need to continue to protect the patient from surprise medical bills. Transparency is key and that's what this package will do for both the patient and the provider. I'm encouraged after nearly two years of debate, we were able to get something done for Americans."

## Expired Driver License Extension Ends Dec. 30

Dec. 30 is the deadline for people to renew their expired South Dakota driver licenses and ID cards!

When COVID-19 temporarily shut down the state's driver license stations in early March, Gov. Kristi Noem issued an exemption delaying the renewal of driver licenses and ID cards that expired on or after March 13. That exemption ends Dec. 30.

In the past nine months, the Driver License staff has tried to reduce the backlog of renewals by having exam stations open additional days. You may also have seen or heard commercials about our "Renew 2020" campaign, letting people know how they can renew online.

If you can renew your license online we encourage you to do that. Here's how:

To apply online go to [renew2020sd.com](https://renew2020sd.com) for further information.

You may access and print instructions and an application at [renew2020sd.com](https://renew2020sd.com) to renew by mail.

The renewal fee is \$28 for a regular license and \$33 for a CDL.

The mailing address is Driver Licensing Program, 118 W. Capitol Ave., Pierre SD 57501.

To apply by mail, contact our office by email at [dpsdl@state.sd.us](mailto:dpsdl@state.sd.us) (preferred method) or call us at 605-773-6883 for a renewal by mail packet.

If you must renew in person, you must make an appointment in advance at <https://dps.sd.gov>. The appointment times are filling fast so please do that as soon as possible.

Please do NOT delay renewing your license or ID. If you do not have either one renewed by Dec. 30, you could be cited by law enforcement for driving with an expired license.

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## The following was posted on Erin Sternhagen's Facebook Page

As a physician, I cannot stress enough the importance of vaccination to prevent illness. In the era of COVID-19, vaccines have the potential to prevent hundreds of thousands of deaths. I could not be more grateful to work at a hospital that had early access to the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, and can now feel safe working with my sickest patients in the ICU and general medicine floors.

When the COVID-19 vaccine becomes available to the general public, I encourage everyone to get vaccinated. You may have already had COVID-19 or may not be personally scared of the illness, but please think of others who may not be so fortunate. If not for you, please get vaccinated for those around you: for your grandmother with COPD, your neighbor with autoimmune disease, or your friend who is 8 months pregnant.

We can reverse the course of this pandemic and stop even more deaths from occurring if we just work together to stay safe. Please contact me if you have any questions about the vaccine or head to the CDC website for more information.



## FDA Authorized COVID-19 Vaccine Arrives in South Dakota Healthcare Systems to Begin Phase I of Vaccination Plan

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health is announcing that all three major healthcare networks in our state: Avera, Monument and Sanford, have received their first batch of the FDA authorized, Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. Additionally, Prairie Lakes in Watertown and Mobridge also received vaccine doses.

The arrival of the vaccine marks a significant leap forward in the fight against COVID and statewide vaccine administration will be carried out in accordance to South Dakota's vaccination plan.

"The arrival of this life-saving vaccine is something our department has been working and preparing for months. Operation Warp Speed was essential not only in its vaccine delivery to states but in its safe manufacturing, following all health and safety protocols," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. "We look forward to working with our partners across the state to administer the vaccine in an organized and prioritized manner to all South Dakotans."

South Dakota's initial allotment of COVID-19 vaccines from the federal government included 7,800 Pfizer doses and 14,600 Moderna doses. The latter is expected to arrive in our state next week and be distributed within the healthcare systems in a similar prompt manner.

### COVID-19 VACCINE Priority Groups for Phase 1

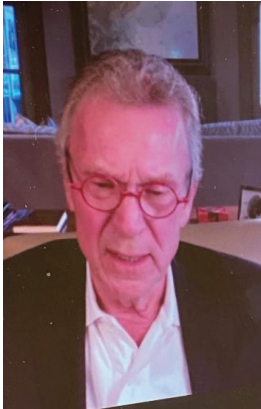
- A** Frontline Healthcare Workers (working in an emergency department, ICU, COVID unit, or general acute care) and Long-Term Care Facility Healthcare Workers
- B** Long-Term Care Residents (nursing home and assisted living)
- C** Other healthcare workers, including laboratory and clinic staff; Public Health Workers; Emergency Medical Services; Law Enforcement; Correctional Officers
- D** Persons with 2 or More Underlying Medical Conditions (cancer, chronic kidney disease, COPD); Heart Conditions, such as heart failure, coronary artery disease, or cardiomyopathies; Immunocompromised State (weakened immune system) from solid organ transplant; Obesity or Severe Obesity; Sickle Cell Disease; Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus; Teachers and Other School/College Staff; Persons Aged 65 Years and Older; Residents in Congregate Settings, Residents in Licensed Independent Living Facilities, and Residents of Licensed Group Homes; Funeral Service Workers
- E** Fire Service Personnel; Other Critical Infrastructure Workers, including water and wastewater, energy, finance, food service, food and agriculture, legal, manufacturing, shelter and housing, transportation and logistics, information technology and communications

Due to limited allocation of the vaccine, the South Dakota Department of Health will use COVID-19 infection rates and will follow recommendations from the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) to guide which counties will receive the vaccine first.

SOUTH DAKOTA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH covid.sd.gov



## Daschle Says Farmers Union Members are Change Makers



**Former Sen. Tom Daschle gives the keynote speech via Zoom for the 2020 S.D. Farmers Union Convention held Dec. 9.** (Photo courtesy of SDFU)

HURON, S.D. - Former Sen. Tom Daschle began his keynote address praising S.D. Farmers Union (SDFU) leadership and members for their efforts to make a positive difference for South Dakota's number one industry of agriculture.

"I've been around now for over 70 years, and I guess I have come to believe ...there are two kinds of people. Those who strive to make a living. And those who not only want to make a living, but also want to make a difference. ...I believe that everyone one of you fit in that latter category," said Daschle, addressing SDFU members during the virtual convention held December 9.

Daschle went on to share that throughout his long career in public service, he has always been impressed by farmers and ranchers' resilience to weather challenges.

"American farmers have faced some very difficult times. And sometimes I wonder how much Washington listens or cares."

He noted this resilience is especially apparent in recent challenges brought on by the pandemic and consolidation of the meat packing industry.

Almost as a nod to the grassroots policy discussion scheduled to follow his speech, Daschle highlighted the important role members play in enacting beneficial change.

"Whether it is advancing rural broadband, building new infrastructure, keeping rural hospitals and schools open or ensuring our farmers a fair price for the food, fiber, feed and fuel that they produce, rural America and the co-ops that serve it, deserve every bit as high a priority as those in urban and suburban communities across the country," he said. "It is up to each of us to ensure that policy makers know more about the tools that work to do that."

Daschle focused on SDFU's Inventory Management Soil Enhancement Tool (IMSET) as an example.

"I am highly impressed with this simple concept of farmers idling some land in exchange for higher price coverage under crop insurance," he said. "It is a tool that holds real potential."

IMSET is designed as a management tool for farmers to receive a price on grain commodities of beneficial financial results for improving soil health needs of farmland.

During his keynote, Daschle took a few minutes to share his thoughts on the recent announcement of Tom Vilsack to serve as Secretary of Agriculture and how once confirmed, Vilsack will be a great advocate for higher ethanol blends, like E30.

He went on to tout the clean air and health benefits of E30 – a product SDFU has long been an advocate for.

"Just this week, I heard a Nobel laureate say that climate change will make the corona virus pandemic look easy. I fear he is right," he said. "The South Dakota Farmers Union has shown extraordinary leadership in the promotion and elevation of this critical fuel for the future. The potential for higher octane, lower carbon and reduced greenhouse gas makes E30 the most compelling answer to the challenges we face in the transformation to fossil free transportation fuel."

COVID-19 came up more than once in Daschle's speech. He discussed its impact on food security, as well as the lives of South Dakotans. He shared a stunning statistic, comparing South Dakota's COVID-related deaths to Japan's. "We have lost over 1,000 people. By comparison, Japan with 130 million people, have lost a mere 1,900. But they wear masks, they socially distance and every person in Japan has access to care."

Daschle ended his comments focusing on the importance of resilience, innovation, collaboration and engagement.

"It is critical that an organization be engaged. Engaged in the public policy debates, in the regulatory decision making and, in the efforts, to bring meaningful change," he said. "Resiliency, innovation, collaboration and engagement will determine the future of this great organization."

**S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank  
Groton  
Will be closing at noon on Friday, Dec 18 for  
inventory.  
We will Reopen Saturday.**

## **Additional COVID relief funds available for small businesses and non-profits**

Governor Kristi Noem has announced up to \$345 million in additional grants for small businesses, non-profit organizations and healthcare providers dealing with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"South Dakota is in a strong position thanks to the amazing work of our small businesses and healthcare providers," said Governor Noem. "This additional relief will help ensure that our economic engines continue to thrive and our healthcare providers have the resources they need to continue the excellent care they give to our friends, family and neighbors."

Eligible small businesses and non-profit organizations may apply for up to \$195 million in grants to compensate for reductions in cash flow from September through November. Eligibility for the grant will be the same as the initial round of grants. Grantees from the first round will be eligible to apply for additional funding, and entities that have not previously applied will still be eligible as well.

Applications for the grant will be accepted starting December 14 through December 20. Additional information, including eligibility requirements and how to apply, is available at <https://covid.sd.gov/smallbusiness-healthcare-grants.aspx>.

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## December 15th COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent  
from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota:

Community Spread:

**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: +345 (91699 total) Positivity Rate: 16.0%

Total Tests: 2163 (688,929 total)

Hospitalized: +42 (5242 total). 435 currently hospitalized -6)

Avera St. Luke's: 18 COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 COVID-19 ICU Beds, 2 COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 13 COVID-19 Occupied beds, 1 COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +2 (1261 total)

Males: 1, Females: 1

60s=1, 80+=1.

Counties: Bennett-1, Pennington-1.

Recovered: +1447 (78,919 total)

Active Cases: -1104 (11,519)

Percent Recovered: 86.0%

Beadle (32) +1 positive, +37 recovered (188 active cases)

Brookings (24) +5 positive, +41 recovered (291 active cases)

Brown (44): +13 positive, +74 recovered (456 active cases)

Clark (1): +1 positive, +10 recovered (41 active cases)

Clay (11): +5 positive, +25 recovered (173 active cases)

Codington (59): +29 positive, +51 recovered (466 active cases)

Davison (50): +6 positive, +26 recovered (256 active cases)

Day (14): +13 positive, +12 recovered (114 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +2 positive, +4 recovered (56 active cases)

Faulk (10): +1 positive, +3 recovered (23 active cases)

Grant (20): +4 positive, +20 recovered (130 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +7 recovered (32 active cases)

Hughes (25): +4 positive, +32 recovered (214 active cases)

Lawrence (26): +4 positive, +36 recovered (300

active cases)

Lincoln (57): +23 positive, +84 recovered (713 active cases)

Marshall (3): +2 positive, +5 recovered (36 active cases)

McCook (21): +1 positive, +11 recovered (56 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +4 recovery (28 active case)

Minnehaha (232): +81 positive, +341 recovered (2798 active cases)

Pennington (117): +31 positive, +166 recovered (1431 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +4 recovered (27 active cases)

Roberts (23): +3 positive, +15 recovered (155 active cases)

Spink (20): +3 positive, +10 recovered (112 active cases)

Walworth (13): +3 positive, +8 recovered (109 active cases)

### NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 15:

- 7.6% rolling 14-day positivity
- 340 new positives
- 3,385 susceptible test encounters
- 277 currently hospitalized (0)
- 3,230 active cases (-362)
- 1,170 total deaths (+13)

## Thune: Senate Republicans Continue to Fight for Additional Relief Funding as First Batch of COVID-19 Vaccines are Distributed

"We can pass additional relief legislation this week. In the words of the majority leader, let's get this done."

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) today discussed the recent distribution of the first COVID-19 vaccines and celebrated that 100 million Americans are expected to be vaccinated by March 2021. Thune highlighted the significant progress that has been made, but he noted that Congress's work toward providing additional COVID-19 relief is not over. He encouraged his Democrat colleagues to join Republicans to pass a bipartisan relief bill for the American people before Christmas.

Thune's remarks (as prepared for delivery):

"Mr. President, yesterday was a hopeful day, as the first COVID vaccines in the U.S. were distributed to health care workers on the front lines of the COVID battle.

"And later this week the FDA will hold a meeting on an emergency use authorization for Moderna's COVID vaccine – meaning that we could have a second coronavirus vaccine authorized before Christmas.

"If all goes well, we expect to have 100 million Americans vaccinated by March.

"That's a pretty amazing statistic when you consider that just a year ago we didn't even know about this virus.

"And it's a tribute to the innovative power of the private sector – and the efforts of Congress and the Trump administration to expedite vaccine development.

"It's been a long, hard year, but the light at the end of the tunnel is coming.

"But while yesterday was an encouraging day, we have more work to do on the COVID front.

"First, we all need to keep following the CDC's recommendations.

"The rollout of Pfizer's vaccine is wonderful news, but cases in the U.S. are still surging.

"Until we can get a lot more people vaccinated, we need to do everything we can to slow the spread of the virus and avoid overwhelming our hospitals.

"Second, we need to pass another COVID bill here in Congress to provide additional funding for vaccines and deliver other urgently needed relief to our fellow Americans.

"Republicans, of course, have been trying to pass additional COVID legislation for months.

"And I'm encouraged that, in the past few weeks, a number of Democrats have stepped forward to work with Republicans to develop bipartisan legislation.

"Just yesterday, a bipartisan group of senators released legislation along the lines of what the majority leader has advocated – targeted relief that focuses on our most critical needs and the areas where Republicans and Democrats agree.

"This includes important COVID priorities like vaccine funding, money for schools, and help for the hardest-hit small businesses.

"Republicans' and Democrats' ideal COVID bills might look very different, but there are a number of things that all of us agree need to be addressed.

"And we should – we must – pass legislation to take care of those priorities.

"I'm thinking about vaccine distribution especially.

"We've been blessed with not one but two viable vaccines, with more on the horizon.

"We can't afford to undermine this success by failing to provide the resources necessary for widespread distribution.

"Mr. President, the ball is in the Senate Democrat leader and Speaker Pelosi's court.

"We have bipartisan support for targeted relief to address our most critical priorities.

"The Democrat leader in the House noted on Sunday that, and I quote, "I think we need to get an agreement, and we need to get this bill passed. ... [N]obody ever gets everything they want. And ... it's

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critically important that we deal with these very, very important objectives even if we don't get on either side everything we want."

"Meanwhile, the Democrat whip on the Senate side was part of the bipartisan group that has suggested dropping the most controversial aspects and focusing on what we agree on.

"So the answer really lies with Speaker Pelosi and the Democrat leader here in the Senate.

"Are they going to heed the bipartisan calls to deliver critical coronavirus funding?

"Or are they going to continue to block relief for Americans?

"Mr. President, around our country, Americans are struggling under the worst wave of the virus to date.

"They need more help – and, above all, they need the vaccinations that will help bring this pandemic to an end.

"We can pass additional relief legislation this week.

"To quote the majority leader, let's get this done."

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	391	345	741	7	Substantial	7.89%
Beadle	2426	2205	4933	32	Substantial	9.56%
Bennett	342	305	1063	6	Substantial	4.46%
Bon Homme	1427	1333	1811	21	Substantial	22.50%
Brookings	2735	2420	9383	24	Substantial	11.67%
Brown	4092	3592	10695	44	Substantial	17.62%
Brule	615	556	1647	5	Substantial	26.00%
Buffalo	401	371	839	10	Substantial	26.19%
Butte	811	715	2735	15	Substantial	20.54%
Campbell	109	104	202	1	Minimal	6.67%
Charles Mix	1036	889	3435	10	Substantial	27.42%
Clark	292	250	821	1	Substantial	6.25%
Clay	1513	1329	4339	11	Substantial	17.42%
Codington	3168	2644	7965	59	Substantial	21.28%
Corson	433	391	872	5	Substantial	22.64%
Custer	632	537	2294	8	Substantial	21.66%
Davison	2589	2282	5510	51	Substantial	13.88%
Day	481	353	1455	14	Substantial	17.95%
Deuel	376	307	947	5	Substantial	18.60%
Dewey	1170	884	3379	7	Substantial	30.23%
Douglas	343	291	794	6	Substantial	18.09%
Edmunds	306	247	871	3	Substantial	16.81%
Fall River	403	351	2201	10	Substantial	17.76%
Faulk	302	269	581	10	Substantial	23.08%
Grant	776	626	1848	20	Substantial	22.16%
Gregory	463	408	1045	24	Substantial	12.50%
Haakon	199	154	460	3	Substantial	21.43%
Hamlin	559	463	1452	28	Substantial	9.26%
Hand	302	283	683	2	Moderate	11.54%
Hanson	291	256	565	3	Substantial	16.28%
Harding	86	69	147	0	Moderate	21.43%
Hughes	1865	1626	5292	25	Substantial	12.33%
Hutchinson	657	556	1939	14	Substantial	23.60%

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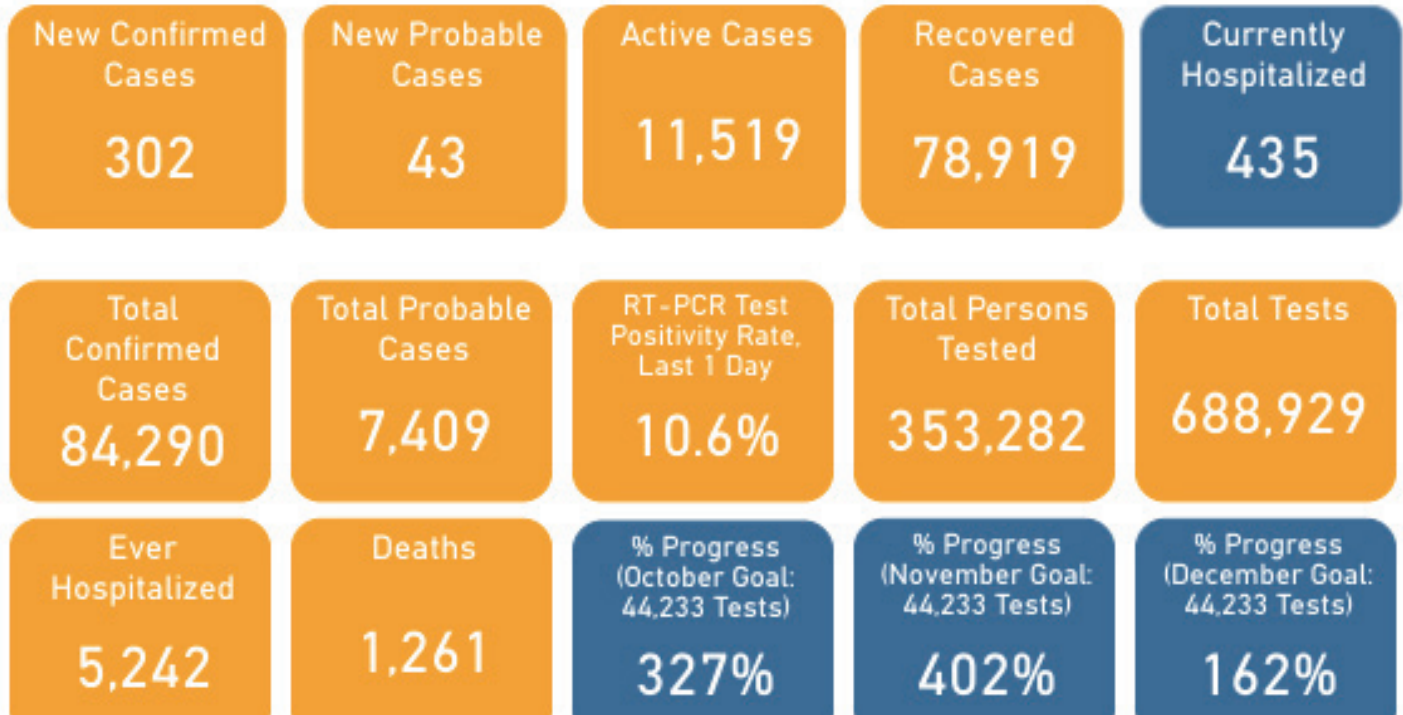
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Hyde	128	118	348	0	Minimal	12.50%
Jackson	252	194	841	8	Substantial	44.29%
Jerauld	252	223	474	15	Moderate	23.81%
Jones	63	62	177	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	488	425	1349	13	Substantial	12.66%
Lake	949	841	2662	12	Substantial	18.24%
Lawrence	2342	2016	7314	26	Substantial	17.95%
Lincoln	6155	5344	16487	57	Substantial	22.18%
Lyman	498	448	1651	9	Substantial	10.84%
Marshall	231	192	956	3	Substantial	24.68%
McCook	635	558	1349	21	Substantial	24.29%
McPherson	163	134	484	1	Moderate	3.97%
Meade	2042	1734	6437	20	Substantial	21.25%
Mellette	209	177	640	1	Substantial	21.43%
Miner	214	186	481	6	Substantial	4.35%
Minnehaha	23269	20229	64464	232	Substantial	19.39%
Moody	495	411	1528	13	Substantial	33.73%
Oglala Lakota	1809	1556	6106	31	Substantial	15.11%
Pennington	10093	8545	32317	117	Substantial	23.58%
Perkins	243	183	624	3	Substantial	15.56%
Potter	291	265	688	2	Substantial	13.33%
Roberts	869	691	3653	23	Substantial	25.94%
Sanborn	297	256	580	3	Substantial	12.12%
Spink	658	526	1805	20	Substantial	18.48%
Stanley	249	226	727	2	Moderate	12.20%
Sully	102	90	233	3	Moderate	0.00%
Todd	1099	972	3706	17	Substantial	17.28%
Tripp	589	505	1287	10	Substantial	15.49%
Turner	895	756	2281	47	Substantial	17.59%
Union	1440	1217	5120	25	Substantial	18.62%
Walworth	578	456	1571	13	Substantial	26.80%
Yankton	2241	1791	7824	17	Substantial	22.83%
Ziebach	270	181	604	7	Substantial	33.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1871	0		

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## South Dakota



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

Age Range	# of Cases	# of Deaths
0-9 years	3322	0
10-19 years	10052	0
20-29 years	16967	3
30-39 years	15224	12
40-49 years	13089	21
50-59 years	13035	63
60-69 years	10320	161
70-79 years	5416	264
80+ years	4274	737

### SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths
Female	47943	617
Male	43756	644



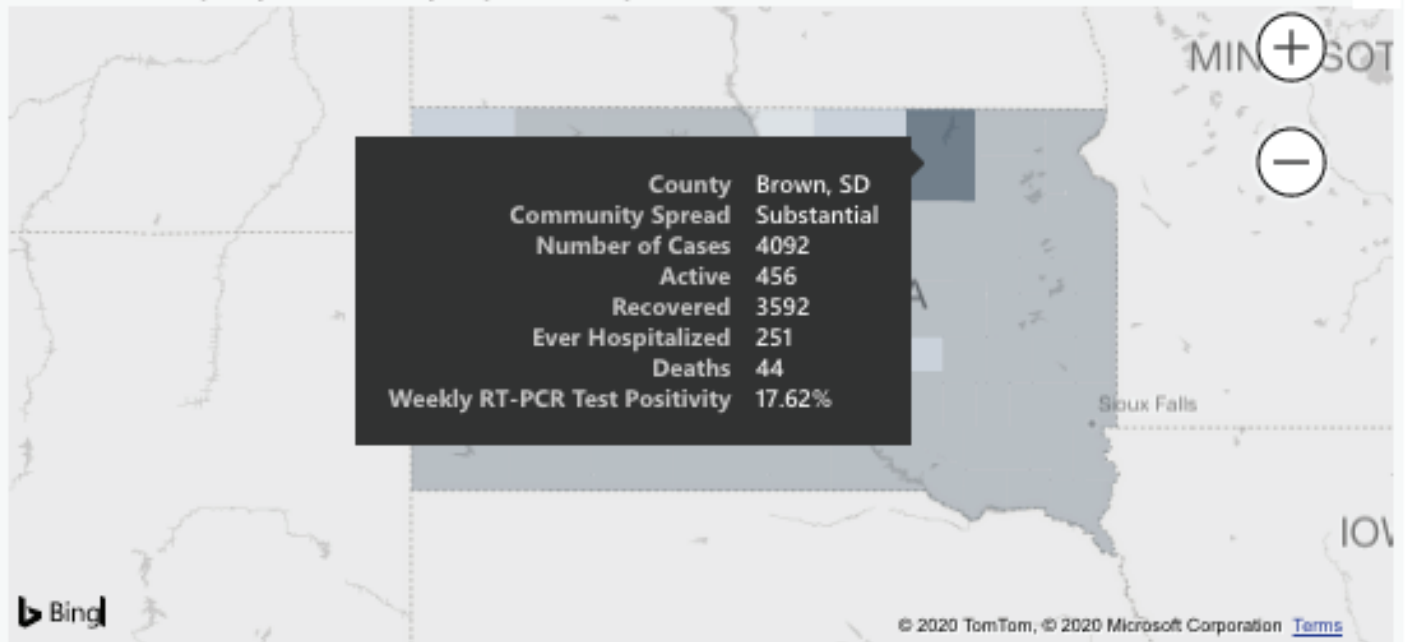
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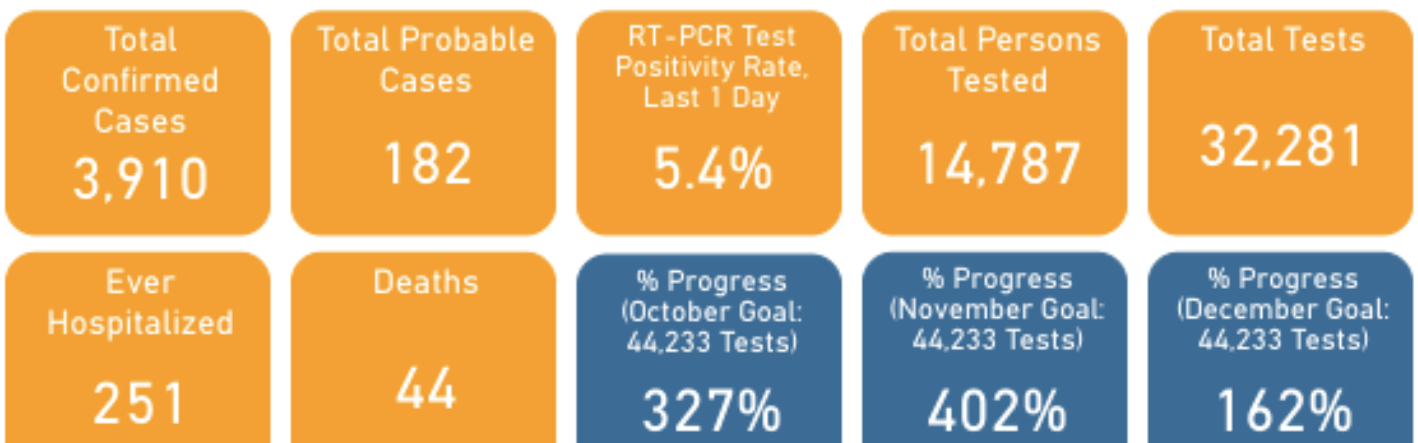
## Brown County



### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



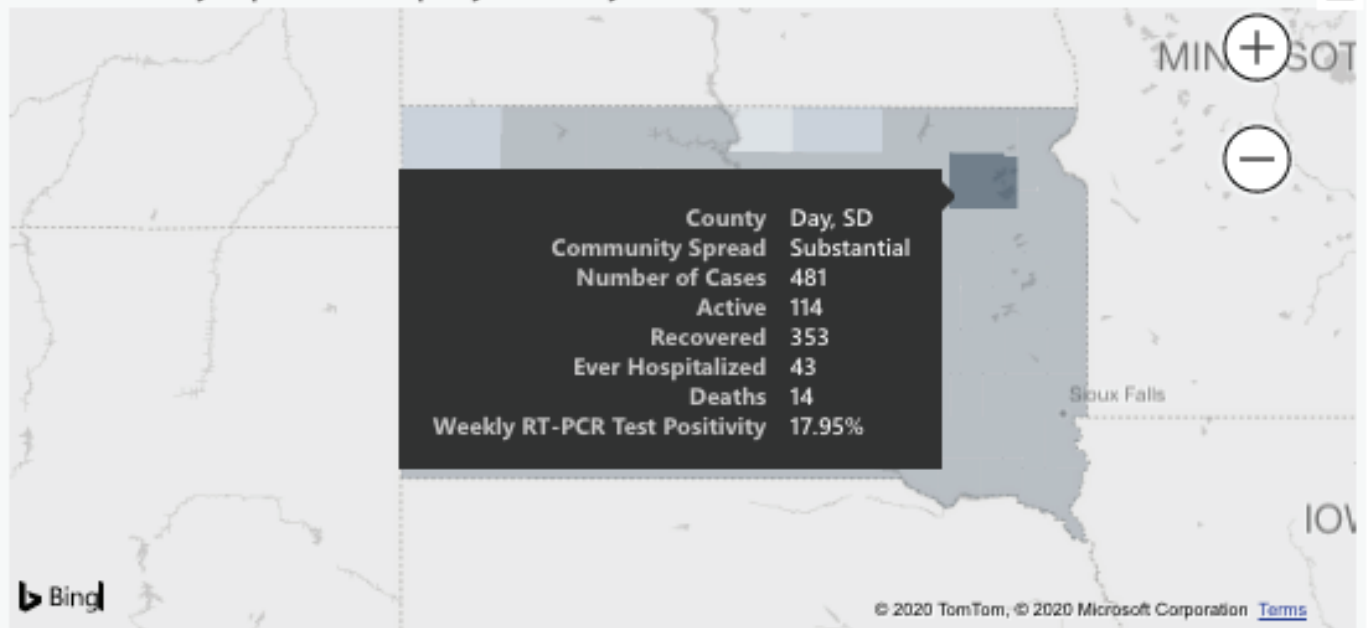
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## Day County

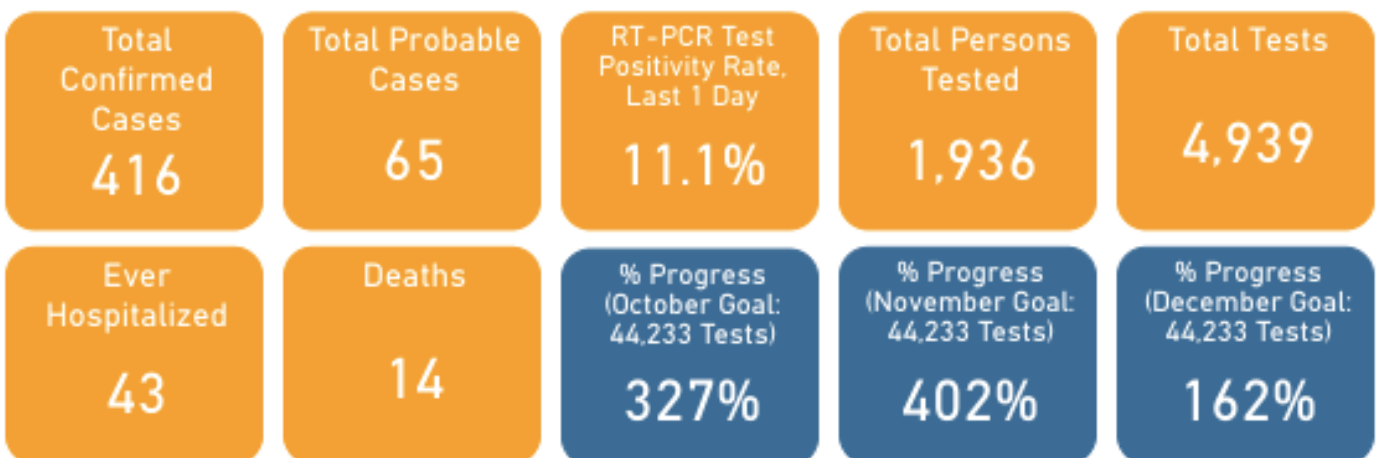


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

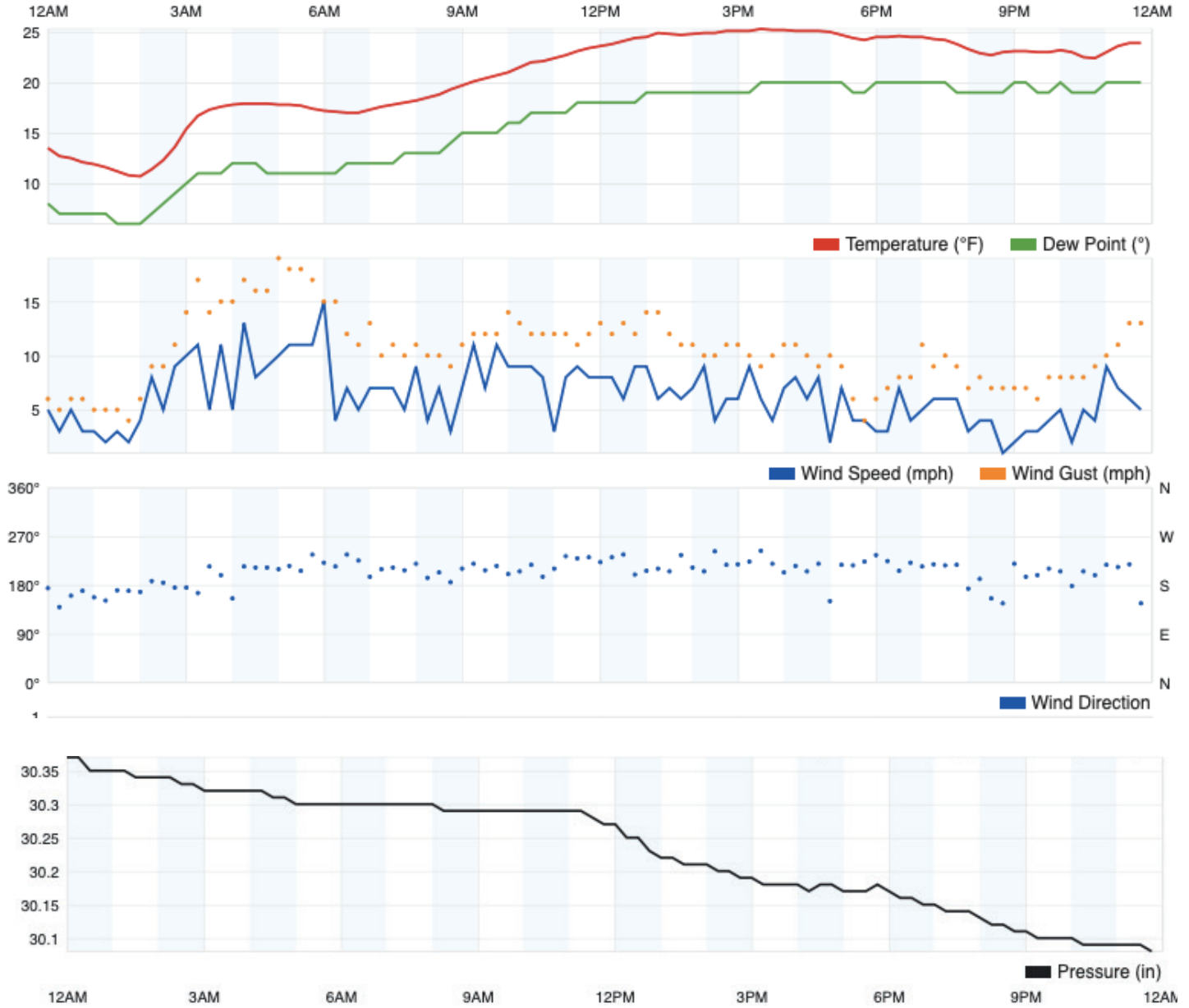
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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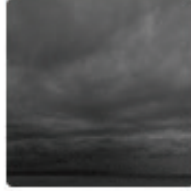

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



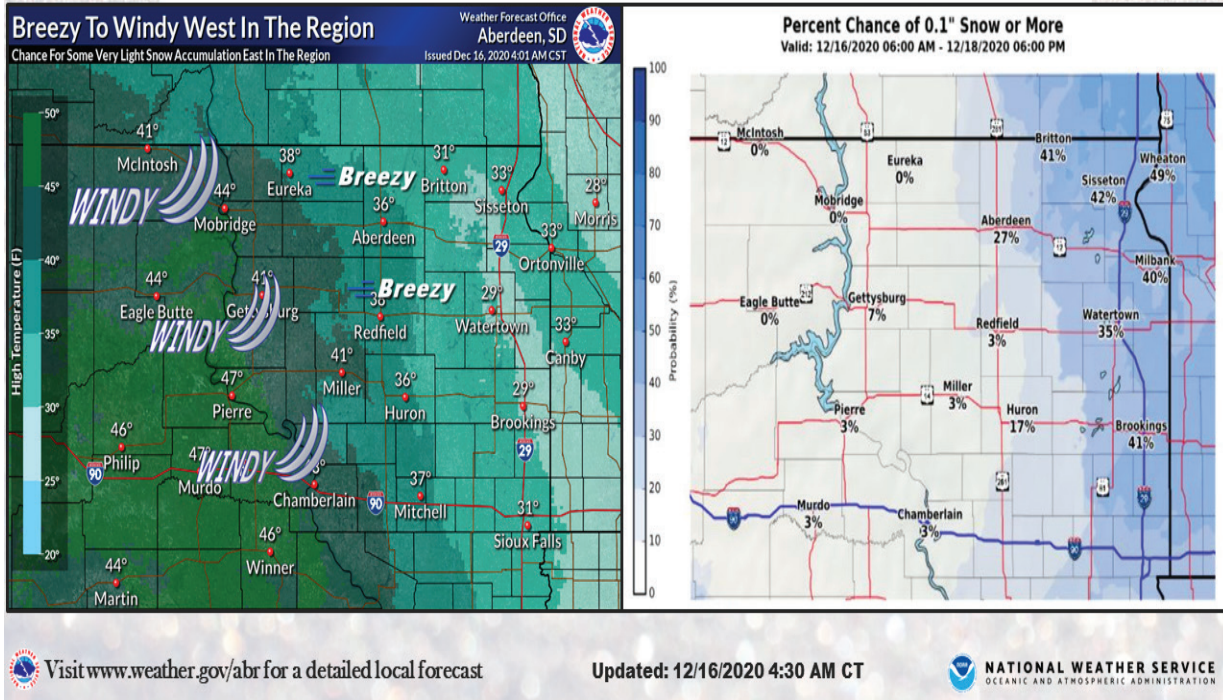
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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 35 °F	Low: 17 °F	High: 35 °F	Low: 25 °F	High: 36 °F

## Warmer And Breezy

-Very Light Snow Possible, Again, Today  
-Mainly Over Far Northeast South Dakota And West Central Minnesota



The advertised warming trend will continue today. Also, by this afternoon, breezy to windy northwest winds will be developing. Finally, similar to yesterday, there could be some small fine flakes of snow flying today, mainly east of the James River valley region of northeast South Dakota, extending over into west central Minnesota. The latest probabilistic guidance places this snow potential at generally a trace to perhaps a couple tenths of an inch of snow accumulation across said area, including the Interstate 29 corridor and U S Highways 12 and 212.

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## Today in Weather History

December 16, 1967: With temperatures in the upper 20s, heavy freezing rain fell in west central and southwest Minnesota at night on the 16th, causing widespread ice accumulations on all exposed surfaces, and power and telephone poles and lines went down over a vast region. Some places were without power and phone service for three to four days. This storm was classified as the most severe ice storm in the past 20 years in some areas. Reports were received of turkeys and other poultry dying due to the cold in the countryside. 20 to 30 cars were in the ditch on one slick stretch of road in Rock County. Further west, throughout eastern South Dakota, freezing rain for most of the day formed ice from 3/8 to 3/4 inch on exposed surfaces. Extensive damage was caused to utility lines. All roads became dangerous for traveling, and one death was directly linked to the ice storm. The ice cut off a regular water supply, causing one person to attempt to get water from a cistern. She slipped on the ice into the cistern. Three deaths were indirectly related to the ice storm; two due to automobile accidents, and one due to a heart attack.

December 16, 2000: Northwest winds of 30 to 50 mph, with gusts to 60 mph, combined with newly fallen snow and arctic air to bring widespread blizzard conditions and extreme wind chills as low as 70 below zero to west central Minnesota and much of South Dakota from late on the 15th through the 16th. Events were canceled, travel was shut down, and some motorists were stranded. Both US Highway 12 and Interstate 29 in South Dakota were closed throughout the day. As an indirect result of the low visibility, a semi-truck hit and totaled a pickup truck in the snow just west of Clark.

December 16, 1811: An estimated Magnitude 7.5 earthquake struck the Mississippi Valley near the town of New Madrid in Missouri at 2:15 am local time. People were awakened by the shaking in New York City, Washington D.C., and Charleston, South Carolina. The ground motions were described as most alarming and frightening in places like Nashville, Tennessee, and Louisville, Kentucky. In the epicentral area, the ground surface was described as in great convulsion with sand and water ejected tens of feet into the air.

1835 - New England experienced one of their coldest days of record. At noon on that bitterly cold Wednesday the mercury stood at four degrees below at Boston, 15 degrees below at Norfolk CT, and 17 degrees below at Hanover NH. The temperature at Boston was 12 degrees below zero by sunset. Gale force winds accompanied the severe cold, and that night a great New York City fire destroyed much of the financial district. (David Ludlum)

1917 - An ice jam closed the Ohio River between Warsaw, KY, and Rising Sun, IN. The thirty foot high ice jam held for 58 days, and backed up the river a distance of 100 miles. (David Ludlum)

December 16, 1941: In 1941, only two women were employed by the Weather Bureau. By 1945, more than 900 women are employed by the Weather Bureau as observers and forecasters, as a result of filling positions of men during World War II. Eleven days after Pearl Harbor, the Army requested that all weather broadcasts be discontinued. The fear was that the enemy would use this information to plan an attack on the United States.

1987 - A Pacific storm battered the coast of California with rain and high winds, and dumped heavy snow on the mountains of California. Winds along the coast gusted to 70 mph at Point Arguello, and winds in the Tehachapi Mountains of southern California gusted to 100 mph at Wheeler Ridge. Snowfall totals ranged up to 24 inches at Mammoth Mountain. Snow fell for two minutes at Malibu Beach, and Disneyland was closed due to the weather for only the second time in twenty-four years. A winter storm which began in the Southern Rockies four days earlier finished its course producing snow and high winds in New England. Snowfall totals ranged up to 19 inches at Blanchard ME. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Fairbanks, AK, reported freezing rain and record warm temperatures. The afternoon high of 41 degrees was 43 degrees above normal. Snow and high winds continued to plague the mountains of southern California. Mount Wilson CA reported two inches of rain in six hours during the early morning, and a storm total of more than 3.50 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

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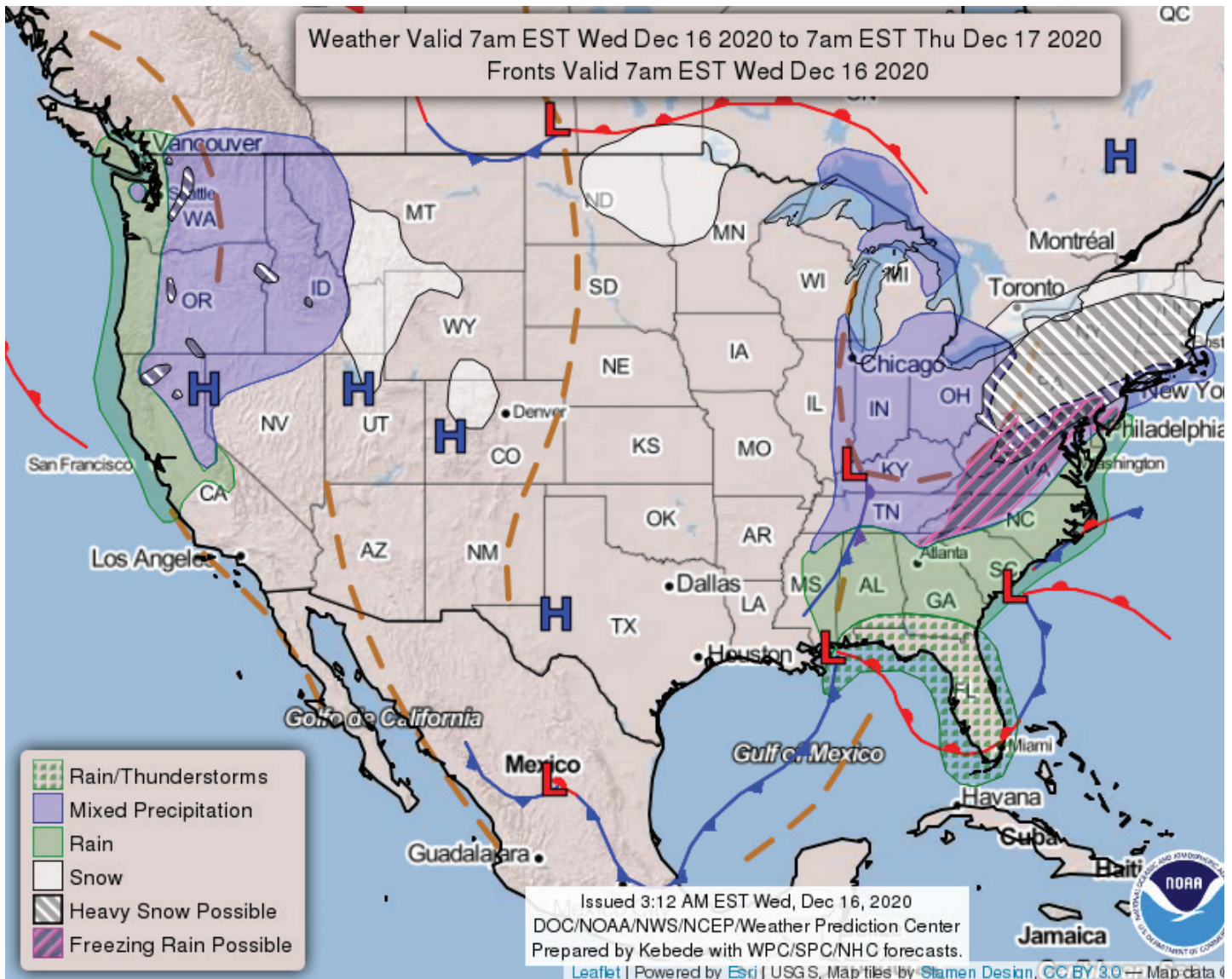
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 25 °F at 2:51 PM**  
**Low Temp: 10 °F at 1:55 AM**  
**Wind: 19 mph at 3:20 AM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 62° in 1962**  
**Record Low: -28° in 1951**  
**Average High: 25°F**  
**Average Low: 5°F**  
**Average Precip in Dec.: 0.25**  
**Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 21.45**  
**Precip Year to Date: 16.52**  
**Sunset Tonight: 4:51 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09 a.m.**



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## GIFTS

Christmas gifts generate great excitement and interest. After the presents are wrapped and placed under the tree, many people spend countless hours trying to figure out what might be on the inside. Sometimes the gifts are carefully shaken or lifted to see if the weight or size might give an indication about what the contents might be.

But when God gave us the first Christmas gift, its value was obvious. It was a gift of love that could not be measured or found outside of Him. It was a gift of mercy that only He could provide. And, it was a gift of grace that only God could give us through His Son.

God's love is ultimately expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His love is the source of His mercy and grace, and it is because of His love that we have mercy and grace. It was because of His love for us that He gave His one and only Son so that whoever believes in Him will find His mercy and enjoy His grace and be with Him forever in eternity.

John says something very significant about this love. "If God loved us," he says, "we ought to love one another." His love does not end with our salvation and then begins with our obligation to share His love with others. It begins a pattern of self-sacrificing love that Christians must live by sharing His mercy and grace with others.

Prayer: Lord, we often forget how responsible we are to share Your gifts of love, mercy, and salvation with others. Give us no peace until we share Your gifts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: 1 John 4:11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

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## News from the Associated Press

### SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

01-10-18-20-46, Mega Ball: 15, Megaplier: 2

(one, ten, eighteen, twenty, forty-six; Mega Ball: fifteen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$291 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$287 million

### Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Baltic 67, Parker 62

Belle Fourche 51, Sturgis Brown 43

Britton-Hecla 42, Wilmot 35

Burke 53, North Central, Neb. 40

Canton 54, Garretson 44

Chamberlain 47, Gregory 40

Corsica/Stickney 64, Avon 30

Dakota Valley 66, Beresford 35

DeSmet 57, Clark/Willow Lake 33

Dell Rapids St. Mary 67, Mitchell Christian 26

Elkton-Lake Benton 49, Castlewood 47

Ethan 85, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 55

Faith 67, Philip 21

Flandreau 68, Hamlin 46

Freeman Academy/Marion 63, Centerville 46

Gayville-Volin 50, Wausa, Neb. 16

Hanson 84, McCook Central/Montrose 51

Harrisburg 67, Brookings 32

Howard 54, Chester 40

Ipswich 46, North Central Co-Op 26

Lead-Deadwood 64, Newell 41

Lower Brule 72, Bennett County 31

Lyman 63, Sully Buttes 33

Mitchell 57, Sioux Falls Lincoln 45

Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 73, Alcester-Hudson 55

Parkston 59, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 21

Potter County 68, Miller 30

Rapid City Christian 90, Wall 36

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 45, Hitchcock-Tulare 34

Sisseton 66, Milbank 54

St. Thomas More 49, Douglas 42

Timber Lake 63, Herreid/Selby Area 58

Tri-Valley 56, Madison 41



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Viborg-Hurley 69, Bridgewater-Emery 33  
Wagner 65, Irene-Wakonda 50  
Warner 57, Aberdeen Christian 56  
Waubay/Summit 77, Webster 47  
West Central 68, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 55  
Winner 68, Stanley County 56  
Wolsey-Wessington 65, Lake Preston 28  
GIRLS BASKETBALL=  
Aberdeen Roncalli 57, Mobridge-Pollock 24  
Alcester-Hudson 54, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 35  
Baltic 46, Parker 42  
Belle Fourche 39, Sturgis Brown 24  
Castlewood 49, Elkton-Lake Benton 36  
Colman-Egan 46, Canistota 27  
Corsica/Stickney 65, Avon 48  
Dakota Valley 62, Beresford 38  
Dell Rapids St. Mary 50, Mitchell Christian 32  
Deubrook 56, Deuel 22  
Ethan 67, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 37  
Faulkton 61, Sunshine Bible Academy 4  
Florence/Henry 57, Estelline/Hendricks 18  
Garretson 70, Canton 54  
Hamlin 46, Flandreau 45  
Harrisburg 63, Brookings 29  
Herreid/Selby Area 58, Timber Lake 51, OT  
Highmore-Harrold 47, James Valley Christian 38  
Howard 65, Chester 38  
Huron 72, Pierre 71  
Ipswich 64, North Central Co-Op 33  
Irene-Wakonda 57, Wagner 45  
Iroquois 48, Wessington Springs 47  
Jones County 39, Kadoka Area 35  
Kimball/White Lake 32, Platte-Geddes 31  
Lemmon 40, Dupree 39  
Lower Brule 58, Bennett County 34  
McCook Central/Montrose 52, Freeman 44  
Menno 56, Scotland 40  
Miller 37, Potter County 31  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 57, West Central 45  
Newell 41, Lead-Deadwood 23  
North Central, Neb. 47, Burke 14  
Parkston 59, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 21  
Rapid City Christian 59, Douglas 49  
Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 43, Hitchcock-Tulare 42  
Sioux Falls Christian 65, Dell Rapids 29  
Sioux Falls Washington 67, Sioux Falls Lincoln 34  
Sisseton 51, Milbank 31  
Sully Buttes 52, Lyman 30  
Tri-Valley 65, Madison 36  
Viborg-Hurley 63, Bridgewater-Emery 50

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Warner 45, Aberdeen Christian 36  
Wausa, Neb. 56, Gayville-Volin 48  
Waverly-South Shore 65, Clark/Willow Lake 51  
Wilmot 51, Britton-Hecla 20  
Winner 72, Stanley County 24

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

## Group facing charges for attempt at Rapid City homeless camp

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say six people accused of setting up a Rapid City homeless camp without the proper requirements and obstructing law enforcement are facing city and state charges.

Daniel Yazzie, Mark Tilsen Jr., Hermus Bettelyoun, James Pipe On Head, Mary Frooman and Carrie Middleton were all charged by the Pennington County State's Attorney Office with obstructing police officers. Frooman and Middleton were also charged with resisting arrest.

All six were later charged by the Rapid City Attorney's Office with breaking three Rapid City codes related to trespassing and failing to obtain the needed permits in flood plain zones, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The six defendants, all or most of whom are regular volunteers at the camp, declined to comment during a court hearing on Tuesday.

Supporters say they are being criminalized for helping people. They argue that law enforcement and the courts don't have jurisdiction since the group was on land that was stolen by the U.S. government after being promised to the Lakota people in now-broken treaties.

The arrests and charges stem from an Oct. 16 Lakota-led attempt to create the Camp Mniluzahan winter homeless camp on Rapid City-owned land.

The six defendants declined to comment during a court hearing on Tuesday.

## Civil Air Patrol helps distribute vaccine in South Dakota

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Wing of the Civil Air Patrol is assisting the state Department of Health in delivering the first allocation of coronavirus vaccines.

The Civil Air Patrol said it's flying the Pfizer vaccine to smaller communities in South Dakota with its fleet of single-engine Cessna aircraft, flown by its volunteer pilots and crews. Other volunteer members will assist with mission planning and logistical support, the patrol said.

"We are proud that the State of South Dakota asked us to help them with this life-saving mission," said Col. Nick Gengler, SDWG commander. "Since the early days of World War II, the South Dakota Civil Air Patrol has helped the state and nation with missions important to our safety and security."

The patrol has planes and air crews in Sioux Falls, Pierre, Rapid City, and Spearfish, Pierre, and Brookings. The wing can deploy its six Cessna aircraft and its vans where needed to assist in emergency response and other support to local, state, tribal, and federal agencies.

The South Dakota patrol has more than 400 members in units in Sioux Falls, Tea, Brookings, Mitchell, Miller, Pierre, Rapid City, Spearfish, and Custer.

The Civil Air Patrol is the official auxiliary of the U.S. Air Force.

South Dakota health officials on Tuesday reported 345 new COVID-19 cases, the lowest number since Oct. 27. The number of confirmed cases since the start of pandemic stands at 91,699. Two deaths were reported in the last day, lifting the total to 1,261.

## Man facing numerous charges in Hughes County shooting

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say a man has been arrested in connection with the Monday morning shooting of a 21-year-old man in rural Hughes County.

The Hughes County Sheriff's Office said Juan Pinela, 19, is facing numerous charges, including aggravated

assault, reckless discharge of a firearm and ingestion of a controlled substance.

Deputies say Pineda shot the victim in the chest. Authorities arrested Pinela two hours later, after he crashed his vehicle.

The victim was airlifted to a Sioux Falls hospital. His condition is not known.

## Germany enters harder lockdown as virus deaths hit new high

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany reported a record level of coronavirus deaths as it entered a harder lockdown Wednesday, closing shops and schools to try to bring down stubbornly high new daily infections.

The country recorded 179.8 virus deaths per 100,000 residents over the last seven days, a new high and significantly more than the 149 per 100,000 reported a week ago by the Robert Koch Institute, the country's disease control center.

It also blew past its previous daily death toll, with Germany's 16 states reporting that 952 more people had died of the virus, the institute said. That was far greater than the previous daily record set Friday of 598 deaths, although included two days of figures from the hard-hit eastern state of Saxony, which did not report Tuesday. It brought the country's overall pandemic death toll to 23,427.

Faced with exponentially increasing cases in October, Germany implemented a "lockdown light" at the start of November, which closed bars and restaurants but left shops open. The measures succeeded in leveling off new daily infections but didn't bring them down, prompting the new stricter restrictions.

In addition to closing shops and moving children to remote learning for the few days before the Christmas holidays, private gatherings are being limited to two households with a maximum of five people, among other things.

Grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations, banks and other businesses providing services deemed essential — including Christmas tree vendors — can remain open.

In Saxony, where the virus is spreading most rapidly in Germany at the moment, hospitals are filling up. The state's governor said more drastic restrictions might be necessary, calling it "pure poison" when too many people were still going out and about.

The restrictions are expected last until at least Jan. 10 but enjoy wide support, with the latest polls showing more than 80% of Germans approve of the lockdown measures or think they should be stricter.

"This year, I don't think Christmas is that important, in the face of the facts we have in society right now," said Stella Kretschmer, who was picking up a prescription in the western city of Cologne.

The 27-year-old student said she was in favor of shops being closed down.

"For me, consumption is not the most important thing," she said, adding, however, that she does "feel sorry for the people who ... have to fear for their jobs."

Germany was widely praised for slowing the spread of its outbreak in the spring, but as people grew lax with distancing and mask rules over the summer the numbers of cases started to climb again.

While daily new cases peaked in March at about 6,000, they are now more than four times that level, with 27,728 new cases reported Wednesday by the Robert Koch Institute.

German officials have pressed the European Union's regulatory agency hard to speed up its approval of a coronavirus vaccine, and the European Medicines Agency has scheduled a meeting Monday on that. With vaccinations expected to start before year's end, German officials have urged people to stay patient and respect the regulations over the holidays.

Health Minister Jens Spahn said Germany was ready and could begin vaccinations within two to four days of the EMA's approval.

"By summer, we'll be able to return to normal, step by step," he said Wednesday on RTL television.

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

## China prepares for return of lunar probe with moon samples

BEIJING (AP) — Chinese ground crews are standing by for the return of a lunar probe bringing back the first fresh samples of rock and debris from the moon in more than 40 years.

The Chang'e probe is expected to land in the Siziwang district of the vast Inner Mongolia region late Wednesday or early Thursday. It fired its engines early Wednesday to put it on course before the orbiter separates from the return vehicle, with all systems functioning as expected, the China National Space Administration said.

Recovery of the return vehicle will be complicated by its small size, darkness and heavy snow, state media reported. Plans call for it to perform an initial bounce off the Earth's atmosphere to reduce its speed before passing through and floating down on parachutes, making it difficult to precisely calculate where it will land, the official Xinhua News Agency quoted Bian Hancheng, a leader of the recovery crew, as saying.

State broadcaster CCTV showed four military helicopters standing by Wednesday morning at a base on the snow-covered grasslands. Crews in vehicles on the ground will also seek to hone in on signals. While sprawling in size, the area is relatively familiar because of its use as a landing site for China's Shenzhou crewed spaceships.

Chang'e 5 set down on the moon on Dec. 1 and collected about 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) of samples by scooping them from the surface, and by drilling 2 meters (about 6 feet) into the moon's crust. The samples were deposited in a sealed container that was carried back to the return module by an ascent vehicle.

Flying a Chinese flag, the lander ceased functioning soon after it was used as a launching pad for the ascender, which was ejected from the orbiter after transferring the samples and came to rest on the moon's surface.

The spacecraft's return will mark the first time scientists have obtained fresh samples of lunar rocks since the former Soviet Union's Luna 24 robot probe in 1976.

Chang'e 5 blasted off from a launch base in China's southern island province of Hainan on Nov. 23 on a mission expected to last 23 days.

It marks China's third successful lunar landing but the only one to lift off again from the moon. Its predecessor, Chang'e 4, became the first probe to land on the moon's little-explored far side and continues to send back data on conditions that could affect a future extended stay by humans on the moon.

The moon has been a particular focus of the Chinese space program, which says it plans to land humans there and possibly construct a permanent base. No timeline or other details have been announced.

China also has joined the effort to explore Mars. In July, it launched the Tianwen 1 probe, which was carrying a lander and a robot rover to search for water.

China's space program has proceeded more cautiously than the U.S.-Soviet space race of the 1960s, which was marked by fatalities and launch failures.

In 2003, China became the third country to send an astronaut into orbit on its own after the Soviet Union and the United States.

The latest flight includes collaboration with the European Space Agency, which is helping to monitor the mission. Amid concerns over the Chinese space program's secrecy and close military connections, the U.S. forbids cooperation between NASA and the CNSA unless Congress gives its approval. That has prevented China from taking part in the International Space Station, something it has sought to compensate for with the launching of an experimental space station and plans to complete a permanent orbiting outpost within the next two years.

The rocks and debris brought back by Chang'e 5 are thought to be billions of years younger than those obtained by the U.S. and former Soviet Union, offering new insights into the history of the moon and other bodies in the solar system.

They come from a part of the moon known as the Oceanus Procellarum, or Ocean of Storms, near a site called the Mons Rumker that was believed to have been volcanic in ancient times.

As with the 382 kilograms (842 pounds) of lunar samples brought back by U.S. astronauts from 1969 to 1972, they will be analyzed for age and composition and likely shared with other countries.

This story has been corrected to show that the mission is the first to return moon rocks in more than 40 years, instead of 45.

## UK still plans to ease restrictions on holiday gatherings

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Britain's easing of restrictions for family gatherings over Christmas looks like it's still on despite a sharp spike in new coronavirus infections that's raised fears of another wave of cases and deaths in the new year.

Britain's communities secretary, Robert Jenrick, said further discussions will take place on Wednesday between leaders from the four nations of the U.K. about the planned relaxation. However, he gave no indication that a change would be announced, beyond urging people to think harder about their holiday plans.

"It could be counterproductive to produce overly restrictive rules rather than providing very clear and sober guidance and ask people to think carefully and come to their informed judgment," he told BBC radio.

Criticism of the planned five-day easing of restrictions, which would allow three households to form a holiday bubble, have ratcheted higher in recent days. With new infections rising in many places, concerns are growing that the relaxation will only escalate infections and deaths and put too much pressure on the already-stressed National Health Service.

Michael Gove, a senior member of Britain's Conservative government, which sets public health policy for England, has met with leaders from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland on the U.K.'s Christmas plans, and the group will meet again Wednesday. They agreed last month to allow a maximum of three households to mix between Dec. 23 and Dec. 27, regardless of what local restrictions are in place.

On Wednesday, London and nearby areas entered the highest level of local restrictions in England — Tier 3 — in which pubs and restaurants had to close again apart from takeout, and more curbs were placed on different households meeting up. Other areas in England, including the cities of Manchester and Birmingham, are finding out later Wednesday whether they will be moved down to Tier 2 restrictions.

Jenrick said the rollout of the coronavirus vaccine developed by America's Pfizer and the German company BioNTech had changed the narrative since the Christmas bubble decision was made. The U.K. on Dec. 8 became the first country in the world to use the vaccine, which has a high efficacy rate of around 95%.

"It's given hope that early in the new year, if not before, those people can be vaccinated. So why not wait a few weeks or months to get family together when you can do so safely in 2021?" he said.

Britain's new vaccines minister, Nadhim Zahawi, said Wednesday that 137,897 people had received a vaccination shot since inoculations began. All those people must return in three weeks for a follow-up shot.

"A really good start to the vaccination program," he said in a tweet.

The government, which is providing the vaccine free of charge mainly at hospitals so far, is first targeting nursing home workers and elderly people over 80. Nursing home residents are now being vaccinated as well after issues relating to the transportation of the vaccine, which needs to be kept at super-cold temperatures, were addressed.

Despite the update, questions remain over how many people can be inoculated on any given day, and what proportion of people being offered the vaccine are agreeing to get a shot.

To date, 800,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccine are known to be in the U.K. and 5 million more are expected to arrive this year, half of the original expectation.

Other vaccines from American biotechnology firm Moderna and one developed by the University of Oxford and British pharmaceutical firm AstraZeneca are currently being assessed by British regulators.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

## Turning the page? Republicans acknowledge Biden's victory

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By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than a month after the election, top Republicans finally acknowledged Joe Biden as the next U.S. president, a collapse in GOP resistance to the millions of voters who decisively chose the Democrat. Foreign leaders joined the parade, too, including Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Speaking on Tuesday from the floor of the U.S. Senate where Biden spent 36 years of his career, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell congratulated his former colleague as president-elect. The two men spoke later in the day.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, meanwhile, was to meet with his likely successor in the new administration, Antony Blinken. And GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, one of President Donald Trump's closest allies, said he'd spoken with some of Biden's Cabinet picks.

A similar shift unfolded in capitals across the world, where leaders including Russia's Putin and Mexico's Andrés Manuel López Obrador acknowledged Biden's win.

The moves came a day after electors nationwide formally cast votes affirming Biden's victory in last month's presidential election. And while that clears a more stable path for Biden to assume the presidency, it does little to stop Trump from continuing to try to undermine confidence in the results with baseless allegations that have been rejected by judges across the political spectrum.

As Republicans began discussing a Biden presidency more openly on Tuesday, Trump still pledged to press forward with almost nonexistent legal options.

"Tremendous evidence pouring in on voter fraud. There has never been anything like this in our Country!" Trump tweeted just as members of his party were publicly recognizing Biden's victory.

The growing acknowledgement of reality in Washington was triggered by the Electoral College formally voting on Monday to seal Biden's win with 306 votes to Trump's 232, the same margin that Trump pulled together four years ago. The normally humdrum political ceremony didn't change the facts of the election but was nonetheless used as political cover by leading Republicans.

"Many of us had hoped the presidential election would yield a different result," McConnell said. "But our system of government has the processes to determine who will be sworn in on Jan. 20. The Electoral College has spoken."

The bureaucratic transition from Trump's government to Biden's actually began weeks ago, despite the president's legal challenges. Still, the suddenly conciliatory stance from many Republicans could thaw the political deep freeze that has gripped Washington lately.

Biden has been trying to build momentum as he prepares to assume the presidency while facing the historic challenge of vaccinating hundreds of millions of Americans against the coronavirus. In some of his most forceful remarks since the election, Biden is calling for unity but also calling Trump's attacks on the voting process "unconscionable" and insisting it is time to "turn the page."

"We need to work together, give each other a chance, and lower the temperature," Biden said in a speech Monday.

Still, the shift coming so late in the tone from Republicans has left the president-elect with barely a month to finish building out key parts his new government. Some say the GOP about-face won't mean much at this point.

"Even them doing this now, the damage has been done because they've blocked, they've interrupted," said Anthony Robinson, a former Obama administration appointee who served several national security policy roles including during the transition to the Trump administration in 2016.

"I don't want to say, 'Who cares?,' but it definitely doesn't symbolize a smooth transition," said Robinson, who is now political director of the National Democratic Training Committee, which trains candidates and campaign staffers all over the country.

Biden's first priority will be the fair and efficient distribution of vaccines against the virus. The president-elect said Tuesday that he would follow the advice of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, who says that getting the president-elect himself vaccinated as soon as possible is a matter of national security.

"Dr. Fauci recommends I get the vaccine sooner than later. I want to make sure we do it by the numbers," Biden said, adding that he'd be immunized publicly, which could help build public trust in the vaccine.

Trump's continued opposition to Biden, meanwhile, may still present roadblocks, especially in the U.S. House where Republicans as recently as last week were introducing legislation to punish members of their party who might be seen as urging Trump to "concede prematurely." Other top Trump administration Cabinet officials haven't yet followed the lead of Pompeo, who plans to meet Thursday with Blinken, Biden's secretary of state nominee.

"The president is still involved in ongoing litigation related to the election," said White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, calling the Electoral College vote "one step in the constitutional process."

Rick Tyler, a Republican operative and fierce Trump critic, said it seemed at first like "the Electoral College had broken the evil spell that Trump cast across the Republican Party."

But he said the attacks on the electoral system that Trump is continuing to wage have many of his supporters now questioning American democracy itself—and that won't quickly dissipate just because some Republicans and world leaders are now willing to say conciliatory things.

"There really are 50-plus million people who no longer have trust in our system, and that's a dangerous thing," said Tyler. He said Biden must "figure out a way to restore that trust. And it can't just be a partisan attack on Republicans for, frankly, being stupid."

Also looming large is the divided U.S. Senate, where majority control will depend on the outcome of two special elections in Georgia on Jan. 5. Unless Democrats win both those races, Senate Republicans will have the power to block many of Biden's Cabinet nominations, not to mention thwart his policy initiatives.

Underscoring the urgency on that score, Biden traveled Tuesday to Georgia, his first trip beyond Delaware and southeast Pennsylvania since the election.

"I need two senators from this state who want to get something done, not just get in the way," Biden told a drive-in rally in Atlanta.

## **Biden's challenge: Creating a COVID-19-free White House**

By ZEKE MILLER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Three blocks from the White House, office space for more than 500 Biden transition staffers sits mostly idle. The government is shipping out laptops so staffers can work from home. President-elect Joe Biden, surrounded by just a handful of aides in Delaware, is using Zoom to oversee his plans to assume power.

But Biden soon will be entering a no-Zoom zone at the White House — just one sign of the challenges his new administration will face when it moves to Washington in the midst of a pandemic.

After months of making a virtue of the cautious approach his campaign and transition team have taken toward COVID-19, Biden's prudence will be tested by technology and tradition when he arrives on Jan. 20.

White House computers don't allow the popular video conference software Zoom or rival systems like Google Meet and Slack. Government-issue cellphones only gained texting capabilities a few years ago. And many employees will need to be present at the White House to access classified information.

Biden's team has limited experience with staffing a physical office during the pandemic. His campaign went all-virtual in mid-March, clearing out its Philadelphia headquarters and sending staff back to their families in Washington, New York and beyond. His transition team plotted out his path to power entirely online.

The closest Biden's team has come to experimenting with in-person work was election night, when a small selection of masked and socially distanced aides in Wilmington, Delaware, monitored returns in hotel conference rooms, a far cry from running a White House 24/7.

Even now, the most prominent use of the 100,000-plus square feet (9,290 square meters) of office space reserved for the transition is for Vice President-elect Kamala Harris to receive the highly classified President's Daily Brief.

Telework is possible for some White House staff, and improvements in both secure and unclassified videoconferencing have been made over the last two decades. But the lack of in-person coordination could

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pose an additional challenge to the new government facing a multitude of crises.

Further complicating matters, the Biden team must devise health and safety protocols from scratch. The Trump administration was, at best, a cautionary tale in how not to run a workplace during a pandemic.

Despite relying on an aggressive testing regimen that is not available in other workplaces, the West Wing under President Donald Trump has been the locus of at least two significant outbreaks of COVID-19 since Trump himself came down with the virus five weeks before Election Day.

Besides the first family, the dozens in Trump world who have tested positive include the White House chief of staff, the vice president's chief of staff, the White House press secretary and the president's campaign manager. Still more aides have had to isolate after potential exposure. The full scale of the infections is not publicly known.

The problems stemmed in large part from the Trump White House flouting its own guidelines for COVID-19 safety, including holding large events, allowing frequent travel and above all not requiring face masks. The Biden team believes that some of the greatest risk can be mitigated simply by adhering to scientific advice: holding safer events, requiring face coverings and continuing regular testing.

White House veterans say the task of making the West Wing a safe workspace is attainable but will require intense discipline, among both White House staff and the hundreds of government employees from other federal agencies who support it.

Detailed planning is still underway, but some early considerations are to curtail the number of staffers who have unfettered access to the West Wing, encourage remote work where possible and even have staffers use secure teleconferencing between individual offices to minimize use of shared spaces.

Biden's team may get a blueprint of sorts for its use of COVID-19 vaccines from the Trump White House, which is beginning to roll out inoculations for some critical government staffers, including military aides to the president, Secret Service agents and Situation Room watch officers.

Biden himself appears likely to receive at least a first dose of the vaccine before taking office, relying on the advice of the nation's top U.S. infectious-disease expert. Dr. Anthony Fauci called for Biden and Harris to swiftly receive the vaccine.

"For security reasons, I really feel strongly that we should get them vaccinated as soon as we possibly can," Fauci said on ABC News on Tuesday. "You want him fully protected as he enters into the presidency in January."

Moving the Bidens into the White House — a stressful process even in normal times — will be more complicated this year.

There will be a top-to-bottom cleaning of the West Wing in the hours after Trump vacates the premises and before Biden's team moves in. Public health experts say it's crucial that extra steps be taken to mitigate the spread of the disease during that changeover.

One former official said the White House ventilation system, hardened against chemical and biological threats, poses less of a concern than in typical buildings, but the Biden team is not taking any risks.

"The two things to think about are cleaning off all surfaces, especially high-touch places like door knobs ... and transmission via aerosols and the possibility of aerosols lingering in the air between the two transitions if someone there is currently sick," said Dr. Abraar Karan, a global health specialist at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School. "Having full air exchange, filtration and open ventilation will be important between the cleaning and the moving in of the new presidential family."

Typically, the entire move is completed in about five or six hours, said Kate Andersen Brower, author of "The Residence: Inside the Private World of the White House." For security reasons, moving day is carried out by White House household staff -- an undertaking that enlists everyone from building engineers to kitchen staff.

"In the past, there's literally one moving truck in the South Lawn entrance and one in the north entrance," she said. "It's very much an all-hands-on-deck situation."

Madhani reported from Wilmington, Del.



## Trump voters accept Biden election win 'with reservations'

By JILL COLVIN and JONATHAN COOPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Robert Reed says he will always believe the 2020 election was stolen from President Donald Trump. The retired police officer-turned-construction worker believes fraud marred the vote, no matter how many courts rejected that claim. Still, a day after the Electoral College made Joe Biden's win official, the ardent Trump supporter from the suburbs of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, was ready to move on.

"I think it's pretty much over," Reed said of Trump's ongoing quest to overturn the results of the election. "I trust the Electoral College."

For weeks, Trump has been on a mission to convince his loyal base that his victory was stolen and the contest was rigged. With help from conservative media, polls show he's had considerable success. But now that the Electoral College has formalized Biden's win and Republican officials, including Senate Leader Mitch McConnell, are finally acknowledging Biden as president-elect, many Trump voters across the country seem to be doing the same.

Interviews with voters, along with fresh surveys of Republicans, suggest their unfounded doubts about the integrity of the vote remain. But there is far less consensus on what should be done about it and whether to carry that resentment forward.

For some, like Reed, the Electoral College vote was the clear end of a process. Others have vowed to continue to protest with demonstrations like the one that turned violent in Washington, D.C., over the weekend. And some said they hoped GOP leaders would press for more investigations to put the doubts Trump sowed to rest.

They are people like Scott Adams, a retiree and Trump voter living in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, who said he accepts Biden's victory — but "with reservations."

Adams said he's heard too much discussion about irregularities in the vote count on Fox News Channel and conservative talk radio to trust the election's outcome and doesn't feel he'll ever know the true margin of victory. (Biden won the Electoral College by a vote of 306 to 232.)

But Adams doesn't think the election was rigged enough to change the outcome, even if he believes it was "rigged enough that it should be questioned more." He'd like to see more investigations.

Republicans across the country — from local officials to governors to Attorney General William Barr — have said repeatedly there is no evidence mass voter fraud affected the outcome. Trump and his allies brought a flurry of lawsuits, but nearly all have been dismissed by judges. The Supreme Court, which includes three Trump-nominated justices, denied requests to hear a pair of cases aimed at invalidating the outcome of the election in key battleground states.

Still, coming to terms with this pile of evidence has been difficult for many Trump voters. They expressed disbelief that Trump could have lost, given the huge crowds he drew to his rallies. Some said their suspicions were heightened by the mainstream media's reluctance to air Trump's baseless claims. And they repeatedly pointed to the slower-than-usual vote count as evidence something had gone awry.

"Something's not right here," said Reed, who lives in East Lampeter Township.

The explanation is well known — in many states, an influx of mail-in ballots, overwhelmingly cast by Democrats, were tallied later than ballots cast in person. Still, Reed said he thought the courts should have spent more time investigating.

"I'll always believe that it was stolen from him. I'll really never be able to have peace of mind that it wasn't," he said.

Others were less willing to go along.

"I don't trust that result. I think that the election was a fraud. I think the election was stolen. I don't know how anybody could not think that. All you have to do is look at the results," said Katherine Negrete, 55, a teacher living in Peoria, Arizona.

Negrete is among those who holds out hope that Trump can win if the Supreme Court intervenes (there is no indication that will happen) or Congress chooses to accept an "alternative slate" of Trump electors

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from several states. Election experts have said that scheme has no legal pathway and Republican Senate leaders have discouraged it.

Still, Negrete said, "hopefully Congress will do the right thing" and she expressed frustration with dwindling options.

"I don't know what we can do about that. If we don't have the courts that stand up for us," she said. "If we don't have an attorney general that will stand up and say, 'This was wrong and we need to investigate it.' What are we supposed to do? Do we need to fight brother against brother? It's crazy."

Biden has vowed to bring Americans together and work across the aisle. His success on both fronts may depend on how many Republicans hold on to their election grievances. A Quinnipiac University poll from earlier this month found that 38% of registered voters, including 77% of Republicans, said they believe there was widespread fraud in the presidential election.

And a recent Fox News poll found 36% of voters, including 77% of Trump voters, believe the election was stolen from Trump. However, the same poll also found that about 8 in 10 voters overall, and about half of Trump voters, said they will at least give Biden a chance as president.

Matt Vereline, 52, a member of the pro-Trump group "Long Island Loud Majority" is not in the mood for reconciliation.

Vereline, who lives in Bohemia, New York, is convinced "there was a lot more voter fraud than we know about," though he's not sure whether it changed the outcome. But that won't keep him from rallying around what he thinks was an injustice. After all, that's what Democrats did to Trump, he says.

"Did they not cry for four years about Russian collusion, which wasn't proven? So now I'm going to cry about voter fraud for four years," he said. "They didn't accept it. Why should I accept Biden? I know I can't do nothing about it. I know a rally is not going to change the course of who gets elected president. It's whatever will be will be. But if my friends want to get together and complain about it in a peaceful way and voice our opinions, I'm going."

Others believe Biden won fair and square. Steve Volkman, a Republican who works in construction in Mesa, Arizona, said he made peace with Trump's loss weeks ago.

"I voted for Trump, but people gotta get over it," Volkman said, while leaning against his pickup truck. "For sure, he (Biden) won the majority vote — landslide. To me, it's already over."

Catherine Templeton, a South Carolina Republican who served in former Gov. Nikki Haley's administration, said that, despite the level of support for Trump in red states like her own, she felt sure voters would be willing to accept Biden as president.

"Obviously, South Carolina supports President Trump, but I think you'll see when Republicans don't get their way, they move on," said Templeton, who lives in Charleston. "It's time to move on."

It remains to be seen, for now, how lingering concerns over the integrity of the vote will affect turnout in future elections. Both parties have been focused on Georgia, where a pair of runoff elections will determine which party controls the U.S. Senate.

Denise Adams, 50, said she has her doubts about "questionable activity" in the general election. But she turned out to vote early on Monday in Kennesaw, a suburb northwest of Atlanta.

"I don't want to lose our freedoms," she said, repeating misleading GOP claims that the Democrats would usher in "socialism." "We're losing our rights and freedoms in our country."

"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," echoed Melissa McJunkin, 40, who remains concerned about the integrity of her vote after hearing stories of voter fraud in the general election, but turned out anyway.

"I think it's important for what's going to happen next," she said.

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Cooper reported from Mesa, Arizona. Associated Press writers Emily Swanson in Washington, Nicholas Riccardi in Atlanta, Sophia Tulp in Rome, Georgia, and Meg Kinnard in Columbia, South Carolina, contributed to this report.

## Verdicts due for 14 over links to Jan. 2015 Paris attackers

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — The terrorism trial of 14 people linked to the January 2015 Paris attacks on the satirical weekly Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket ends Wednesday after three months punctuated by new attacks, a wave of coronavirus infections among the defendants, and devastating testimony bearing witness to three days of bloodshed that shook France.

Three of the 14 fled to Syria just ahead of the Jan. 7-9, 2015 attacks in Paris, which left 17 dead along with the three gunmen — who claimed the killings in the name of al-Qaida and the Islamic State group. The other 11, all men, formed a circle of friends and prison acquaintances who claimed any facilitating they may have done was unwitting or for more run-of-the mill crime like armed robbery: weapons stashed in a zipped duffel that few would admit to opening, vehicles, communications, and a short-term rental apartment scouted as a hideout.

One gambled day and night during the three-day period, learning what happened only after emerging blearily from the casino. Another was a pot-smoking ambulance driver. A third was a childhood friend of the market attacker, who got beaten to a pulp by the latter after going into debt.

It was the coronavirus infection of Ali Riza Polat, described as the lieutenant of the virulently anti-Semitic market attacker, Amédy Coulibaly, that forced the suspension of the trial for a month. Polat, whose profane outbursts and insults drew rebukes from the chief judge, is the only defendant present to face a life term. A handwriting expert testified it was Polat who scrawled a list of arms and munitions — along with their prices — which was linked to the attack.

The minimum sentence requested by prosecutors is five years, for a suspect who went along to shop for weapons and a car, and watched as his friend removed the GPS tracker from a motorcycle but asked no questions.

In all, investigators sifted through 37 million bits of phone data, according to video testimony by judicial police. Among the men cuffed behind the courtroom's enclosed stands, flanked by masked and armed officers, were several who had exchanged texts or calls with Coulibaly in the days leading up to the attack. They describe any contacts as the normal communications among acquaintances.

Among those testifying were the widows of Chérif and Saïd Kouachi, the brothers who stormed Charlie Hebdo's offices on Jan. 7, 2015, decimating the newspaper's editorial staff in what they said was an act of vengeance for its publication of caricatures of the Prophet Muhammad years before. Charlie Hebdo's offices had been firebombed before and were unmarked, and its editors had round-the-clock protection. But it wasn't enough.

In all, 12 people died in that attack. The first was Frédéric Boisseau, who worked in maintenance. Then, the Kouachis seized Corinne Rey, a cartoonist who had gone down to smoke, and forced her upstairs to punch in the door code. She watched in horror as they opened fire on the editorial meeting. For years, she harbored paralyzing guilt that her life was spared while so many others died.

"I was not killed, but what happened to me was absolutely chilling and I will live with it until my life is over," she testified. "It took me some time to understand it, but I'm not the guilty one in this. The only guilty ones are the Kouachis and their accomplices."

The next day, Coulibaly shot and killed a young policewoman after failing to attack a Jewish community center in the suburb of Montrouge. By then, the Kouachis were on the run and France was paralyzed with fear.

Authorities didn't link the shooting to the massacre at Charlie Hebdo immediately. They were closing in on the fugitive brothers when the first alerts came of a gunman inside a kosher supermarket. It was a wintry Friday afternoon, and customers were rushing to finish their shopping before the Sabbath when Coulibaly entered, carrying an assault rifle, pistols and explosives. With a GoPro camera fixed to his torso, he methodically fired on an employee and a customer, then killed a second customer before ordering a cashier to close the store's metal blinds, images shown to a hushed courtroom.

The first victim, Yohan Cohen, lay dying on the ground and Coulibaly turned to some 20 hostages in the

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room and asked if he should "finish him off." Despite the pleas to leave him alone, Coulibaly fired a killing shot, according to testimony from cashier Zarie Sibony.

"You are Jews and French, the two things I hate the most," he told them.

Some 40 kilometers (25 miles) away, the Kouachi brothers were cornered in a printing shop with their own hostages. Ultimately, all three attackers died in near-simultaneous police raids. It was the first attack in Europe claimed by the Islamic State group, which struck Paris again later that year to even deadlier effect.

At the heart of the trial is who helped them and how. Prosecutors said the Kouachis essentially self-financed their attack, while Coulibaly and his wife, Hayat Boumeddiene, took out fraudulent loans. Boumeddiene, the only woman on trial, fled to Syria days before the attack with two other absent defendants, Mohamed et Mehdi Belhoucine. The brothers are believed to be dead, while Boumeddiene is thought to be alive, somewhere between Syria and Turkey.

One witness, the French widow of an Islamic State emir, testified from prison that she'd run across Boumeddiene late last year at a camp in Syria. The French government wants to take no chances of any of the three returning without facing justice. Free after a brief prison term, for reasons both defense attorneys and victims described as baffling, was the far-right sympathizer turned police informant who actually sold the weapons to Coulibaly.

Three weeks into the trial, on Sept. 25, a Pakistani man steeped in radical Islam and armed with a butcher's knife attacked two people outside the former Charlie Hebdo offices on Nicolas-Appert street long since vacated by the publication. Murmurs rippled through the courtroom as the first alerts flashed, but the trial continued.

Six weeks into the trial, on Oct. 16, a French schoolteacher who opened a debate on free speech by showing students the Muhammad caricatures was beheaded by an 18-year-old Chechen refugee, sending France yet again into mourning.

Eight weeks into the trial, on Oct. 30, a young Tunisian armed with a knife and carrying a copy of the Quran attacked worshippers in a church in the southern city of Nice, killing three. He had a photo of the Chechen on his phone and an audio message describing France as a "country of unbelievers."

Just two days later, three defendants came down with coronavirus and the trial was suspended.

"After having wished so long that this trial would come to an end, we all felt how difficult it would be to be finished with it," Charlie Hebdo's Yanick Haenel wrote for the 54th day of testimony, published Tuesday.

As he left the courthouse, he wrote, "I again saw the images of the massacres at Charlie Hebdo and Hyper Cacher and Montrouge, then the faces of the accused seeking out our gaze across the stand: Two intolerable visions.

"We looked for the relationship between these two visions, but did we find it? We were waiting for the truth, and we have misfortune for everyone: Victims, families, accused."

## A pandemic atlas: China's state power crushes COVID-19

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Workers have returned to factories, students are back in the classroom and once again long lines form outside popular hot pot restaurants. In major cities, wearing a surgical mask — though no longer required outside of subways and other crowded places — has become a habit.

In many ways, normal life has resumed in China, the country where COVID-19 first appeared one year ago.

"It feels like life has recovered," said moviegoer Meng Xiangyu, when Beijing theaters re-opened with 30 percent of their seating after a six-month hiatus. "Everything feels fresh."

China's ruling Communist Party has withdrawn some of the most sweeping anti-disease controls ever imposed, but remains on guard against fresh outbreaks and cases from abroad. Health authorities report a dozen or so imported cases every day.

The challenge is jobs: The economy is growing again, but the recovery is uneven. Many big manufacturers are back to normal, but consumer spending remains tepid and smaller companies are contracting or closing.

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By mid-December, the country had reported just six cases per 100,000 population. China does not include people who test positive but show no symptoms in its confirmed case counts.

Questions persist about how officials initially tried to cover up the outbreak and whether it was larger than the ruling Communist Party has acknowledged. The lockdown came too late to prevent the then-unnamed disease from ravaging the city of Wuhan and seeping out to the rest of China and overseas.

But since March, when COVID-19 was largely curbed at home, authorities have moved swiftly to stamp out any reappearance, locking down neighborhoods and conducting widespread testing.

"What was the most dangerous place is now the safest place of all," said Chen Jin, who sells barbecue skewers at an outdoor night market in Wuhan. His business hasn't recovered but he hopes to see more customers in 2021.

Life has changed. Virtually everyone has a smartphone app that indicates if they have been in an infected area. It must be shown to gain admission to many office buildings, shopping centers and tourist sites. Some attractions limit the number of daily visitors.

With each passing day, though, those restrictions seem less strictly enforced. People remain cautious — a few still use a tissue or glove to avoid touching elevator buttons — but the pervasive fear has largely evaporated.

Crowds thronged popular destinations with little or no social distancing during the last major holiday in October, as domestic travel bounced back to 80 percent of the year before.

For some, though, it's impossible to shake a new-found unease. Wuhan native Zhu Tao used to think about his future and that of his country. "We now do not care about anything other than how our family, the three of us, can live through this year," he said.

In the early days, authorities squelched warnings about the outbreak, reprimanding several Wuhan doctors for "rumor-mongering" after they alerted friends on social media. They delayed releasing critical information about the virus, even as hundreds of patients showed up at hospitals and the potential dangers became increasingly evident.

Once the Communist Party leadership mobilized, it moved decisively. The Jan. 23 lockdown announcement came in the middle of the night, and as often in China, with no warning or public debate. No one could enter and no one could leave the city of Wuhan, home to 11 million people. In the ensuing days, it was expanded to most of the rest of Hubei province.

As Wuhan hospitals overflowed, patients with mild symptoms were sent home, where they infected others. Police rounded up citizen-journalists posting online video reports detailing the dire conditions. State media focused on the heroic efforts to save people but not the shortcomings that made those efforts necessary.

The Communist Party has held up its relative success in controlling the pandemic as validation for its one-party rule.

And in a sense, the crisis illustrates the strength of the system, and its dark side.

The virus has been kept at bay — but only because of the government's power to dictate monumental changes, and its willingness to use surveillance and censorship to control its people.

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Associated Press video journalist Emily Wang and video producer Olivia Zhang contributed.

## **A pandemic atlas: No longer in viral denial, Iran struggles**

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

At the start, Iranian officials downplayed COVID-19 — denying the mounting toll of infections, refusing to close mosques, making half-hearted gestures at locking down businesses.

That was then. This is now: Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has worn disposable gloves while planting a tree for state media, and he prayed in an empty mosque to mark the holy Shiite commemoration of Ashoura.

The coronavirus pandemic has only grown worse in Iran in the course of the year, threatening everyone from the day laborer on the street to the upper reaches of the Islamic Republic. Now the virus has

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sickened and killed top officials, becoming perhaps Iran's greatest threat since the turmoil and war that followed its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Crushed by U.S. sanctions, Iran has avoided the full lockdowns seen in other countries as it struggles to keep its anemic economy alive. Those who must work each day to eat — whether from the sweat of construction or driving a taxi through Tehran's clogged streets — do not have the luxury of being able to stay at home.

Even efforts aimed at limiting some travel have been met with chaos, with online videos repeatedly showing drivers ignoring police to speed off to the Caspian Sea for long weekends. Efforts to close shrines saw hard-liners push their way into two in March.

And the toll just keeps rising, say the officials at Tehran's massive Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, already the final resting place of some 1.6 million people.

"All of the crises that we have experienced at this cemetery over the past 50 years of its history have lasted for just a few days or a week at most," manager Saeed Khaal said. Never before — not during earthquakes or even the country's 1980s war with Iraq — has the pace of bodies flowing into Behesht-e-Zahra been so high for so long, he said.

The spread of the virus in February came as Iran held a parliamentary election in which officials sought to boost turnout as a sign of support in the government. The country also marked the 41st anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution with robust demonstrations. Those mass events likely fueled the virus' spread.

Iran has asked the International Monetary Fund for \$5 billion, potentially its first-such loan since 1962, though that has not yet been granted amid the U.S. pressure campaign that began after President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew from Iran's nuclear deal with world powers. Those sanctions, while allowing for humanitarian aid, have crushed Iran's rial currency and made international purchases of medicine and equipment much more difficult.

Meanwhile, Iran's own response has been hampered in part by mixed messages as the crisis worsened in the fall. The country requested aid from the international community, then revoked an offer allowing Doctors Without Borders to work in Isfahan. Khamenei also refused U.S. aid, citing a baseless conspiracy theory claiming the virus could be man-made by America.

In October, Health Minister Saeed Namaki warned of "hospitals full of patients," but then the next day reportedly said: "We should never announce that we don't have empty beds. We do have empty beds." Authorities ordered face masks to be worn, then set the cash fine at just 500,000 rials, or \$1.60. All as Iran hit ever-increasing records for its reported daily deaths and case counts — numbers long suspected of being below the true toll of the pandemic.

By mid-December, Iran had reported over 1,300 cases per 100,000 population.

What awaits Iran in winter remains in question.

Nearly half of the country's recorded coronavirus deaths have come from Tehran. Authorities in November proposed a monthlong nightly business curfew in the capital and 30 other major cities and towns, asking nonessential shops to keep their workers home.

But whether that will have an effect remains in question. The streets were far from empty, and there was no noticeable police presence to enforce the curfew.

## Virus shuts many UK theaters but online the show goes on

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When Andrew Lincoln steps onstage at London's Old Vic Theatre as Ebenezer Scrooge in "A Christmas Carol," he looks out on an empty auditorium.

The spectators are beyond the theater walls, in houses and apartments, staring at screens. In this pandemic year, the Old Vic's seasonal production of Charles Dickens' classic is being livestreamed nightly until Dec. 24, with ticket-holders around the world tuning in over Zoom.

"It's a very strange experience, doing something theatrical on a stage and then not feeling the reverberation of an audience," said Lincoln, the British actor who starred for nine seasons in AMC zombie drama "The

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Walking Dead.”

But that is the reality of London’s West End this holiday season. The Old Vic is among theaters trying to keep the flame alive. But owners and producers warn that nine months of coronavirus-related curbs have left Britain’s performing arts on the brink — and a decision to shut theaters in the capital starting Wednesday may push them over.

Christmas is normally a golden time for British theaters. Families flock to see pantomimes — raucous seasonal shows combining fairy-tale plots with songs, satire and slapstick — and festive classics such as “A Christmas Carol.” Holiday-season revenue can carry venues through the rest of the year.

This year, more than half the U.K. population is under tight restrictions that have forced theaters, concert halls, art galleries, museums and cinemas to shut their doors.

That includes London, where theaters had just begun to reopen after a four-week national lockdown ended Dec. 2. Then, on Monday, the government slapped toughened restrictions on the capital because of a surge in infections.

Julian Bird, chief executive of industry groups the Society of London Theatre and U.K. Theatre, said the decision would cause “catastrophic financial difficulties for venues, producers and thousands of industry workers — especially the freelancers who make up 70% of the theater workforce.”

Ever since Britain went into its first lockdown in March, theaters have found ingenious ways to keep working. The Old Vic has mounted an “In Camera” season of plays performed on its stage and broadcast online. Other venues had begun to reopen to limited, face mask-wearing audiences, with social distancing measures in place.

Producers say there have been no virus outbreaks linked to theaters, and wonder why they have to close when large stores can stay open. Composer Andrew Lloyd Webber said it seemed “arbitrary and unfair” to ban theater performances while letting shopping continue.

Producer Sonia Friedman, whose show “The Comeback” was forced to close at London’s Noel Coward Theatre just days after its opening night, said audiences “have left the theater uplifted, energized and reminded about the power of theater and the vital role it can play in the mental well-being of the community.”

“To have that so abruptly, cruelly and illogically ripped away is heartbreaking,” she said.

The government says it is supporting theaters out of its 1.57 billion-pound (\$2.1 billion) Culture Recovery Fund.

The culture department said it had also earmarked 400 million pounds of contingency funding, “and will now use it to support organizations facing financial distress as a result of closure, as well as helping them transition back to fuller opening in the spring.”

The one glimmer of hope is that, as workplaces, theaters can continue creating and rehearsing. The Old Vic’s “Christmas Carol” is employing 80 people, including 18 actors and musicians.

It has been a challenge. Cast and crew are temperature checked daily and tested twice a week. Lincoln has been staying in London, away from his family, during rehearsals. The performers must remain 2 meters (6½ feet) apart onstage.

And yet, Lincoln says, the production retains the magic of Dickens’ story about a miser who mends his ways after being given a supernatural tour of his past, present and future. Playwright Jack Thorne’s adaptation has been a hit at the Old Vic for the past three Christmases. But this year it looked unlikely to return.

Speaking to The Associated Press over Zoom, Lincoln said the production came about “because (artistic director) Matthew Warchus was doing what we’re doing. Lots and lots of Zoom calls trying to save the theater and work out how the heck are we going to navigate this terrible year.”

Lincoln’s own plans, which include a “Walking Dead” movie, have been forestalled by the pandemic, though he hopes the film will start shooting in the spring.

“It does feel like there is a certain sense of positivity and the cavalry’s coming with the vaccines,” he said. “And there’s a real sort of sense of a renewal, hopefully.”

“We just feel very fortunate that we’re all working in a theater at this time in history.”

He thinks the story of redemption and people’s dependence on one another has special resonance in

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2020, when "the world's been through this terrible year together."

"It's challenging, trying to rehearse for three weeks in masks," he said. "(But) everybody's come with such goodwill that we're just sort of throwing it out there and hopefully we're going to make something that is exciting, thrilling, scary and very moving.

"It's just a good thing we're sending out into the world."

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

## The Latest: Denmark expands virus restrictions nationwide

The Associated Press undefined

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Restrictions that applied to 69 of Denmark's 98 municipalities are becoming nationwide on Wednesday with restaurants, theaters, museums, cinemas and various other venues closing.

Shops will remain open, but people are urged to work from home, and children from 5th grade upward will be sent home from school and switch to remote learning.

The nationwide restrictions are to continue until Jan. 3.

The government said the move was decided "on the basis of the high level of infection in Denmark," which has had 116,087 cases — up 2,992 on Wednesday— and 961 deaths — up 11.

### THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- Biden's challenge: Creating a COVID-19-free White House
- Poor countries face long wait for vaccines despite promises
- US vaccinations ramp up as 2nd COVID-19 shot nears
- After a punishing fall that left hospitals struggling, some Midwestern states are seeing a decline in new coronavirus cases.
- A scientist taking part in the World Health Organization's mission track down the origins of the coronavirus says they plan to sift through samples and medical data from China to help determine where the bug came from.
- The four nations of the United Kingdom are facing mounting calls to scrap, or at least limit, a planned easing of coronavirus restrictions over Christmas following a spike in new infections.

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

### HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

- PRAGUE — The Czech Republic is launching a program of nationwide testing for the coronavirus. The free voluntary testing started Wednesday at hundreds of sites across the country and will continue until Jan. 15. The results of the rapid antigen tests will be known in up to 20 minutes. Those who test positive will be retested with the more precise PCR tests. The country has recently offered the rapid tests to teachers and used them to test residents and staff at all nursing homes. The Czech Republic has been facing a rise in coronavirus infections in December. The government has decided to toughen restrictive measures that include the closure of bars, restaurants and hotels and the re-imposition of overnight curfew as of Friday. The country of 10.7 million has 594,148 confirmed cases with 9,882 fatalities. The day-to-day increase in new cases reached 7,889 on Tuesday, about 2,000 more than the same day a week ago.

TOKYO — Tokyo has reported 678 new cases of the coronavirus, a high for the Japanese capital, as



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Japan now struggles with another surge in the virus.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government said Wednesday that the new cases bring the prefectural total to 48,668.

Infections have been on the rise nationwide. Japan had more than 2,410 cases Tuesday for a national total of 184,042, including 2,688 deaths.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, apparently reluctant to further damage businesses already hit by the pandemic, has been slow to take steps. Last Friday, after repeated calls from experts, Suga finally announced plans to suspend the government's travel promotion campaign nationwide from Dec. 28 to Jan. 11 following a series of media surveys showing a sharp decline in his approval ratings.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has reported another high in daily coronavirus increases as health officials face growing pressure to enforce stricter social distancing to slow the spread in the capital area.

The 1,078 cases confirmed by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Wednesday brought the national caseload to 45,442. The death toll was 612 after 25 COVID-19 patients died in the past 48 hours, the two deadliest days since the outbreak began.

The agency said 226 among 11,883 active patients were in serious or critical condition, which was also the most since the start of the pandemic, as fears grow about a possible shortage in hospital capacities.

Senior Health Ministry official Yoon Taeho said authorities were discussing whether to elevate social distancing restrictions to the highest "Tier 3," which could possibly include banning gatherings of more than 10 people, shutting non-essential businesses, and requiring companies to have more employees work from home.

"Tier-3 social distancing is the last and strongest measure that we could take, which would cause widespread damage to the self-employed," he said. "We are hearing the opinions of experts, including those from central government agencies and regional governments ... while deeply reviewing whether to elevate the measures."

More than 770 of the new infections were reported from the Seoul metropolitan area, home to half of the country's 51 million people, where new clusters are popping up from just about everywhere, including churches, hospitals, long-term care facilities, schools, restaurants, army units and prisons.

Critics say the country let its guard down by easing social distancing to the lowest in October out of concerns about sluggish economic growth rates despite warnings of a viral surge during the winter, when people spend longer hours indoors.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lankan authorities have reopened the island's main fish market, which had been closed for two months.

The Central Fish Market, located on the outskirts of the capital, Colombo, was closed in October after 49 traders there tested positive for the coronavirus. Fish sales dropped sharply after the outbreak at the market spread across the island nation.

The number of cases centered at the fish market has risen to 26,774. While the fish market resumed operations on Wednesday, authorities said it would be limited to wholesale trade.

Sri Lanka has seen a fresh outbreak of the virus since October when two clusters — one centered at a garment factory and the other at the fish market — emerged in Colombo and its suburbs. Another cluster surfaced at crowded prisons last month. So far, there have been 30,459 confirmed cases from the three clusters. Sri Lanka has reported a total of 34,104 cases, including 154 deaths.

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — The number of daily COVID-19 deaths in Pakistan crossed 100 for the first time in five months with the virus spreading fast in the financial capital of Karachi.

The 105 fatalities in the last 24 hours increased Pakistan's death toll 9,010 since February. Pakistan also reported 2,731 new cases, increasing its total to 445,977.

Karachi has been especially hard hit with the positivity rate of 18.76% compared to 7.2% nationwide.

Despite repeated requests from the government, most Pakistanis appear to still not adhere to social

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distancing rules, causing a fresh surge in the country that until recently had kept COVID-19 deaths in double digits.

Pakistan says a vaccine may not be available until February or March.

**KANSAS** — A western Kansas mayor announced Tuesday that she is resigning, effective immediately, because of threats she has received after she publicly supported a mask mandate.

Dodge City Mayor Joyce Warshaw said she was concerned about her safety after being met with aggression, including threats via phone and email, after she was quoted on a USA Today article on Friday supporting the mandate, The Dodge City Globe reported.

"I understand people are under a lot of pressure from various things that are happening around society like the pandemic, the politics, the economy, so on and so forth, but I also believe that during these times people are acting not as they normally would," Warshaw said.

The commission voted 4-1 on Nov. 16 to impose a mask mandate, with several exceptions.

Ford County, where Dodge City is located, has recorded 4,914 cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began, according to the state health department. The county has about 33,600 residents.

**BOISE, Idaho** — A proposed public health order that would have included a mask mandate for Idaho's most populated region was voted down on Tuesday as hundreds of protesters again gathered outside the Central District Health building in Boise.

A previous attempt to vote on the order was abruptly halted last week after Boise city police asked the board to end the meeting early amid protest-related safety fears.

During Tuesday's meeting, three board members from Elmore, Valley and Boise counties — the more rural counties in the region — all voted against the mask mandate, saying they'd heard from constituents who were deeply opposed to the rule. But three board members from Ada County — the most populated county in the state — were in favor of the mask mandate, noting that Boise-area hospitals are reaching capacity because of an influx of COVID-19 patients, including many who are coming from neighboring counties.

The order lacked the required majority to pass.

**SACRAMENTO, Calif.** — California is distributing 5,000 body bags mostly to the hard-hit Los Angeles and San Diego areas and has 60 refrigerated trailers standing by as makeshift morgues in anticipation of a surge of coronavirus deaths.

The precautions come from hospitalizations that now are double the summertime peak and threaten to soon overwhelm the hospital system.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said Tuesday that the number of average daily deaths has quadrupled from a month ago. The surge is forcing an urgent scramble for more staff and space, a crush that might not abate for two months despite the arrival of the first doses of vaccines this week.

In Orange County, health officials said they plan to send large tents to four hospitals to help handle their patient caseloads.

**MONTREAL** — Quebec's premier is closing all non-essential businesses across the Canadian province from Christmas until at least Jan. 11.

Premier Francois Legault says that big box stores will be prohibited from selling any goods that are deemed non-essential. The premier is also forcing all office towers to empty starting Thursday and requiring employees to work from home until at least Jan. 11.

Legault says elementary and secondary schools will close Dec. 17 and can reopen at the earliest on Jan. 11. He says hospitals across the province are under too much pressure because of the COVID-19 pandemic to allow non-essential businesses to stay open during the holidays.

Quebec reported 1,741 COVID-19 infections on Tuesday.

## A pandemic atlas: Italy becomes Europe's viral epicenter

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — On the morning of Feb. 20, Dr. Annalisa Malara went to work at the public hospital in tiny Codogno, Italy, and broke protocol by ordering up a coronavirus test for a patient.

In so doing, she confirmed that Europe's coronavirus outbreak was under way.

Malara's intuition — to test a 38-year-old Italian marathoner who hadn't traveled to China or been in contact with a known positive case — sounded the alarm to Italy and the rest of the world: The virus had not only arrived in the West but was circulating locally.

Italy would go on to become the epicenter of COVID-19 in Europe and a cautionary tale of what happens when a health care system in even one of the wealthiest parts of the world collapses under the weight of the pandemic sick and dead.

And when a second wave hit in September, even the lessons learned from the first weren't enough to spare Italy's disproportionately old population. Despite plans and protocols, monitoring systems and machinery that were put in place to hedge against the expected flu season onslaught, another 30,000 people died, hospitals once again were brought to the breaking point and Italy reclaimed the dishonor of leading Europe in the gruesome death count.

"It changes you inside," said Simona Romani, who lost her mother-in-law on Oct. 28 during the peak of Italy's second wave, after just two days in the hospital. "You are powerless before an invisible enemy."

By mid-December, Italy had reported about 3,070 cases per 100,000 population.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. After suffering so much in spring, Italy won international praise for having tamed the virus thanks to the West's first nationwide lockdown: All non-essential production and commercial activity ground to a halt for 10 weeks from March to May. No gelato, no pizza, no cappuccino at the bar downstairs.

Cooped up at home, Italians were deluged with a steady barrage of terrifyingly effective media programming: Local governors on Facebook Live videos nudged doctors and nurses to come out of retirement to help colleagues who were overwhelmed with patients and were themselves falling sick. And night-time talk shows featured exhausted hospital staff in sweaty scrubs begging Italians to stay home.

Residents were allowed outside only for essential work, medical appointments or necessities like grocery shopping, and only then with a certificate. Police set up checkpoints and issued fines.

But it worked. By Aug. 1, Italy added a daily 295 new infections nationwide and had only 43 people in intensive care, a nearly 100-fold decrease in ICU-saturation from the springtime high. The daily 6 p.m. lockdown ritual of blaring the national anthem and cheers for medical workers gave way to the 6 p.m. aperitivo at the bar with friends and a giddy sense of having beaten it.

But by late August, infections began creeping back up again as Italians returned from Sardinia and the Croatian coast where they had danced the nights away, maskless, at beachfront discos that became ground zero for the second wave of infection.

Industrial, densely populated Lombardy, which bore the brunt of the toll in spring, got slammed again in the fall. In March, the province of Bergamo registered a 571% increase in excess deaths, and cemeteries and crematoria were so full that army convoys trucked caskets out of town.

By October, Italy's business capital, Milan, was buckling under and led the region and country in new infections and deaths. The government divided up the peninsula into yellow, orange and red zones of risk and Lombardy was labeled red as it once again failed to protect its elderly.

The 200-bed field hospital that the Lombardy region built to great fanfare in spring with 20 million euros in donations — half from ex-Premier Silvio Berlusconi — was finally put to use.

And that's where Malara, the anesthesiologist from tiny Codogno who diagnosed Italy's first homegrown COVID-19 patient, now finds herself working.

After risking her job to go outside medical protocol to diagnose Patient No. 1, Malara told local media she is now volunteering at the Milan field hospital to treat COVID-19 patients, who now exceed 1 million.

Her aim? "To give back the precious and vital help that was given to us in March and April."

## AP Interview: Flattening curve wasn't enough for New Zealand

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand this year pulled off a moonshot that remains the envy of most other nations: It eliminated the coronavirus.

But the goal was driven as much by fear as it was ambition, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern revealed Wednesday in an interview with The Associated Press. She said the target grew from an early realization the nation's health system simply couldn't cope with a big outbreak.

And there have been plenty of bumps along the way. When a handful of unexplained cases began cropping up in August, Ardern found herself defending wildly exaggerated claims from President Donald Trump, who told crowds at rallies there was a massive resurgence and "It's over for New Zealand. Everything's gone."

"Was angry the word?" Ardern said, reflecting on Trump's comments. She said while the new cases were deeply concerning, "to be described in that way was a misrepresentation of New Zealand's position."

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

New Zealand's response to the virus has been among the most successful, together with actions taken by China, Taiwan and Thailand early on in the pandemic. The country of 5 million has counted just 25 deaths and managed to stamp out the spread of COVID-19, allowing people to return to workplaces, schools and packed sports stadiums without restrictions.

When the virus began hitting Europe early in the year, Ardern said, the only two options countries were considering were herd immunity or flattening the curve. She opted for the latter.

"Originally, that's where we started, because there just simply wasn't really much of a view that elimination was possible," she said.

But her thinking quickly changed.

"I remember my chief science adviser bringing me a graph that showed me what flattening the curve would look like for New Zealand. And where our hospital and health capacity was. And the curve wasn't sitting under that line. So we knew that flattening the curve wasn't sufficient for us."

Ardern said she didn't worry that elimination might prove impossible, because even if New Zealand didn't get there, the approach still would have saved lives.

"The alternative is to set a lesser goal, and then still misfire," she said.

Border closures and a strict lockdown in March got rid of the disease, and New Zealand went 102 days without any community spread. But then came the August outbreak in Auckland, which remains unexplained but likely originated abroad.

"We thought we were through the worst of it. And so it was a real psychological blow for people. And I felt that, too. So it was very, very tough," Ardern said.

She said they'd modeled different outbreak scenarios but the one that eventuated "was about the worst that you could even possibly imagine."

That's because the outbreak had spread across multiple groups in densely populated areas, she said, and some who caught it had been attending large church gatherings. But after a second lockdown in Auckland, New Zealand again stamped out the disease.

Ardern said she felt confident about her responses despite sometimes feeling a touch of imposter syndrome in her role as leader.

"You just have to get on with it. There's a job to be done," she said. "Any self-doubt I ever have, just as a human being, doesn't mean that always translates into doubt around what needs to be done."

Two months after the second outbreak, Ardern faced an election campaign. She won a second term in an landslide, with her liberal Labour Party winning a majority of all votes, something that last happened in New Zealand's multiparty system in 1951.

After watching President-elect Joe Biden win the U.S. election soon after, Ardern said she's hopeful of improving the relationship between the two nations.

She said her job is to build good relationships with every leader.

"But there's no question that when some of your ideas and values are similar, that's an easier job to do," she said. "And so that's the basis, I think, on which we'll be building the relationship with the new president."

Ardern said she's not afraid of sometimes taking a stance against a more aggressive China despite New Zealand's reliance on Beijing as its largest trading partner.

"My personal view is that we're at a point where we can raise issues," Ardern said. "We're fairly predictable in the fact that we do. And I think that's an important part of our independent foreign policy."

For the world to begin to return to normal, Ardern said, there needs to be comprehensive work around ensuring that everybody can get vaccinated against COVID-19 and putting in place a vaccine certification process that would allow people to travel.

She does worry the economic impact of the virus is increasing wealth disparity, and that New Zealanders have defied earlier predictions by sending house prices to new all-time highs.

She said there is a psychology behind New Zealand's financial obsession with housing that needs to be examined, otherwise "we won't figure out how to move people back into other parts of the economy."

Ardern said she plans to take some time off over the Southern Hemisphere summer to spend with her fiancé, Clarke Gayford, and their 2-year-old daughter, Neve.

"I'm doing nothing," she said with a laugh. "I will be by the sea, though. It'll be great."

## Minnesota juvenile lifer walks free after 18 years in prison

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Black man sent to prison for life as a teenager took his first steps of freedom Tuesday to the sound of ringing bells and cheering family members and supporters, hours after a pardons board commuted his sentence in a high-profile murder case.

Myon Burrell's prosecution and harsh punishment raised questions about the integrity of the criminal justice system that put him away nearly two decades ago for the death of a young girl killed by a stray bullet. Earlier this year, The Associated Press and APM Reports uncovered new evidence and serious flaws in the police investigation, ultimately leading to the creation of an independent national legal panel to review the case.

Last week, panel members published their findings, raising many of the same concerns, including that police had "tunnel vision" while pursuing Burrell as a suspect. The panel said it saw no purpose served by keeping Burrell locked up, pointing to his age at the time of the crime and his good behavior behind bars.

Burrell's request for a pardon was denied. But it was the first time in at least 22 years that Minnesota commuted a sentence in a murder case, according to the Department of Corrections.

And the release was swift. Just hours after learning his life sentence had been commuted, with two remaining years to be served on supervised release, he walked out the front door of Stillwater prison into below-freezing temperatures. Dozens of bundled supporters, some holding signs and balloons, surrounded Burrell while cheering "Myon's free! Myon's free!"

After jumping into a waiting car, he was soon home. Friends and relatives filtered into the living room, greeting him with gifts and hugs.

"It's just a blessing," he said, while standing outside on the street searching the sky for the moon and stars, which he said he's been longing to see.

Burrell has always maintained his innocence in the 2002 killing of 11-year-old Tyesha Edwards, struck in the heart while doing homework at the dining room table with her little sister. He told Minnesota's Board of Pardons members Gov. Tim Walz and Attorney General Keith Ellison that his "heart goes out" to her family. The third board member, Supreme Court Chief Justice Lorie Skjerven Gildea, recused herself, citing prior involvement with the case.

Edwards' death enraged the African American community in a city just emerging from some of the nation's highest homicide rates, briefly earning it the nickname "Murderapolis." Sen. Amy Klobuchar, who

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then headed the county attorney's office, has used Burrell's conviction over the years as an example of her tough-on-crime policies, most recently during a Democratic presidential primary debate last year.

The AP investigation that followed sparked national outrage and gave Burrell's family and community organizers the ammunition they needed to get Klobuchar's attention. She called for the creation of the independent panel of legal experts. Barry Scheck, co-founder of the Innocence Project, and Laura Nirider, of Northwestern University's Center on Wrongful Convictions, oversaw that effort.

Klobuchar released a statement Tuesday saying the pardon board made the right decision. She also urged a conviction-review unit to continue investigating the facts.

The yearlong investigation by The AP showed there was no hard evidence — no gun, DNA or fingerprints — tying Burrell to the shooting. Among other things, police did not collect a corner store's surveillance video, which Burrell said could have cleared him. And video footage showed the lead homicide detective offering a man in police custody \$500 for Burrell's name, even if it was just hearsay. Officers relied heavily on a single eyewitness, who offered conflicting accounts, along with jailhouse informants, who benefited generously for testifying. One had his 16-year prison sentence cut to three.

Burrell's co-defendants said the teenager was not at the scene that day.

And one, Isaiah Tyson, admitted to being the shooter.

Burrell, who was 16 at the time of the slaying, appeared at his hearing via videoconference from inside the state's Stillwater prison. He became emotional as the board voted, and put his hand on his head and said, "Thank you, thank you. I appreciate it."

Burrell told the board about his time in prison, saying he did not know what was going on when he was sentenced, and that he converted to Islam and became a religious leader while behind bars.

"I tried to make the best of my situation," he said. "I started going in and extracting medicine out of the poison. The trials and tribulations I was going through, I tried to get something out of it."

His request was accompanied by testimony from community leaders and letters from young men in prison, who attested to his strong character and moral leadership.

Jimmie Edwards III, Tyesha's brother, told the AP that he and his family were upset by the decision. He said the justice system failed his family, and media coverage and support for Burrell's release overshadowed his sister's death.

"She never got to go to her prom. She never got to go to college. She never got to go to junior high school or high school," he said. "Her life was taken away at 11. Who's the victim?"

Gov. Walz recommended the commuted sentence, saying science has found and the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that teenage minds work differently than those of adults, and that a life sentence for a teenager is too extreme.

"While this board is not a fact finder, it does have the power to determine when justice is served through the power of clemency and mercy," he said. "We cannot turn a blind eye to the developments in science and law as we look at this case."

Walz addressed the Edwards family during the hearing, saying: "We're not here to relitigate the crime committed against your family that took your daughter away. There is nothing I can do to ease your pain, and it will not be made better. But we must act today to recognize the law in this area has changed. Justice is not served by incarcerating a child for his entire lifetime for a horrible mistake committed many years ago."

New questions about Burrell's case surfaced just before Minneapolis was thrust into the national spotlight after a police officer held his knee against George Floyd's neck outside a convenience store as Floyd gasped for breath. It was the same Cup Foods store that Burrell said could have provided his alibi if surveillance tapes had been pulled.

Floyd's death sparked racial injustice protests and put renewed focus on some law enforcement practices from the 1990s and early 2000s, when harsher policing and tougher sentencing led to the highest lock-up rates in the nation's history. Those incarcerations hit minority communities the hardest.

Burrell was jailed during an era "marked by racially charged fear mongering about young 'super-predators'

who would be violent for the entirety of their lives," Mark Osler, who chaired the panel, wrote in the Minneapolis Star Tribune this past weekend.

Edwards III, Tyesha's brother, said news of Burrell's release is especially hard after the death of his mother last year.

"When she lost our sister, it took her away. She was never able to recover," he said of his mother. "I'm glad my mom is not here to witness this, because it would just break her heart."

Associated Press writers Amy Forliti and Mohamed Ibrahim contributed to this report.

## Camp closures force Iraqi families back to shattered homes

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

DEBAJA, Iraq (AP) — After living in a camp for three years, 70-year-old Merhi Hamed Abdullah returned to his village west of the city of Mosul to find it in ruins — his first glimpse of home since Iraq defeated the Islamic State group.

To shelter his family of seven, Abdullah resurrected the tent he had hurriedly packed as the government closed Hamam Alil camp last month, forcing him and 8,500 others to return to devastated hometowns and an uncertain future.

All around Abdullah, 200 other returnee families in the remote village of Debaja followed suit. The sweeping plains are dotted with burned-out shells of broken homes and, next to them, the tents they have erected, emblazoned with the unmistakable logo of the U.N. refugee agency. Without running water or electricity, Debaja is pitch black at night. Few have steady work.

"If it were up to me, I wouldn't have left," Abdullah said. "It wasn't."

The closure of Hamam Alil camp, south of Mosul, was part of a government push to shut down all camps for internally displaced persons, or IDPs, by the end of the year. Iraq's cash-strapped government says accelerated closures are needed to revive lagging reconstruction efforts.

Aid groups warn the rapid closings could leave tens of thousands of people homeless in winter months amid the coronavirus pandemic. Haphazard implementation, they say, threatens to create new displacement, cause informal settlements to mushroom and fuel resentments in an Iraqi society still reeling from the memories of IS's brutal rule.

So far, at least 34,000 people have been pushed out by the closure or consolidation of 11 formal camps since mid-October. Aid groups say the number is likely higher. Another 26,000 people are still in the three remaining camps in federal Iraq slated for closure.

More than 180,000 people live in 25 other camps in the Kurdish-run northern region. It is not clear when they would face closure.

Expelled camp residents are left to live in wrecked homes or in tents, or drain savings renting in expensive urban sprawls. The most stigmatized — families affiliated with the IS group — say they have nowhere to turn.

"Pushing people out of camps might seem like ending displacement, but it doesn't solve the crisis in terms of offering durable solutions to that displacement," said Marine Olivesi, spokeswoman for the Norwegian Refugee Council.

Iraq's 2014-2017 war against IS drove 6 million Iraqis from their homes, nearly 15% of the population. Over the years, many returned, and in August 2019, the Baghdad government began closing camps. It sped up the process in mid-October, when camps still held more than 240,000 people.

Nearly 75% of Hamam Alil camp's residents said they couldn't return because their homes were destroyed, according to a survey conducted by the NRC before the camp closed.

In Laylan camp, west of the city of Kirkuk, 7,000 IDPs were given days to pack up and leave, prompting management to scramble and prepare three month's supply of life-saving medications.

The U.N. has raised alarm, finding that 30% of returnees are not in "safe or dignified" housing since leaving camps.

Government officials say that by pushing IDPs to return, aid groups can shift from managing camps to

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assisting development.

"We need them to return to rebuild their towns and villages," said Najm Jibouri, governor of Nineveh province, where Hamam Alil is located. "Yes, they will suffer ... But that doesn't mean we should keep them in camps without a deadline."

In an example of what some Nineveh officials hope will be replicated elsewhere, the U.N.'s International Organization of Migration recently assisted IDPs in Salamiyah camp to assess the cost of repairing homes, said Azad Daoud, deputy head of the immigration department in Mosul.

Contrary to what dozens of returnees told The Associated Press, Daoud said IDPs were given a choice to remain in camps if their areas of origin were deemed unsafe.

Though Jibouri has pressed Iraq's prime minister and the U.N. for more assistance, with temperatures dropping, many returnees said they cannot wait.

In Mosul's Hay Tanak slum, Ghanem Khalaf, 41, inspected the trench dug with his bare hands to keep out sewage that floods his single-story home whenever it rains. His home's exposed concrete walls have no insulation to trap warmth.

"We have to stay here, there are no other options," said the father of five, who left Jadah Camp months ago.

As camps empty out, the government has no master plan for the most stigmatized of the residents: the wives, widows and mothers of IS members, who face discrimination and fear retribution by militias and their own tribes.

With trucks parked to collect their belongings in Laylan camp, Suha Ahmed said she cannot go back to her village south of Kirkuk.

Though she formally disavowed her IS-member husband — a procedure required for these families — her tribe has not accepted her return. She also fears the nearby checkpoint manned by Shiite militiamen.

"I don't know where to go," said Ahmed, who has five children, the youngest three years old.

In Nineveh, 2,000 IS-linked families are stuck in limbo. Daoud expects they will be consolidated in Jadah 5 Camp. After that he doesn't know what will happen.

Government-led negotiations with local tribes to facilitate returns have seen some success. But other areas remain out of reach.

In the town of Sinjar, painful memories are still fresh of IS militants destroying Yazidi villages, lining up men to be shot and enslaving thousands of women.

Suhad Daoud, who survived IS horrors, said she will never accept the return of Sunni Arab families.

"We reject those families living among us again. They betrayed us," she said.

Sheikh Mohammed Ibrahim, a Sunni tribal leader in Khailo village, south of Sinjar, said even IS members' children were forbidden from returning.

"Anyone whose family member was killed will want revenge by blood," he said. "We don't want them back, we don't want to see them, be they men, women or children."

Despite these sharp objections, the government is committed to closing all camps.

"If these families stay in camps, we will breed a new generation of IS in Iraq," said Jibouri, the governor. "They need to mix with the people ... They need to change their minds."

## A pandemic atlas: How COVID-19 took over the world in 2020

By The Associated Press

Almost no place has been spared — and no one.

The virus that first emerged a year ago in Wuhan, China, swept across the world in 2020, leaving havoc in its wake. More than any event in memory, the pandemic has been a global event. On every continent, households have felt its devastation — joblessness and lockdowns, infirmity and death. And an abiding, relentless fear.

But each nation has its own story of how it coped. How China used its authoritarian muscle to stamp out the coronavirus. How Brazil struggled with the pandemic even as its president scoffed at it. How Israel's ultra-Orthodox flouted measures to stem the spread of the disease, intensifying the rift between them



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and their more-secular neighbors.

Spain witnessed the deaths of thousands of elders. Kenyans watched as schools closed and children went to work, some as prostitutes. India's draconian lockdown brought the rate of infection down — but only temporarily, and at a horrific cost.

At year's end, promising vaccines offered a glimmer of hope amid a cresting second wave of contagion. "The winter will be difficult, four long difficult months," said Chancellor Angela Merkel, as she announced new restrictions on life in Germany. "But it will end."

Journalists from The Associated Press around the world assessed how the countries where they are posted have weathered the pandemic — and where those countries stand on the cusp of year two of the contagion.

The story of COVID-19 in BRAZIL is the story of a president who insists the pandemic is no big deal. Jair Bolsonaro condemned COVID-19 quarantine, saying shutdowns would wreck the economy and punish the poor. He scoffed at the "little flu," then trumpeted the fatalistic claim nothing could stop 70% of Brazilians from falling ill. And he refused to take responsibility when many did. He poured money into the economy to ease the pain of the pandemic. But while Bolsonaro could have inspired people to hunker down, he instead encouraged them to flout local restrictions.

Go deeper: Brazil's leader scoffs, and toll rises

Workers have returned to factories and offices, students are back in the classroom and once again long lines form outside popular hot pot restaurants. In the cities, wearing a surgical mask — though no longer required outside of subways and other crowded places — has become a habit. In many ways, normal life has resumed in CHINA, the country where COVID-19 first appeared one year ago. China's ruling Communist Party has retracted some of the most sweeping anti-disease controls ever imposed. The challenge is jobs: The economy is growing again, but the recovery is uneven.

Go deeper: China's state power crushes COVID-19

GERMANS enjoyed a largely relaxed summer with many restrictions lifted, the dividend of a rapid response to the initial coronavirus outbreak and a reliance on early and widespread testing that won wide praise. It brought the number of daily COVID-19 cases down from a peak of more than 6,000 in late March to the few hundreds by the warmer months. But as people grew lax in following the rules the numbers began to climb to nearly quadruple the March daily record, and the country now finds itself in a new lockdown as it tries to bring the pandemic back under control.

Go deeper: Early success, growing concern in Germany

A nation of 1.3 billion people, INDIA is likely to emerge as the country with the world's highest coronavirus tally. It responded to the pandemic early on with an abrupt nationwide lockdown, but the number of cases spiked as restrictions eased and its creaky public health system struggled to keep up. Questions have been raised about its unusually low death rate. India's virus worries are also multiplied by its struggling economy that recorded its worst performance in at least two decades. It will be the worst-affected among the world's major economies even after the pandemic wanes.

Go deeper: India struggles to save lives, economy

At the start, IRANIAN officials downplayed COVID-19 — denying the mounting toll of infections, refusing to close mosques, making half-hearted gestures at locking down businesses. That was then. This is now: Even Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has worn disposable gloves while planting a tree for state media, and prayed in an empty mosque to mark the holy Shiite commemoration of Ashoura. The coronavirus pandemic has only grown worse in Iran in the course of the year, threatening everyone from the day laborer on the street to the upper reaches of the Islamic Republic. Now the virus has sickened

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and killed top officials, becoming perhaps Iran's greatest threat since the turmoil and war that followed its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Go deeper: No longer in viral denial, Iran struggles

When ISRAEL went into its second nationwide coronavirus lockdown in September, most of the country quickly complied with the closure. But in some ultra-Orthodox areas, synagogues were packed, mourners thronged funerals and COVID-19 cases continued to soar. The flouting of nationwide safety rules in ultra-Orthodox areas reinforced a popular perception that the community prioritizes faith over science and cares little about the greater good. It also has triggered a backlash that threatens to ripple throughout Israeli society for years. Meanwhile, the neighboring Palestinian territories — the West Bank and the Gaza Strip — are coping with their own crises.

Go deeper: A virus widens Israel's religious rifts

In late February, ITALY became the epicenter of COVID-19 in Europe and a cautionary tale of what happens when a health care system in even one of the wealthiest parts of the world collapses under the weight of pandemic sick and dead. When the second wave hit in September, even the lessons learned from the first weren't enough to spare Italy's disproportionately old population from devastation. Despite plans and protocols, monitoring systems and machinery that were put in place to hedge against the expected autumn onslaught, thousands more died and hospitals once again were brought to the breaking point.

Go deeper: Italy becomes Europe's viral epicenter

The COVID-19 pandemic in JAPAN had a turbulent start in February when a luxury cruise ship returned to its near-Tokyo home port carrying passengers and crewmembers; their infections exploded during quarantine. The handling of the Diamond Princess triggered criticism that Japanese health officials botched the quarantine, turning the vessel into a virus incubator. Despite concerns whether the country could survive future waves of infections, Japan has been spared the dangerous surges seen in the U.S. and Europe, and hopes to host the Olympics next summer. Experts say the use of masks and border control have been key to keeping the Japanese caseload low.

Go deeper: Masks key to keeping Japan's caseload low

They say youth is a protective factor against COVID-19. In KENYA, youth have suffered anyway. From children forced into hard labor and prostitution, to schools closed until 2021, from a child shot dead by police enforcing curfew, to babies born in desperate conditions, the effects of the pandemic in Kenya have fallen hard on the young. Growing economic pressures, and Kenya's intention to close schools for almost everyone until 2021, has put enormous pressure on children, who were suddenly left to drift by the millions. Some now split rocks in quarries, or have turned to prostitution or theft.

Go deeper: Kenya's youth suffer collateral damage

For months PERU held the grim title of first worldwide in per capita COVID-19 deaths. It didn't have to be that way. Decades of under investment in public health, poor decisions at the onset of the pandemic, coupled with severe inequality and shortages of life-saving goods like medicinal oxygen combined to create one of the world's deadliest outbreaks. Now the nation is coping with crippling, mass grief. A recent poll found that 7 in 10 Peruvians know someone who has died from the virus.

Go deeper: Peru's death toll leaves a grieving nation

In the world's most unequal country, the disease hit the poor the hardest and the economic downturn sent unemployment to 42%. But SOUTH AFRICA had a secret weapon: Health professionals who are veterans of the country's longstanding battles against HIV/AIDS and drug-resistant TB. The country's leaders heeded their advice on how to deal with the coronavirus, and though there have been ups and downs,

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the worst-case scenarios have not yet come to pass.

Go deeper: South Africa acts quickly, dodges disaster

In 2020, SPANIARDS have normalized things unimaginable only 12 months before. But 2020 will also go down as the year in which an unknown virus shook the foundations of the social contract and threw into question a system that failed to prevent so many deaths. Politicians boast that the system didn't collapse during that first wave, when the country recorded 929 deaths in a single day. But health professionals will tell you that the actual cost was overworked staff who fell sick more than anywhere else in the world and suffered a huge emotional toll.

Go deeper: Spanish system fails, and the elderly die

AMERICANS have been inundated by wave after wave of grim numbers — COVID-19 deaths in the hundred thousands, infections in the millions. While those figures testify to a tragedy of historic proportions, they don't fully capture the multitude of ways, large and small, that the virus has upended and rejiggered everyday life. For that, though, there are a host of other numbers, some more familiar than others, but all just as telling in tracking the pandemic's sweeping impact.

Go deeper: USA by the numbers, telling and horrifying

In MEXICO, the government did little, aside from asking its people to act responsibly. The result: more than 100,000 deaths, a number that is presumed to be an understatement. In NEW ZEALAND, the government closed its borders and shut down nearly everything, preventing all but a couple dozen deaths. The nations of the world ran the gamut in their responses to the COVID-19 pandemic — sometimes veering from strict to lax measures in the course of just a few months, or vice versa. A look at the state of the pandemic around the globe.

Go deeper: Nations ran the gamut in their response

On the Web: A Pandemic Atlas ( <http://apnews.com/PandemicAtlas> )

## **A pandemic atlas: USA by the numbers, telling and horrifying**

By ADAM GELLER AP National Writer

Month after dismal month, Americans have been inundated by an ever-rising tide of devastating numbers. Hundreds of thousands of deaths. Tens of million unemployed.

By mid-December, five in every 100 Americans — more than 16 million — had been infected by COVID-19.

Those numbers testify to a historic tragedy. But they don't fully capture the multitude of ways, large and small, that the virus has upended and reconfigured everyday life in the U.S.

For that, there are a host of other numbers. Some may be less familiar than others, yet all are just as telling in calculating the pandemic's sweeping impact:

Miles that Americans did not drive because they were unemployed, working or studying from home and traveling less: 35.3 billion (through August)

School lunches and breakfasts that went unserved in March and April after schools were closed: 400 million

Number of people participating in meetings on Zoom each day last December: 10 million

Number of people participating daily in Zoom meetings by the end of March: 300 million

Employment rate of low-wage workers as the year nears its end, compared to January: down 20.3 percent

Employment rate of high-wage workers compared to January: up 0.2 percent

Share of small businesses that are still closed even as the U.S. economy has reopened: 28.8 percent

Drop in the number of passengers traveling on U.S. domestic flights this spring: 272.01 million, a decline of 76 percent (March to July, compared to the same period in 2019).

Dollars the international airline industry has lost this year: \$118.5 billion

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Passengers screened by Transportation Security Administration agents at U.S. airports on April 14 last year: 2.21 million

Passengers screened by the TSA on April 14 this year: 87,534

Number of TSA screening agents who have tested positive for COVID: 3,575

Number of TSA agents at New York's John F. Kennedy International who have tested positive: 152

Number of people who went to a New York Broadway show during the first week of March: 253,453

Number of people who have been to a Broadway show since mid-March: 0

Number of jobs lost at New York City restaurants and bars between February and April: 233,751

Number of jobs regained at New York City restaurants and bars from April through September: 89,559

People who applied for a job at Amazon.com in a single week, after the online retailer announced a hiring fair to keep up with skyrocketing orders: 384,000

Payments to Americans by the Internal Revenue Service to help ease the pandemic's economic fallout: 153.1 million checks and direct deposits through August, totaling \$269.3 billion

Americans' spending on restaurants and hotels, compared to January: down 36.6 percent

Americans' spending on transportation, compared to January: down 50.9 percent

Americans' spending on entertainment and recreation, compared to January: down 64.3 percent

Americans' spending on groceries, compared to January: down 2.7 percent

Total sales of alcoholic beverages during the pandemic: \$62.5 billion, up 21.8 percent

Online sales of alcohol in September compared to a year ago: up 256 percent

Sales of tequila for home consumption in September and October, compared to a year ago: up 56 percent

Champagne: up 71 percent

Ready-to-drink cocktails: up 131 percent

Production increase in bottles of Purell hand sanitizer this year: up 300 percent

Number of Purell single-pump "doses" contained in bottles shipped to U.S. hospitals this year: 54 billion

Dentists who closed their offices entirely, or to all but emergency patients, in April: 97.1 percent

Dentists whose offices have reopened, but with fewer patients than usual: 65.6 percent

Dentists who say they are seeing more patients who grind their teeth, usually an indicator of stress: 59.4 percent

Games played during Major League Baseball's regular season last year: 2,430

Fans who attended those games: 68,494,752

Games played during MLB's shortened regular season this year: 898

Fans who attended those games: 0

Sources: Federal Highway Administration; Sivak Applied Research; U.S. Government Accountability Office; Zoom Video Communications Inc.; Opportunity Insights using data from Womply, Affinity Solutions, Paychex Inc., Intuit Inc., Earnin and Kronos; Bureau of Transportation Statistics; International Air Transport Association; Transportation Security Administration; The Broadway League; Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; Amazon.com Inc.; Internal Revenue Service; The Nielsen Company; GOJO Industries; American Dental Association; Major League Baseball.

## US vaccinations ramp up as 2nd COVID-19 shot nears

By MATTHEW PERRONE, LAURAN NEERGAARD and DAVID PORTER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hundreds more hospitals around the country began dispensing COVID-19 shots to their workers in a rapid expansion of the U.S. vaccination drive Tuesday, while a second vaccine moved to the cusp of government authorization.

A day after the rollout of Pfizer-BioNTech's coronavirus shots, the Food and Drug Administration said its preliminary analysis confirmed the effectiveness and safety of the vaccine developed by Moderna and the National Institutes of Health. A panel of outside experts is expected to recommend the formula on Thursday, with the FDA's green light coming soon thereafter.

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The Moderna vaccine uses the same technology as Pfizer-BioNTech's and showed similarly strong protection against COVID-19 but is easier to handle because it does not need to be kept in the deep freeze at minus 94 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 70 Celsius).

Another weapon against the outbreak can't come soon enough: The number of dead in the U.S. passed a staggering 300,000 on Monday, according to Johns Hopkins University, with about 2,400 people now dying per day on average.

The devastating toll is only expected to grow in the coming weeks, fueled by travel over Christmas and New Year's, family gatherings and lax adherence to mask-wearing and other precautions.

Packed in dry ice, shipments of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine began arriving Tuesday at more than 400 additional hospitals and other distribution sites.

The first 3 million shots are being strictly rationed to front-line health workers and nursing home patients, with hundreds of millions more shots needed over the coming months to protect most Americans.

The rollout provided a measure of encouragement to exhausted doctors, nurses and other hospital staffers around the country.

Maritza Beniquez has had a front-row seat to the devastation the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought on communities of color in New Jersey, so she jumped at the chance to take the vaccine that is being hailed as a turning point in the long and grueling battle against the virus.

The 56-year-old emergency room nurse at Newark's University Hospital became the first person in New Jersey to receive the vaccine on Tuesday. All recipients will get a second shot a few weeks later.

"I'm happy that in another month and a half I won't have to be afraid to go into a room anymore. I won't have to be afraid to perform chest compressions or be present when they're intubating a patient," Beniquez said. "I don't want to be afraid anymore, and I don't want to have that risk of taking it home to my own family and my own friends."

Widespread acceptance of the vaccine is critical to eventually protecting enough of the U.S. population to defeat the outbreak. But 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.

In Manchester, New Hampshire, intensive care unit nurse Heidi Kukla said she volunteered to get the shot first to help dispel fears about the vaccine's long-term effects and the speed with which it was developed.

"I know a lot of people have reservations about getting the vaccine," she said after getting vaccinated at Elliot Hospital. "But I can assure you that there is absolutely nothing worse than being a patient on a ventilator in an ICU anywhere in this country right now with COVID."

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, a childhood polio survivor, urged elected officials to "step up" and get vaccinated.

"We really need to get the country vaccinated," he said. "It's the right thing to do for yourself, for your family and for the country."

Acting U.S. Defense Secretary Christopher Miller received the Pfizer vaccine at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, on Monday. Other high-ranking Pentagon military service leaders are expected to get the vaccine as soon as next week to show that it is safe. Currently, getting the vaccine is voluntary for members of the military.

The federal government is planning hundreds more shipments through the weekend.

Shots for nursing home residents won't start in most states until next week, when some 1,100 facilities are set to begin vaccinations. Government officials project 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 Moderna vaccine, which also requires two shots for full protection. The U.S. government has purchased 100 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and orders for 200 million doses of the Moderna serum. Assuming no manufacturing or distribution delays, that would be enough to vaccinate 150 million Americans by mid-2021.

Elsewhere around the world, the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine is being given in Britain and Canada. And Eu-

European Union regulators moved up a meeting to assess the vaccine to Dec. 21, more than a week earlier than planned, under pressure from Germany and other countries on the continent.

In scrutinizing early results of a 30,000-person study, the FDA found that Moderna's vaccine worked just about the same as Pfizer-BioNTech's.

The Moderna vaccine was more than 94% effective overall at preventing COVID-19 illness, and 86% effective in people 65 and older. The FDA uncovered no major safety problems. Side effects can include fever, fatigue and aches as the vaccine revs up the immune system.

Even such a large study can't detect very rare problems. But the FDA looked carefully for signs of allergic reactions after Britain last week reported some possible reactions among people with a history of severe allergies who received the Pfizer-BioNTech shot.

The FDA found no serious allergic reactions in the Moderna study. About 1.5% of vaccine recipients and 1.1% who got dummy shots reported possible smaller, "hypersensitivity" reactions.

Both Moderna's and Pfizer-BioNTech's shots are so-called mRNA vaccines. They aren't made with the coronavirus itself, meaning there is 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.

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Associated Press writers Tamara Lush, Holly Ramer, Candice Choi and Lolita C. Baldor contributed to this report. Porter reported from Newark, New Jersey.

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## Trump asking about special prosecutor for Hunter Biden

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump is considering pushing to have a special counsel appointed to advance a federal tax investigation into the son of President-elect Joe Biden, setting up a potential showdown with incoming acting attorney general Jeffrey Rosen.

Trump — angry that out-going Attorney General William Barr didn't publicly announce the ongoing, two-year investigation into Hunter Biden — has consulted on the matter with White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, White House counsel Pat Cipollone and outside allies.

That's according to several Trump administration officials and Republicans close to the White House who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss private matters.

Beyond appointing a special prosecutor to investigate the younger Biden, the sources said Trump is interested in having another special counsel appointed to look into his own baseless claims of election fraud. But if he's expecting his newly named acting attorney general to go further than Barr on either matter, he could end up quickly disappointed.

Barr on Monday evening announced he will resign effective next week, revealing his plans about a week after Hunter Biden publicly disclosed that he was under investigation related to his finances. It is generally Justice Department policy not to disclose investigations that are in progress, though the subjects of those investigations can.

Rosen, the deputy attorney general, will step into the Justice Department's top job in an acting role. A longtime litigator, he has served as Barr's top deputy since May 2019 but largely shies away from the spotlight. He said in a statement Tuesday he was "honored" to serve and "will continue to focus on the implementation of the Department's key priorities."

Trump is still weighing his options, considering whether to pressure Rosen to make the special counsel appointment or, if needed, to replace the acting attorney general with someone more likely to carry out his wishes. He has even asked his team of lawyers, including personal attorney Rudy Giuliani, to look into whether the president has the power to appoint a special counsel himself.

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A key question will be whether Rosen can stand up to presidential pressure — and potentially withering attacks — in the waning weeks of the Trump administration. If not, Rosen could be cast aside in favor of others more willing to do Trump's bidding.

Believing that a special counsel probe could wound a Biden administration before it even begins, Trump aides have urged the president to push for one, which would make it so the investigation can't be easily stopped by the incoming president. No firm decision has been made.

Trump announced that Barr would be stepping down from his position on Dec. 23, amid lingering tension between the president and the attorney general over the Hunter Biden investigation. Trump was angry for days after learning that Barr knew of the Hunter Biden tax investigation before the election but did not disclose it.

He also was unhappy that Barr said in a widely reported interview with the AP that the Justice Department had not uncovered widespread election fraud that would have affected the results of the election.

For much of his tenure, Barr was perceived as one of the president's most loyal Cabinet members, especially after he framed the results of Robert Mueller's Russia investigation in a manner favorable to Trump even though the special counsel did not exonerate the president of obstruction of justice. It was Barr who first appointed a U.S. attorney to review the case against former national security adviser Michael Flynn and then sought to dismiss the criminal charges against Flynn, who twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI.

As Barr exits, the biggest thing by far hanging over the Trump Justice Department is its investigation into Hunter Biden, which involves multiple U.S. attorney offices and FBI field offices. Appointing a special counsel could prove to be complicated, requiring consolidating different investigatory angles and bringing in someone new to run the probe and get up to speed.

Under federal regulations, a special counsel can be fired only by the attorney general and for specific reasons such as misconduct, dereliction of duty or conflict of interest -- reasons that must be spelled out in writing. Appointing a special counsel for the Hunter Biden probe would also signal a more prolonged and complicated investigation than the current inquiry, so far largely centered on his taxes. A subpoena seeking documents from the younger Biden asked for information related to more than two dozen entities, including Ukraine gas company Burisma.

Either way, the probe is complicating Joe Biden's pick for attorney general, upon whose shoulders this probe would land. Any nominee for attorney general is likely to face a mountain of questions at a confirmation hearing about how they would oversee the probe.

It could be that Rosen is left in the position for a few weeks after Biden is sworn in on Jan. 20. If Trump doesn't fire him, that is.

Rosen has been the public face of some of the Justice Department's biggest actions, including its antitrust case against Google and the criminal case against opioid maker Purdue Pharma. Before joining the Justice Department, he worked at the Department of Transportation as general counsel and then deputy secretary.

At Rosen's confirmation hearing in 2019, he suggested that he was willing to rebuff political pressure from the White House, if necessary. He told legislators that criminal investigations should "proceed on the facts and the law" and that prosecutions should be "free of improper political influences."

"If the appropriate answer is to say no to somebody, then I will say no," he said at the time.

## **Biden taps Buttigieg for transportation, Granholm for energy**

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, JONATHAN LEMIRE, THOMAS BEAUMONT and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden nominated his former rival Pete Buttigieg as secretary of transportation on Tuesday and intends to choose former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm as his energy secretary.

Biden also plans to tap Gina McCarthy, a former Environmental Protection Agency chief, for the powerful new position of domestic climate chief to run his ambitious climate plans across the federal government.

All three will be central to Biden's plan to remake the country's automobiles and transportation systems

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to quickly cut climate-damaging petroleum emissions.

Buttigieg would be the first openly gay person confirmed by the Senate to a Cabinet post. At 38, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, would also add a youthful dynamic to an incoming administration that is so far dominated in large part by leaders with decades of Washington experience.

Biden said in a statement that Buttigieg was a "patriot and a problem-solver who speaks to the best of who we are as a nation."

Granholtz, 61, served as Michigan's attorney general from 1999 to 2003 and two terms as Michigan's first female governor, from 2003 to 2010. She was a supporter of Biden's presidential bid and has spoken out against President Donald Trump's attempts to overturn the election results, accusing him of "poisoning democracy."

The intended selections of Granholtz and McCarthy were confirmed by three people who were familiar with one or both of the picks. They spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly before the president-elect's announcement.

Biden is steadily rolling out his choices for Cabinet secretaries, having already selected former Obama adviser Tony Blinken as his secretary of state, retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin as his secretary of defense and former Fed Chair Janet Yellen as his treasury secretary. He's also picked former Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to reprise that role in the Biden administration, and Ohio Rep. Marcia Fudge to serve as housing secretary.

Meanwhile, New Mexico Rep. Deb Haaland is considered a lead contender to become interior secretary despite Democratic worry that her departure would leave them with a perilously thin majority in the House. Haaland, a member of New Mexico's Pueblo of Laguna, would be the first Native American to lead the Interior Department if confirmed.

Buttigieg became a leading figure in national politics when he was among those who challenged Biden for the Democratic presidential nomination this year. Initially written off as the leader of a relatively small town competing against far more established figures, Buttigieg zeroed in on a message of generational change to finish the first-in-the-nation Iowa caucuses in a virtual tie with Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders.

His campaign stumbled, however, in appealing to Black voters who play a critical role in Democratic politics. As the primary moved into more diverse states such as South Carolina, Buttigieg faltered and quickly withdrew from the race. His backing of Biden ushered in a remarkably swift unification of the party around its ultimate nominee.

Biden's selection of Buttigieg for transportation secretary drew praise from LGBTQ rights groups, with one calling it "a new milestone in a decades-long effort" to have LGBTQ representation in the U.S. government.

"Its impact will reverberate well-beyond the department he will lead," added Annise Parker, president and CEO of the LGBTQ Victory Institute.

The South Bend chapter of Black Lives Matter, however, denounced Buttigieg's pending nomination. The group had made their displeasure of Buttigieg known during his presidential campaign, following the 2019 South Bend shooting of a Black man by a white police officer.

"We saw Black communities have their houses torn down by his administration," BLM's South Bend leader Jordan Giger said in a statement, referring to Buttigieg's effort to tear down substandard housing. "We saw the machinery of his police turned against Black people."

If confirmed as transportation secretary, Buttigieg will be charged with implementing Biden's proposals to spend billions making major infrastructure improvements and on retrofitting initiatives that can help the U.S. battle climate change. He also wants to immediately mandate mask-wearing on airplanes and public transportation systems to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, as energy secretary, Granholtz will have a role in executing Biden's promised \$2 trillion climate plan, billed as the nation's broadest and most ambitious effort to cut fossil fuel emissions that are dangerously warming Earth's atmosphere.

Biden's plan includes overhauling the nation's transportation and power sectors and buildings to eliminate fossil fuel emissions by 2050.



As governor, when Granholm faced an economic downturn before the Great Recession struck, she sought to diversify the state that is home to the Detroit Three automakers by emphasizing the growing "green economy." The state pushed incentives to manufacture wind turbines, solar panels, advanced batteries and electric vehicles, and she signed a law requiring that more of Michigan's energy come from renewable sources.

After leaving office, she moved to California to teach at the University of California, Berkeley. She is a political contributor on CNN.

As domestic climate chief, McCarthy will spearhead Biden's ambitions for a massive, coordinated domestic campaign to slow climate change. Her counterpart in climate efforts will be former Secretary of State John Kerry, earlier named by Biden as his climate envoy for national security issues.

The selection of McCarthy is in line with Biden's pattern of picking tested, familiar figures from his time as vice president. McCarthy, 66, served as EPA administrator from 2013 to 2017 during President Barack Obama's second term and was assistant administrator for the Office of Air and Radiation in Obama's first term.

She led initiatives that cut air and water pollution and signed the Clean Power Plan, Obama's signature effort to address climate change by setting the first national standards for reducing carbon emissions from existing power plants. Trump later scrapped the plan, and moved to support climate-damaging coal, oil and gas.

Beaumont reported from Des Moines, Iowa, and Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City. Associated Press writers Matthew Daly in Washington, David Eggert in Lansing, Mich., and Amer Madhani in Wilmington, Del., contributed to this report.

## McConnell warns GOP off Electoral College brawl in Congress

By LISA MASCARO and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fending off a messy fight that could damage Republicans ahead of Georgia Senate runoff, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell warned fellow GOP senators on Tuesday not to join President Donald Trump's extended assault on the Electoral College results.

In public remarks and private warnings, McConnell worked to push ahead to the Biden era and unite a fractured Republican Party ahead of the runoff elections that will determine Senate control.

First, the Republican leader heaped praise on Trump's "endless" accomplishments as he congratulated President-elect Joe Biden during a morning Senate speech. Then he pivoted, privately warning Republican senators away from disputing the Electoral College tally when Congress convenes in a joint session Jan. 6 to confirm the results.

That fight would yield a "terrible vote" for Republicans, McConnell told the senators, according to two people granted anonymity to discuss the call, which was first reported by Politico. They would have to choose whether to back Trump or publicly buck him.

Republicans are worried about bad effects on the Jan. 5 Georgia runoff election, where two incumbent Republican senators, David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, face Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in a state that flipped in November for Biden.

McConnell has been a strong supporter of most Trump efforts. But the turn of events six weeks after Election Day showed the Kentucky senator, backed by his leadership team, seeking to normalize relations with the coming Biden presidency while avoiding the spectacle of pitched floor fight that would divide the party as Trump reluctantly leaves office.

"I want to congratulate President-elect Joe Biden," McConnell said as he opened the Senate.

"Many of us had hoped the presidential election would yield a different result," he said. "But our system of government has the processes to determine who will be sworn in on Jan. 20. The Electoral College has spoken."

Biden told reporters that he called to thank McConnell for the remarks and the two had a "good con-

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versation." As he departed to campaign in Georgia, he said he told McConnell there are "things we can work together on."

The Senate leader's sprint into action after weeks of silence followed other leading Republicans who spoke up the after the Electoral College voted late Monday. They finally said aloud what many Republicans had been signaling privately — that Biden is the winner of the presidential election, and they are essentially abandoning Trump's election attacks.

From there, the floodgates opened. Several GOP senators confirmed they had spoken with Biden, including Trump ally Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Mitt Romney of Utah, the GOP's 2012 presidential nominee. Some have had meetings with Biden's nominees for administration posts.

In his phone call, Romney expressed admiration for Biden's willingness to endure the rigors of a presidential campaign and serve in the nation's highest office, the senator's office said. The two also discussed the challenging political environment ahead.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said now that McConnell has spoken, "enough is enough."

Trump should "end his term with a modicum of grace and dignity," Schumer said.

For his part, Trump continued to push his baseless claims of "voter fraud" in a new tweet on Tuesday.

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.

House Republican leader Kevin McCarthy declined to comment Tuesday when asked if he was ready to acknowledge Biden as the president-elect.

One House Republican, Rep. Mo Brooks of Alabama, is planning to challenge the Electoral College results when Congress convenes for the joint session.

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.

McConnell and his lieutenants, including Sens. John Thune of South Dakota and Roy Blunt of Missouri, warned the senators off any Electoral College challenge, calling it dead end since any action would need sign-off by Democrats who have the House majority under Speaker Nancy Pelosi, according to one of the people familiar with Tuesday's call.

The GOP leaders further warned senators that forcing their colleagues into a vote on Electoral College challenges would prove difficult, especially for those facing their own reelections in 2022.

No Republican senator spoke up in contradiction.

Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, who as chairman of the Homeland Security Committee is convening a hearing Wednesday on election fraud, has "no plans" to join with House Republicans and challenge the results, according to spokesman Austin Altenburg.

McConnell surprised Washington on Tuesday when he opened the Senate addressing the election.

The GOP leader called Biden someone "who has devoted himself to public service for many years." He also congratulated Kamala Harris, saying "all Americans can take pride that our nation has a female vice president-elect for the very first time."

McConnell prefaced his remarks with sweeping praise of Trump's four years in office, saying the president delivered on a promise to "shake up Washington." He cited the president's nomination and Senate confirmation of three Supreme Court justices, among other accomplishments.

With states having affirmed the election results, the Republicans faced a pivotal choice — to acknowledge Biden the president-elect or keep standing silently by as Trump wages a potentially damaging campaign to overturn the election.

"At some point you have to face the music," Thune, the No. 2 GOP leader, said late Monday. "Once the Electoral College settles the issue today, it's time for everybody to move on."

Historians and election officials have warned that Trump's unfounded claims of voter fraud threaten to erode Americans' faith in the election system.

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. Some 120 House Republicans signed on to that failed effort.

Associated Press writer Amer Madhani contributed to this story from Wilmington, Delaware.

## Ex-Houston officer accused of assault in bogus fraud claim

JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A former Houston police captain was charged with assault on Tuesday after running a man off the road and holding him at gunpoint in an effort to prove what authorities have called a bogus voter fraud scheme.

Mark Aguirre claimed that an air conditioner repairman was the mastermind of a giant voter fraud scheme. Aguirre said the man's truck was filled with fraudulent ballots when he ran his SUV into it on Oct. 19, according to authorities.

"The defendant stated (the driver) has approximately seven hundred and fifty thousand fraudulent mail ballots and is using Hispanic children to sign the ballots because the children's fingerprints would not appear in any databases," according to an arrest affidavit.

Aguirre told police he and some friends set up a "command post" at a Marriott hotel in suburban Houston and conducted 24-hour surveillance on the repairman for four days, according to the affidavit. He said he then ran the man's truck off the road, pointed a gun at him, forced him onto the ground and put a knee on his back, the affidavit said.

Police who responded to the incident searched the truck and found only air conditioning parts and tools, authorities said. Authorities did not name the truckdriver, who was not hurt.

"A lengthy investigation ... determined allegations of election fraud were unfounded and no evidence of illegal ballots was found," Houston police said.

Aguirre told a police officer at the scene, "I just hope you're a patriot," according to the affidavit.

Lt. Wayne Rubio with the Texas Attorney General's Office later told police that Aguirre had asked his office to conduct a traffic stop for his investigation and when Rubio said he couldn't do that, Aguirre said he would do it himself and "make a citizen's arrest," according to the affidavit.

Aguirre, 63, has been charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. Court records did not list an attorney for Aguirre.

If convicted, Aguirre faces up to 20 years in prison. Police have not identified any other suspects.

Police say Aguirre was paid \$266,400 by Houston-based Liberty Center for God and Country, a nonprofit organization that is run by GOP party activist Dr. Steven Hotze.

A conservative power broker, Hotze unsuccessfully sued to stop the extension of early voting in Texas for this year's election. He also sued officials in Harris County, where Houston is located, to limit in-person and absentee voting, making allegations without evidence that Democrats were engaged in "ballot harvesting" by gathering votes from individuals who are homeless or elderly.

Allegations by President Donald Trump and others of massive voter fraud have been refuted by several judges, state election officials, an arm of his own administration's Homeland Security Department and Attorney General William Barr.

Hotze was also part of a group of individuals who unsuccessfully tried to challenge the legality of drive-thru voting in Harris County.

Jared Woodfill, an attorney for Hotze, said Liberty Center had employed Aguirre's company and around 20 investigators who were looking into allegations of voter fraud during the election.

Woodfill said he doesn't know if Aguirre was working on the investigation at the time of the alleged assault, but that Liberty Center doesn't approve of such tactics.

"We would never endorse that, saying go pull someone over, put a gun up to their head and make them open up their truck," he said.

Woodfill said he would be "surprised if the allegations were true. That seems out of character for any of the people that would be working under Liberty Center."

Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg said Aguirre's actions "crossed the line from dirty politics to commission of a violent crime."

"We are lucky no one was killed," Ogg said. "His alleged investigation was backward from the start — first alleging a crime had occurred and then trying to prove it happened."

Aguirre was fired from the Houston Police Department in 2003 after a botched raid in which nearly 300 people were arrested in a crackdown on illegal street racing. Most who were arrested were not linked to street racing and charges were dropped. Aguirre was tried and acquitted on five counts of official oppression.

Follow Juan A. Lozano on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/juanlozano70](http://www.twitter.com/juanlozano70)

## **Boko Haram claims abduction of students in northern Nigeria**

By SAM OLUKOYA and CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Rebels from the Boko Haram extremist group claimed responsibility Tuesday for abducting hundreds of boys from a school in Nigeria's northern Katsina State last week in one of the largest such attacks in years, raising fears of a growing wave of violence in the region.

More than 330 students remain missing from the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara after gunmen with assault rifles attacked their school Friday night, although scores of others managed to escape.

The government and the attackers are negotiating the fate of the boys, according to Garba Shehu, a spokesman for Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

"The kidnapers had made contact and discussions were already on, pertaining to the safety and return" of the children to their homes, said Shehu on Twitter during talks with Katsina Gov. Aminu Masari. Neither official said whether the negotiations are with Boko Haram or another group.

Masari said security agencies "deployed for rescue operations have also informed us that they have located their position."

The Daily Nigerian said it received an audio message from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau claiming the abduction, although there has been no independent verification of its authenticity.

The Islamic extremist group has carried out mass abduction of students before. The most serious took place in April 2014, when more than 270 schoolgirls were taken from their dormitory at the Government Secondary School in Chibok in northeastern Borno State. About 100 of the girls are still missing.

In February 2014, 59 boys were killed during a Boko Haram attack on the Federal Government College Buni Yadi in Yobe State.

In the audio message about Friday's attack, Shekau said his group abducted the schoolboys because Western education is against the tenets of Islam.

More than 600 students attend the school. Many were able to escape during a gunfight between the attackers and the police, according to state police spokesman Gambo Isah.

Students corroborated this account with various news agencies, saying many of them were also rounded up and forced to walk to a nearby forest, where some were also able to flee.

Several armed groups operate in northern Nigeria, where Katsina State is located. It was originally believed that the attackers were bandits, who sometimes work with Boko Haram.

Bandits have operated in the northwest region for some time, and kidnappings have increased in recent years. Amnesty International says that more than 1,100 people were killed in the first six months of 2020 in violence related to attacks by bandits.

A joint rescue operation was launched Saturday by Nigeria's police, air force and army after the military engaged in gunfights with bandits after locating their hideout in the Zango/Paula forest.

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If Boko Haram is proven to be behind the abduction, it could mean a new wave of religious extremism is on the rise in Nigeria. For more than 10 years, the group has engaged in a bloody campaign for introducing strict Islamic rule, but it has been mainly active in northeast Nigeria, not in the northwest, where Katsina State is located. Thousands have been killed and more than a million people displaced by the violence.

Nnamdi Obasi of the International Crisis Group said a shift of Boko Haram's activities to the northwest would have serious security implications because it could partner with other armed criminal groups known to carry out attacks and collect payments from households and markets.

"They are like mini-armies that are able to carry out operations in defiance of the security forces, and it is worrisome," Obasi told The Associated Press.

The local armed groups have no religious ideology, however, and Obasi said Boko Haram's movement into the northwest would create "a risk of convergence between criminal groups and jihadist groups. The trajectories are very disturbing."

Because the northwest is more homogeneously Islam than the northeast, there are more potential recruits for radicalism.

Friday's abduction has become a rallying cry for Nigerians fed up with growing violence, with #BringBackOurBoys trending on Twitter as people express their frustrations. A similar #BringBackOurGirls became an international rallying cry for the Chibok girls.

"Before now, it has been bandits and kidnappers terrorizing our state, but little has been done to address the situation," said Mallam Saidu Funtua, a member of a local civil society organization in Katsina State.

He added that "the abduction of students was the height of it all. It is unacceptable and the government has to do more" to protect students and residents.

The attack was a major setback for education in Katsina, which was beginning to make progress in enrollment, he said, adding: "Our people will be discouraged in sending their kids to school."

Kankara villager Lawal Muhammed said the attack left most residents terrified and traumatized.

"We have never experienced this kind of thing before," he said. "We want the government to do more in protecting our children, especially now that schools would be resuming after the COVID-19 break."

The abductions also come as Boko Haram and the Nigerian military may be investigated for war crimes in the rebels' insurgency, which has lasted more than a decade.

The International Criminal Court's chief prosecutor last week said a probe has found enough evidence to merit opening a full-scale inquiry into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity by Boko Haram extremists as well as into charges that Nigerian government forces have also perpetrated abuses.

Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said there is a "reasonable basis to believe" Boko Haram and splinter groups linked to it committed crimes including murder, rape, sexual slavery and torture, as well as intentionally targeting schools and places of worship and using child soldiers. While a vast majority of the criminality in the conflict has been carried out by Boko Haram, prosecutors also found grounds to believe members of Nigeria's security forces had committed crimes, she said.

Amnesty International last week released a report saying at least 10,000 civilians have died in Nigerian military custody since 2011 after being detained in connection with the Boko Haram insurgency in northern Nigeria.

Associated Press writer Haruna Umar in Maiduguri, Nigeria, contributed.

## Hopeful sign: Midwestern states see drop in new virus cases

By ADAM GELLER Associated Press

After a punishing fall that left hospitals struggling, some Midwestern states are seeing a decline in new coronavirus cases. But the signs of improvement are offset by the virus's accelerating spread on both coasts: In California, officials scrambled to distribute body bags and deploy mobile morgues as infections rose at an alarming rate.

States including Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota and Nebraska have seen decreases in the number of people

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testing positive for COVID-19 over the past couple of weeks. All, however, are still experiencing an alarming number of deaths and hospitalizations because of the earlier surge of cases.

With winter weather driving people indoors, where the virus spreads more easily, there's no guarantee the improving dynamic can be maintained, doctors and public health officials say.

"We have a vaccine rolling out, but that doesn't change the overall picture," Dr. James Lawler with the University of Nebraska Medical Center's Global Center for Health Security told the Omaha World-Herald. "Things could still turn south pretty easily."

But he and others are encouraged by the figures. In Iowa, for example, the number of new virus cases reported daily has declined over the past two weeks from nearly 1,800 to about 1,250. In Nebraska, it has gone from about 1,800 a day to a little under 1,300.

"I am fingers crossed right now," said Dr. Stacey Marlow, an emergency room physician at UnityPoint Allen Hospital in Waterloo, Iowa. "The COVID patients that I am seeing are very, very sick. But there are ... less of them."

Deaths from the virus in Iowa have continued to rise sharply, to an average of 79 a day, up from 28 two weeks ago.

The hope, of course, is that the drop in infections will translate into a decline in deaths, but that could take time. Many of those now dying of COVID-19 may have been infected weeks ago.

Nationwide, the death toll has topped 300,000, with more than 16 million confirmed infections. On average, the U.S. is seeing about 2,400 deaths and over 215,000 new cases per day. An influential model from the University of Washington says deaths could total 502,000 by April 1, even with a vaccine.

Lawler said more Nebraska residents appear to be following warnings to limit dining out and wear masks in public. It helps that a number of Nebraska cities recently passed mask mandates, he said.

But he said it's important for Nebraskans to remain vigilant about maintaining social distancing as they wait for vaccines to become widely available in the spring.

In a call with governors this week, White House coronavirus task force member Dr. Deborah Birx said the progress in Midwestern states is being offset by a "deteriorating situation" on both coasts.

Nationwide, the number of people in the hospital with the virus has hit an all-time high of more than 110,000, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

In California, hospitalizations are now double the summertime peak and threaten to overwhelm the system, Gov. Gavin Newsom said Tuesday. The supply of beds in intensive care units is dwindling as new cases average more than 31,000 a day. State officials are distributing 5,000 body bags, mostly to the hard-hit Los Angeles and San Diego areas, and have 60 refrigerated trailers standing by as makeshift morgues in anticipation of a surge of coronavirus deaths.

In Orange County, health officials said they plan to send large tents to four hospitals to help handle their patient caseloads.

"We have reached case counts that exceed all previous records," said Van Do-Reynoso, Santa Barbara County public health director. "It is imperative that each individual take action now and stay home. We are reaching a point where we can see on the horizon our health care system being overrun."

In New York City, officials halted indoor dining at restaurants Monday as the number of infections continued to climb. State and city officials have warned that a broader shutdown might be necessary if things keep getting worse.

"We cannot let this virus keep growing, especially at a moment where we are finally getting the vaccine and can turn the corner," Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

About 370 coronavirus patients were in intensive care in the city this week, triple the number of a month ago, but a fraction of the more than 3,100 patients who filled ICUs in April. Across the state, new confirmed cases have risen from about 6,500 a day to more than 10,100 over the past two weeks.

In New Jersey, a rise in new cases from about 4,000 a day at the end of November to an average of 4,900 has raised concerns among officials and health providers. But the dynamic is very different from the crisis of last spring.

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"People do still continue to die from the disease but certainly not in the kinds of numbers that we were seeing back then," said Dr. John Bonamo, chief medical and quality officer at RWJ Barnabas Health, a large hospital operator in the state.

Associated Press writers Heather Hollingsworth in Mission, Kansas, and Carla K. Johnson in Washington state contributed to this report.

## **Biden tells Georgia he needs a Democratic Senate to govern**

By BILL BARROW and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden told Georgia voters on Tuesday they must deliver two Democratic Senate runoff victories in January so his administration can forcefully confront the coronavirus pandemic and other national challenges.

Fresh off the Electoral College affirming his victory, Biden campaigned alongside Jon Ossoff and the Rev. Raphael Warnock as they try to unseat Republican Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler in Jan. 5 runoff elections that will determine which party controls the Senate. The president-elect, who won Georgia in November, warned that Republican victories would leave him to face the kind of GOP obstruction that hampered former President Barack Obama for most of his two terms.

"We can get so much done, so much that can make the lives of the people of Georgia and the whole country so much better," Biden said at a drive-in rally outside downtown Atlanta on the second day of early voting. "And we need senators who are willing to do it, for God's sake."

Biden criticized Perdue and Loeffler as "roadblocks" for not supporting a sweeping new economic aid package as the coronavirus pandemic surges. In contrast, he said Ossoff and Warnock would "fight for progress and not just get in the way."

"Are you ready to vote for two United States senators who know how to say the word 'yes' and not just 'no'?" Biden said as supporters gathered in the railroad yard honked their horns.

Hours earlier in Washington, Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell acknowledged for the first time that Biden had defeated President Donald Trump after spending weeks muted about the president's false claims that Biden stole the election through widespread voter fraud. In fact, elections officials across the country, including some Georgia Republicans, vouched for the integrity of the voting process and tabulations.

Perdue and Loeffler have not yet publicly acknowledged Biden is president-elect, and they've joined Trump in questioning the integrity of the election results in Georgia and in other battleground states Biden won.

Loeffler tweeted midday Tuesday: "I will never stop fighting for @realDonaldTrump because he has never stopped fighting for us!" The two senators' campaign aides did not respond to a fresh inquiry Tuesday asking whether they acknowledge the reality of Biden's election.

Biden mocked Perdue and Loeffler for publicly backing a failed lawsuit by Texas essentially asking the U.S. Supreme Court to overturn the election results in Georgia and other battlegrounds. The nation's highest court rejected the request unanimously.

"They fully embraced nullifying nearly 5 million Georgia votes," said Biden, the first Democratic presidential nominee to win the state since 1992. "Maybe your senators were just confused. Maybe they think they represent Texas. Well, if you want to do the bidding of Texas, you should be running in Texas."

Biden edged Trump in Georgia by about 12,000 votes out of the 5 million cast, a turnout increase of about 850,000 over 2016. There's an expectation of some dropoff for the second round, though political observers expect a record runoff turnout. The first day of early voting Monday offered mixed results. According to the secretary of state's office, 23% more people cast in-person ballots on Monday than on the opening early voting day in October. But according to an analysis by Ryan Anderson, a nonpartisan data analyst in Atlanta, the number of returned absentee ballots so far is about 37% lower than during the general election.

Despite their reticence to accept Biden's victory, Republicans have tacitly acknowledged Biden's win in

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the way they talk about the importance of the runoffs. Perdue, Loeffler and their allies have issued dire warnings that a Democratic Senate would ensure a leftward lurch in the federal government. Democrats would need to win both Georgia seats to force a 50-50 Senate, and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris would be the tiebreaking vote.

Republicans need one of the two Georgia seats for McConnell to remain majority leader and set the Senate agenda. McConnell has repeatedly described himself as the barrier for Democrats' policy ideas on health care, overhauling the nation's energy grid and reducing the carbon pollution that causes climate change, among other matters.

Democrats in Georgia have not been as eager as their Republican rivals to embrace the nationalization of the runoffs, partly because Democratic victories in the longtime GOP stronghold still involve a patchwork coalition that ranges from progressives and liberals in the metro areas to moderate suburbanites and small-town residents who dislike Trump but may be more reticent about Democrats controlling Capitol Hill and the White House.

Speaking before Biden, Ossoff took on the matter most directly. "If Mitch McConnell controls the Senate, they're going to try to do to Joe and Kamala just like they tried to do President Obama," he said, alluding to McConnell's years of blocking legislation and Obama's court appointments. "They will block the COVID relief that we need. They will block the \$15 minimum wage. They will block the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act that we need. They will block affordable health care. We can't let that happen, Georgia."

Warnock declared the outcome a "a matter of life and death" because of COVID-19 relief and health care legislation, though he didn't explicitly mention McConnell or Senate control.

Biden also used the trip to catch up with key supporters who helped him win Georgia. He praised voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams, Democrats' 2018 candidate for governor, for her years of organizing work that registered hundreds of thousands of new voters. He also singled out Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, who gave Biden one of his earliest high-profile endorsements in 2019.

After he spoke, Biden huddled with Bottoms, who has been mentioned for various Cabinet posts, before departing.

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Associated Press writer Kate Brumback in Atlanta contributed to this report.

## **Hack may have exposed deep US secrets; damage yet unknown**

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Some of America's most deeply held secrets may have been stolen in a disciplined, monthslong operation being blamed on elite Russian government hackers. The possibilities of what might have been purloined are mind-boggling.

Could hackers have obtained nuclear secrets? COVID-19 vaccine data? Blueprints for next-generation weapons systems?

It will take weeks, maybe years in some cases, for digital sleuths combing through U.S. government and private industry networks to get the answers. These hackers are consummate pros at covering their tracks, experts say. Some theft may never be detected.

What's seems clear is that this campaign — which cybersecurity experts says exhibits the tactics and techniques of Russia's SVR foreign intelligence agency — will rank among the most prolific in the annals of cyberespionage.

U.S. government agencies, including the Treasury and Commerce departments, were among dozens of high-value public- and private-sector targets known to have been infiltrated as far back as March through a commercial software update distributed to thousands of companies and government agencies worldwide. A Pentagon statement Monday indicated it used the software. It said it had "issued guidance and directives to protect" its networks. It would not say — for "operational security reasons" — whether any of its systems may have been hacked.

On Tuesday, acting Defense Secretary Chris Miller told CBS News there was so far no evidence of com-



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promise.

In the months since the update went out, the hackers carefully exfiltrated data, often encrypting it so it wasn't clear what was being taken, and expertly covering their tracks.

Thomas Rid, a Johns Hopkins cyberconflict expert, said the campaign's likely efficacy can be compared to Russia's three-year 1990s "Moonlight Maze" hacking of U.S. government targets, including NASA and the Pentagon. A U.S. investigation determined the height of the documents stolen — if printed out and piled up — would triple the height of the Washington Monument.

In this case "several Washington Monument piles of documents that they took from different government agencies is probably a realistic estimate," Rid said. "How would they use that? They themselves most likely don't know yet."

The Trump administration has not said which agencies were hacked. And so far no private-sector victims have come forward. Traditionally, defense contractors and telecommunications companies have been popular targets with state-backed cyber spies, Rid said.

Intelligence agents generally seek the latest on weapons technologies and missile defense systems — anything vital to national security. They also develop dossiers on rival government employees, potentially for recruitment as spies.

President Donald Trump's national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, cut short an overseas trip to hold meetings on the hack and was to convene a top-level interagency meeting later this week, the White House said in a statement.

O'Brien had been scheduled to return Saturday and had to scrap plans to visit officials in Italy, Germany, Switzerland and Britain, said an official familiar with his itinerary who was not authorized to discuss it and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Earlier, the White House said a coordinating team had been created to respond, including the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

At a briefing for congressional staffers Monday, DHS did not say how many agencies were hacked, a reflection of how little the Trump administration has been sharing with Congress on the case.

Critics have long complained that the Trump administration failed to address snowballing cybersecurity threats — including from ransomware attacks that have hobbled state and local governments, hospitals and even grammar schools.

"It's been a frustrating time, the last four years. I mean, nothing has happened seriously at all in cybersecurity," said Brandon Valeriano, a Marine Corps University scholar and adviser to the Cyber Solarium Commission, which was created by Congress to fortify the nation's cyber defenses. "It's tough to find anything that we moved forward on at all."

Trump eliminated two key government positions: White House cybersecurity coordinator and State Department cybersecurity policy chief.

Valeriano said one of the few bright spots was the work of Chris Krebs, the head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, whom Trump fired for defending the integrity of the election in the face of Trump's false claims of widespread fraud.

Hackers infiltrated government agencies by piggybacking malicious code on commercial network management software from SolarWinds, a Texas company, beginning in March.

The campaign was discovered by the cybersecurity company FireEye when it detected it had been hacked — it disclosed the breach Dec. 8 — and alerted the FBI and other federal agencies. FireEye executive Charles Carmakal said it was aware of "dozens of incredibly high-value targets" infiltrated 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 compromised.

Carmakal said the hackers would have activated remote-access back doors only on targets sure to have prized data. It is manual, demanding work, and moving networks around risks detection.

The SolarWinds campaign highlights the lack of mandatory minimum security rules for commercial software used on federal computer networks. Zoom videoconferencing software is another example. It was approved for use on federal computer networks last year, yet security experts discovered various

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vulnerabilities exploitable by hackers — after federal workers sent home by the pandemic began using it. Rep. Jim Langevin, a Rhode Island Democrat and Cyberspace Solarium Commission member, said the breach reminded him of 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.

It highlights the need, he said, for a national cyber director at the White House, a position subject to Senate confirmation. Congress approved such a position in a recently passed defense bill.

“In all of the different departments and agencies, cybersecurity is never going to be their primary mission,” Langevin said.

Trump has threatened to veto the bill over objections to unrelated provisions.

Associated Press writers Ben Fox, Deb Riechmann and Lolita Baldor in Washington and Matt O’Brien in Providence, Rhode Island, contributed to this report.

## **EXPLAINER: How Congress will count Electoral College votes**

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The congressional joint session to count electoral votes is generally a routine, ceremonial affair. But President Donald Trump’s repeated, baseless efforts to challenge Democrat Joe Biden’s presidential victory will bring more attention than usual to the Jan. 6 joint session of the Senate and the House.

The congressional count is the final step in reaffirming Biden’s presidential win, after the Electoral College officially elected him on Monday. The meeting is required by the U.S. Constitution, and includes several distinct steps.

A handful of House Republicans have signaled that they want to object to the results, a move that could force separate votes in the Senate and the House. But to do so, they would need a senator to sign on. And even if a senator did support the effort, the move would almost certainly fail.

On Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell privately asked his caucus not to do that, saying it would be a “terrible vote” for the Senate to have to take, according to two people familiar with the Republican meeting and granted anonymity to discuss it.

A look at the joint session:

### **WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONGRESS MEETS IN JANUARY?**

Under federal law, Congress must meet Jan. 6 to open sealed certificates from each state that contain a record of their electoral votes. The votes are brought into the chamber in mahogany boxes.

Bipartisan representatives of both chambers read the results out loud and do an official count. The president of the Senate, Vice President Mike Pence, presides over the session and declares the winner.

### **WHAT DOES THE CONSTITUTION REQUIRE?**

The Constitution requires Congress to meet and count the electoral votes. If there is a tie, then the House decides the presidency, with each congressional delegation having one vote. That hasn’t happened since the 1800s, and Joe Biden’s electoral win over Trump was decisive, 306-232.

### **HOW DOES THE SESSION UNFOLD?**

The two chambers meet midday on Jan. 6th to count the votes. If the vice president can’t preside, there is precedent for the Senate pro-tempore, or the longest-serving senator in the majority party, to lead the session. That’s currently Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

The presiding officer opens and presents the certificates of the electoral votes in alphabetical order of the states. The appointed “tellers” from each chamber, members of both parties, then read each certificate out loud. The tellers then record and count the votes, and the presiding officer announces who has won the majority votes for both president and vice president.

### **WHAT IF THERE’S AN OBJECTION?**

After a teller reads the certificate from a state, any member can stand up and object to that state’s vote on any grounds. However, the presiding officer will not hear the objection unless it is in writing and

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signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

If there is such a joint request, then the joint session suspends and the House and Senate go into separate sessions to consider it. For the objection to be sustained, both chambers must agree to it by a simple majority vote. If they do not both agree, the original electoral votes are counted.

The last time such an objection was considered was 2005, when Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio and Sen. Barbara Boxer of California, both Democrats, objected to Ohio's electoral votes by claiming there were voting irregularities. Both chambers debated the objection and rejected it. It was only the second time such a vote had occurred.

## WHAT IF A SENATOR DOES AGREE TO OBJECT?

On a GOP caucus call Tuesday, McConnell asked his fellow Republican senators not to join in any House objection, saying they would have to vote it down and it would be "terrible," according to the people familiar with the meeting.

It is unclear if any senator has seriously considered doing so. Many senators have ruled it out, including Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson, one of Trump's chief allies on Capitol Hill, who is holding a hearing Wednesday looking at whether there were "irregularities" in the election. There was no widespread fraud in the election, as has been confirmed by a range of election officials and Attorney General William Barr.

A spokesman for Johnson, Austin Altenburg, said Tuesday that Johnson has "no plans" to join a House challenge to the results.

On Monday, after the electoral college vote, Texas Sen. John Cornyn said any such effort by congressional Republicans would be "futile" and a mistake.

## WHAT IS PENCE'S ROLE?

The role of the vice president as presiding officer is often an awkward one, as it will be for Pence, who will be charged with announcing Biden's victory — and his own defeat — once the electoral votes are counted. It will be especially tense for the former Indiana congressman as his boss, Trump, has refused to concede.

But he won't be the first vice president put in an uncomfortable situation. In 2001, Vice President Al Gore presided over the counting of the 2000 presidential election he narrowly lost to Republican George W. Bush, and had to gavel several Democrats' objections out of order. In 2016, Biden presided over the count that declared Trump the winner and also shot down objections from House Democrats that did not have any Senate support.

## ONCE CONGRESS COUNTS THE VOTES, WHAT'S NEXT?

The joint session is the last official chance for objections, beyond court cases that have so far proven ineffective for Trump and his team.

"I think there comes a time when you have to realize that, despite your best efforts you've been unsuccessful," Cornyn told reporters, saying he hopes anyone entertaining the idea of an objection would realize that it "would be futile and it's unnecessary."

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Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro contributed to this report.

## Turning the page? Republicans acknowledge Biden's victory

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than a month after the election, top Republicans finally acknowledged Joe Biden as the next U.S. president on Tuesday, a collapse in GOP resistance to the millions of voters who decisively chose the Democrat. Foreign leaders joined the parade, too, including Russia's Vladimir Putin.

Speaking from the floor of the U.S. Senate where Biden spent 36 years of his career, Majority Leader Mitch McConnell congratulated his former colleague as president-elect. The two men spoke later in the day.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, meanwhile, was to meet with his likely successor in the new administration, Antony Blinken. And GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, one of President Donald Trump's closest allies, said he'd spoken with some of Biden's Cabinet picks.

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A similar shift unfolded in capitals across the world, where leaders including Russia's Putin and Mexico's Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador acknowledged Biden's win.

The moves come a day after electors nationwide formally cast votes affirming Biden's victory in last month's presidential election. And while that clears a more stable path for Biden to assume the presidency, it does little to stop Trump from continuing to try to undermine confidence in the results with baseless allegations that have been rejected by judges across political spectrum.

As Republicans began discussing a Biden presidency more openly on Tuesday, Trump still pledged to press forward with almost nonexistent legal options.

"Tremendous evidence pouring in on voter fraud. There has never been anything like this in our Country!" Trump tweeted just as members of his party were publicly recognizing Biden's victory.

The growing acknowledgement of reality in Washington was triggered by the Electoral College formally voting on Monday to seal Biden's win with 306 votes to Trump's 232, the same margin that Trump pulled together four years ago. The normally humdrum political ceremony didn't change the facts of the election, but was nonetheless used as political cover by leading Republicans.

"Many of us had hoped the presidential election would yield a different result," McConnell said. "But our system of government has the processes to determine who will be sworn in on Jan. 20. The Electoral College has spoken."

The bureaucratic transition from Trump's government to Biden's actually began weeks ago, despite the president's legal challenges. Still, the suddenly conciliatory stance from many Republicans could thaw the political deep freeze that has gripped Washington lately.

Biden has been trying to build momentum as he prepares to assume the presidency while facing the historic challenge of vaccinating hundreds of millions of Americans against the coronavirus. In some of his most forceful remarks since the election, Biden is calling for unity but also calling Trump's attacks on the voting process "unconscionable" and insisting it is time to "turn the page."

"We need to work together, give each other a chance, and lower the temperature," Biden said in a speech Monday.

Still, the shift coming so late in the tone from Republicans has left the president-elect with barely a month to finish building out key parts his new government. Some say the GOP about-face won't mean much at this point.

"Even them doing this now, the damage has been done because they've blocked, they've interrupted," said Anthony Robinson, a former Obama administration appointee who served several national security policy roles including during the transition to the Trump administration in 2016.

"I don't want to say, 'Who cares?,' but it definitely doesn't symbolize a smooth transition," said Robinson, who is now political director of the National Democratic Training Committee, which trains candidates and campaign staffers all over the country.

Biden's first priority will be the fair and efficient distribution of vaccines against the virus. The president-elect said Tuesday that he would follow the advice of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, who says that getting the president-elect himself vaccinated as soon as possible is a matter of national security.

"Dr. Fauci recommends I get the vaccine sooner than later. I want to make sure we do it by the numbers," Biden said, adding that he'd be immunized publicly, which could help build public trust in the vaccine.

Trump's continued opposition to Biden, meanwhile, may still present roadblocks, especially in the U.S. House where Republicans as recently as last week were introducing legislation to punish members of their party who might be seen as urging Trump to "concede prematurely." Other top Trump administration Cabinet officials haven't yet followed the lead of Pompeo, who plans to meet Thursday with Blinken, Biden's secretary of state nominee.

"The president is still involved in ongoing litigation related to the election," said White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany, calling the Electoral College vote "one step in the constitutional process."

Rick Tyler, a Republican operative and fierce Trump critic, said it seemed at first like "the Electoral College had broken the evil spell that Trump cast across the Republican Party."

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But he said the attacks on the electoral system that Trump is continuing to wage have many of his supporters now questioning American democracy itself—and that won't quickly dissipate just because some Republicans and world leaders are now willing to say conciliatory things.

"There really are 50-plus million people who no longer have trust in our system, and that's a dangerous thing," said Tyler. He said Biden must "figure out a way to restore that trust. And it can't just be a partisan attack on Republicans for, frankly, being stupid."

Also looming large is the divided U.S. Senate, where majority control will depend on the outcome of two special elections in Georgia on Jan. 5. Unless Democrats win both those races, Senate Republicans will have the power to block many of Biden's Cabinet nominations, not to mention thwart his policy initiatives.

Underscoring the urgency on that score, Biden traveled Tuesday to Georgia, his first trip beyond Delaware and southeast Pennsylvania since the election.

"I need two senators from this state who want to get something done, not just get in the way," Biden told a drive-in rally in Atlanta.

## Over-the-counter home test for COVID-19 gets US green light

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first home test for COVID-19 that doesn't require a prescription will soon be on U.S. store shelves.

U.S. regulators Tuesday authorized the rapid coronavirus test, which can be done entirely at home. The announcement by the Food and Drug Administration represents another important — though incremental — step in efforts to expand testing options.

Regulators granted emergency use for a similar home test last month, but that one needs a doctor's prescription.

The agency's action Tuesday allows sales in places like drugstores "where a patient can buy it, swab their nose, run the test and find out their results in as little as 20 minutes," said FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn, in a statement.

Initial supplies of the over-the-counter test will be limited. Australian manufacturer Ellume said it expects to produce 3 million tests next month before ramping up production over the first half of 2021.

A company spokesperson said the test will be priced around \$30 and be available at pharmacies and for purchase online.

The kit includes a nasal swab, a chemical solution and a testing strip. The test connects digitally to a smart phone app that displays the results and then helps interpret them. Users can also connect with a health professional via the app.

For months, health experts have stressed the need for fast, widespread home testing so that people can screen themselves and avoid contact with others if they have an infection. But the vast majority of tests still require a nasal swab performed by a health worker that must be processed at high-tech laboratories. That typically means waiting days for the results. About 25 tests allow people to collect their own sample at home— a nasal swab or saliva — but then that's shipped to a lab.

Ellume's test looks for viral proteins shed by COVID-19, which is different from the gold standard tests that look for the genetic material of the virus.

Like other tests that scan for proteins, FDA officials noted that Ellume's test can deliver a small percentage of false positive and false negative results. People who get a negative result but have coronavirus symptoms should follow up with a health professional, the agency said.

Currently the U.S. is testing nearly 2 million people daily. Most health experts agree the country needs to be testing many times more and researchers at Harvard have pushed for cheap, paper home tests.

Still, Dr. Michael Mina of Harvard called the new test "a great addition," to existing options, though he cautioned that its price could limit access.

"This is a milestone, with reservations," Mina said in an email. "I just hope it doesn't drive more of a wedge between haves and have nots."

For people with insurance, federal law requires that plans cover the cost of COVID-19 testing.

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## US regulators OK genetically modified pig for food, drugs

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. regulators have approved a genetically modified pig for food and medical products, making it the second such animal to get the green light for human consumption. But the company behind it says there are no imminent plans to sell it for meat.

The pig is genetically engineered to eliminate the presence of alpha-gal, a type of sugar found in many mammals. The sugar makes its way into many products — including medications, cosmetics and food — and can cause allergic reactions in some people.

The main goal of the company behind the pig, United Therapeutics Corp., is to develop medical products, such as blood thinners, that won't set off such reactions, said its spokesman Dewey Steadman. Eventually, the Silver Spring, Maryland-based firm hopes to develop a way for the pig's organs to be transplanted into people.

The pig, called GalSafe, also has commercial potential as food, but Steadman said the company doesn't know when it might be able to secure an agreement with a meat producer to process and sell it. He noted the meat allergy the pig addresses, called alpha-gal syndrome, isn't yet considered a major issue.

"It's known, but it's not well known," Steadman said.

Health researchers don't fully understand how the allergy develops, but it has been tied to bites from certain ticks. In 2009, there were 24 reported cases, but more recent estimates exceed 5,000 cases, according to a report by a working group for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Symptoms can include hives, itching, cramping and vomiting. Unlike other food allergies, alpha-gal reactions typically happen several hours after eating beef, pork or lamb, making it difficult to diagnose.

Jaydee Hanson, policy director for the Center for Food Safety, noted that meat from the genetically modified pigs wasn't tested in people with the allergies.

"You're offering it up as something they can eat, without knowing whether it addresses their allergy," Hanson said.

The FDA said it didn't evaluate allergy-specific food safety, since the company's application didn't include data on the preventing such reactions.

The Center for Food Safety has sued the FDA over the first genetically modified animal the agency approved for human food — salmon engineered to grow faster. The group said it's reviewing the agency's decision on the GalSafe pig posted Monday.

Greg Jaffe of the Center for Science in the Public Interest said the FDA's approval of the GalSafe pig announced Monday is also concerning because it came without a chance for public comment.

"Nobody was given notice, and all of a sudden there's an approved animal," he said.

The company didn't disclose exactly how it altered the animal's DNA. Jaffe said the pig was produced by knocking out a gene responsible for producing the sugar and adding another that serves as a marker for the silenced gene.

Jaffe said he's not aware of any rules on how pork from genetically modified pigs would need to be labeled to be sold in supermarkets. A representative for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees meat labeling, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Steadman said the United Therapeutics pigs would be more difficult to produce than conventional pigs for meat because of requirements governing how they must be kept and slaughtered. He said there are about 25 GalSafe pigs at an Iowa farm.

Long term, he said the goal is to combine the genetic modification with multiple other changes to make their organs acceptable for transplants in people. For years, researchers have been looking into the idea of transplanting pig organs as a way of eliminating shortages of donated organs.

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Though there aren't any plans yet to sell meat from GalSafe pigs, the genetically modified salmon could become available in the U.S. soon. AquaBounty, the company that produces the fish, says it is determining the best time to harvest the salmon, which have been growing in indoor tanks at a plant in Indiana.

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## Does Electoral College end election for conservative media?

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Newsmax's newest star, Greg Kelly, sought to rally President Donald Trump's supporters after Monday's Electoral College vote confirmed their hero's defeat at the hands of President-elect Joe Biden.

"My fellow deplorables," he said, "it's not over."

By continuing to support the president's unfounded accusations of election fraud, Kelly is by no means alone within a media infrastructure that competes for the loyalty of Trump's backers. He doesn't speak for all, however, and a shift toward preparing for a post-Trump world is slowly gaining momentum.

Geraldo Rivera offered tough love following Biden's nationally televised address Monday night, telling his Fox News Channel audience that "it's over."

The Wall Street Journal editorialized that Trump and Republicans "can help the country and themselves by acknowledging the result and moving on." Online on Tuesday, Breitbart News played up the story of Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan saying that Republicans who won't accept the election results are "embarrassing us." Only one of 15 stories on the homepage of Dan Bongino's site concerned the election.

Polls illustrate the stark choice imposed by Trump's refusal to concede.

A CBS News-YouGov poll released this week found that 82% of Trump voters didn't believe Biden was the legitimate winner of the election. Similarly, a Fox News poll found that 77% of Trump voters believe their candidate actually won.

So if success as a media personality depends upon this audience, do you tell them the truth or what they want to hear?

"It may not be the ethical answer, but in terms of business? You tell them what they want to hear," said Nicole Hemmer, a Columbia University professor and author of "Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics."

Throughout the Trump era, conservatives who opposed the president have generally lost their media platforms while pro-Trump voices have been ascendant, she said.

As often stated by Rush Limbaugh, many conservative media voices consider themselves entertainers, even if listeners treat them as news sources, said Brian Rosenwald, author of "Talk Radio America" and a scholar in residence at the University of Pennsylvania.

The audience is their first loyalty, he said.

"As conservative media proliferated, it put a lot more pressure on the hosts to move to the right and embrace warfare politics," Rosenwald said. "If they don't, they get accused of selling out. This is a business."

Hemmer said she expects the Electoral College vote will begin to shift the narrative from "the election is undecided" to "the election was stolen."

The difficulty of that transition was evident in coverage of the Electoral College voting.

Newsmax, riding a wave of newfound popularity thanks in part to Trump's promotion, has resisted calling the election for Biden, making it significant when anchor John Bachman twice referred to Biden as the president-elect.

Some colleagues had trouble with that idea: Host Chris Salcedo referred to a "potential Biden administration." With Congress meeting Jan. 6 to formally count the Electoral College vote, Kelly said, "the way I read it, we won't have a president-elect until then."

CNN treated it like a second election night, keeping a running tally of Electoral College votes on the

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screen. Dana Bash said it was a routine event and covered like that in the past, but Trump's stance made it necessary to be more aggressive.

Fox News Channel, like other cable and broadcast news networks, carried Biden's evening speech live. The Electoral College vote led Bret Baier's newscast, which was not a given considering COVID-19 vaccinations began Monday.

Meanwhile, daytime anchor Bill Hemmer's hourlong newscast didn't even mention the Electoral College. Trump aide Stephen Miller was invited on "Fox & Friends" to call for "heroes to step up and do right thing" and grant the president a second term.

Then there are, like Kelly, the true believers. Maria Bartiromo said on Fox Business Network on Monday that "an intel source (is) telling me that President Trump did, in fact, win the election." Lou Dobbs cited "cries of fraud from almost every corner of the country." Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity said that anyone who doesn't "bow before the election decrees" will face a media mob's wrath.

It was notable, though, that while Tucker Carlson found no shortage of things to criticize Biden for, he did not talk about election results.

The idea that Trump was robbed isn't likely to disappear. But it's not a long-term business strategy, and "I also think it's not very interesting editorially," said Steve Krakauer, who publishes the Fourth Watch conservative newsletter and produces podcasts for Megyn Kelly.

Fox would be better off establishing itself as a check on the Biden administration, much like MSNBC and CNN have for Trump, Krakauer said.

Fox appears better positioned to maintain leadership, despite a post-election ratings boomlet at Newsmax, because it has much more robust news capabilities than its competitors for a conservative audience, he said. A Pew Research Center poll released Tuesday also suggests limits to the dissatisfaction with Fox that has been expressed by some Trump fans. Republicans who said Fox is a major source of their election news had a better impression of the network's coverage than those with a more mixed media diet.

No matter how things shake out, experts don't expect it to be pretty for Biden.

"There is no appetite for even recognizing Biden's victory, much less actually working with him," Nicole Hemmer said. "All the incentive structures now encourage more radicalism, more conspiracies, more obstruction. So while the past month has been remarkably corrosive, it likely will be surpassed in the not-too-distant future."

## Birth on a riverbank: Woman's ordeal shows risks at border

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — The Honduran woman walked alone through the dark brush of the South Texas borderlands after being pushed across a nearby river in a tire.

Her labor pains were getting worse. From the other side of the river, the smugglers yelled at her to keep moving.

Finally, she fell to the ground and screamed for help.

Merín gave birth to her daughter next to the Rio Grande, attended to by two Border Patrol agents, showing how lives routinely end up at risk at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Increasing numbers of parents and children are crossing the border, driven by violence and poverty in Central America and growing desperation in migrant camps in Mexico. While crossings have not reached the levels seen in previous years, facilities that hold migrants are approaching capacity, which has been reduced because of the coronavirus pandemic.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection said Monday that it made roughly 4,500 apprehensions of unaccompanied immigrant children in November, more than six times the figure in April. In South Texas' Rio Grande Valley, children and their parents are usually taken to a small station where some young people report having to use old masks and being detained in cramped quarters.

Merín and her daughter are safe after she gave birth on Nov. 22.

"They treated me well, thank God," said Merín, who didn't want her last name used because she fears



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retribution if she's forced to leave the country.

Agents Chris Croy and Raul Hernandez were called to help by another agent who found her. Merín said the first agent told her to get up and keep walking, but she couldn't. She says he accused her of lying.

"When I look, I see the head of a child," Croy said. "I just kneel down to go ahead and support the child's head."

Hernandez saw that Merín's clothing was obstructing the baby's head. He pulled out a small knife and carefully cut it away. Croy kept hold of the baby's head.

"She had another big contraction and out came the baby," he said.

It took another 10 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. Croy and Hernandez took clothes from Merín's bag to keep the baby warm in the meantime.

Mother and child were hospitalized for three days, then processed at a Border Patrol station before being released to Catholic Charities. They soon boarded a bus to join family in the U.S.

Hundreds of people die each year trying to cross the border. Photos last year of a father and daughter who drowned trying to cross the Rio Grande — not far from where Merín made her journey — were shared worldwide.

"There's so many women in great danger," said Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley. "They must really think before they do what they do and risk the life of their unborn child."

Why would a woman cross the river in labor? Law enforcement and human rights groups give sharply different answers.

The Border Patrol blames smugglers for using people in medical distress as decoys, drawing attention from others trying to sneak into the country. In Merín's case, agents said, the smugglers who pushed her across the river then brought through a group of five people. When agents chased the group, they went back across the river into Mexico.

The agency also said in a statement that U.S. birthright citizenship laws "could lead some to cross illegally as they are giving birth." It didn't have numbers on how often that happens.

Under President Donald Trump, the Border Patrol has been criticized for its treatment of immigrant parents and children. Since 2017, six children have died shortly after being detained. Agents separated thousands of families in 2017 and 2018 and have been accused of refusing entry to pregnant women or forcing them to return to Mexico under government policies restricting asylum.

The Border Patrol defends how it treats immigrants and the medical care they receive. Its parent agency, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, said in a statement that agents' priority in emergencies "is the preservation of life of everyone they encounter regardless of citizenship or background. The enforcement of laws becomes secondary."

Advocates say government policies to deter migrants push desperate people into more dangerous situations.

Having fled Honduras with her teenage son when her then-husband threatened to kill her, Merín said she lived for several months in southern Mexico before trying to report drug dealers to police. That made her a target, and she fled again.

She settled in the northern city of Monterrey with her now-partner. Her son went to the border city of Matamoros and crossed a bridge in January as an unaccompanied child.

Thousands of other migrants are waiting in Mexican border cities for a chance to enter the U.S. — some for years. The Trump administration has turned away tens of thousands at legal border crossings, first citing a shortage of space and then telling people to wait for court dates under its "Remain in Mexico" policy.

So Merín used the river. Smugglers are known to control crossings on the Rio Grande and attack migrants who don't obey.

Merín reported one threat: "If you don't pay and you try to cross, you're going to die. We will cut your head off."

Aside from the first agent, she said she was grateful for how she was treated in the U.S. She hoped to find work and support relatives in Honduras. She still could face deportation if she loses her case in

immigration court.

Since the pandemic, the government has expelled more than 200,000 people within hours or days, citing a public-health declaration. In its final days, the Trump administration is formalizing new restrictions on asylum and other immigration protections that would take months or years for President-elect Joe Biden to unwind.

Pimentel, of Catholic Charities, wants reforms to allow people to enter the U.S. safely and pursue their immigration cases, reducing the chance that desperate families will risk their lives in the hands of smugglers.

"There needs to be a process for that, and it doesn't exist at this point," Pimentel said.

## Feds to delay seeking legal protection for monarch butterfly

By JOHN FLESHER AP Environmental Writer

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — Federal officials on Tuesday declared the monarch butterfly "a candidate" for threatened or endangered status, but said no action would be taken for several years because of the many other species awaiting that designation.

Environmentalists said delaying that long could spell disaster for the beloved black-and-orange butterfly, once a common sight in backyard gardens, meadows and other landscapes now seeing its population dwindling.

The monarch's status will be reviewed annually, said Charlie Wooley, head of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Great Lakes regional office. Emergency action could be taken earlier, but plans now call for proposing to list the monarch under the Endangered Species Act in 2024 unless its situation improves enough to make the step unnecessary.

The proposal would be followed by another year for public comment and development of a final rule. Listing would provide a number of legal protections, including a requirement that federal agencies consider effects on the butterfly or its habitat before allowing highway construction and other potentially damaging activities.

Scientists estimate the monarch population in the eastern U.S. has fallen about 80% since the mid-1990s, while the drop-off in the western U.S. has been even steeper.

"We conducted an intensive, thorough review using a rigorous, transparent science-based process and found that the monarch meets listing criteria under the Endangered Species Act," Fish and Wildlife Service Director Aurelia Skipwith said in a statement. "However, before we can propose listing, we must focus resources on our higher-priority listing actions."

Scientists will continue monitoring the butterfly's numbers and the effectiveness of what Wooley described as perhaps the most widespread grassroots campaign ever waged to save an imperiled animal.

Since 2014, when environmental groups petitioned to list the monarch, school groups, garden clubs, government agencies and others around the nation have restored about 5.6 million acres (nearly 2.3 million hectares) of milkweed plants on which monarchs depend, Wooley said. They lay eggs on the leaves, which caterpillars eat, while adults gather nectar from the flowers.

The volunteer effort "has been phenomenal to see," he said. "It has made a difference in the long-term survival of monarchs and helped other pollinators that are potentially in trouble."

But advocacy groups say it has compensated for only a small fraction of the estimated 165 million acres (67 million hectares) of monarch habitat — an area the size of Texas — lost in the past 20 years to development or herbicide applications in cropland.

"Monarchs are too important for us to just plant flowers on roadsides and hope for the best," said Tierra Curry, a senior scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity. "They need the comprehensive protection that comes only from the Endangered Species Act, which would save them and so many other beleaguered pollinators that share their habitat."

The monarch's plight is part of what the United Nations describes as a worldwide crisis threatening 1 million species — one of every eight on Earth — with extinction because of climate change, development and pollution.

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Even so, the Trump administration has listed only 25 species — fewer than any since the act took effect in 1973. The Obama administration added 360.

Trump's team also has weakened protections for endangered and threatened species in its push for deregulation. Among other changes, it limited consideration of climate change's effects on animals when evaluating whether they should be listed.

Global warming is one of the biggest dangers to the monarch. It contributes to lengthening droughts and worsening storms that kill many during their annual migration.

About 90% of the world's monarchs live in North America. Scientists measure their abundance by the size of the areas they occupy in Mexico and California, where they cluster during winter after flying thousands of miles from as far away as Canada.

The Fish and Wildlife Service estimates the larger eastern population declined from about 384 million in 1996 to a low of 14 million in 2013 before rebounding somewhat, reaching about 60 million last year.

But the California-based western group dropped from about 1.2 million in 1997 to fewer than 30,000 in 2019. Preliminary survey results this fall have turned up only about 2,000, said Lori Nordstrom, the Fish and Wildlife Service's assistant regional director.

While such grim prospects qualify the monarch for listing, officials said the law allows delays when the agency has limited resources and must focus on higher-priority cases under consideration.

Species ahead in line might be worse off, or courts might have set deadlines for decisions on them.

The Great Lakes office, which is handling the monarch case, is considering nine others with higher-priority status. They include the little brown bat, the plains spotted skunk, the Illinois chorus frog, the golden-winged warbler, Blanding's turtle, the Mammoth Springs crayfish, two freshwater mussels and a plant called Hall's bulrush.

Advocacy groups said 47 species have gone extinct waiting to be listed.

"Protection for monarchs is needed — and warranted — now," said George Kimbrell, legal director for the Center for Food Safety. "The Biden administration must follow the law and science and protect them."

Also this week, the Fish and Wildlife Service said the northern spotted owl, listed as threatened in 1990, has declined enough since then to justify downgrading to "endangered" — or in peril of extinction. But it also was placed behind higher-priority cases.

Nordstrom said the timing of the announcements about the monarch and the spotted owl was coincidental and did not represent a trend toward finding species fit for listing yet putting them on a waiting list.

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Associated Press writer Ellen Knickmeyer contributed to this story from Oklahoma City.

## Biden to take oath outside Capitol amid virus restrictions

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris aim to take their oaths of office outside the U.S. Capitol building as inauguration planners seek to craft an event that captures the traditional grandeur of the historic ceremony while complying with COVID-19 protocols.

Biden's team released some broad details for the Jan. 20 event on Tuesday. One big unknown: Will President Donald Trump participate?

The president, who continues to make unproven claims of widespread voter fraud, has not yet told current and former White House aides whether he will attend Biden's inauguration. While many had assumed he would skip the event after his loss, some now do expect him to make an appearance for the sake of tradition, even if he tries to overshadow the event by, perhaps, announcing the launch of his 2024 campaign just before.

Despite this week's rollout of the new vaccine, its availability to the general public is still months away. So Biden's team is urging supporters not to come to Washington, D.C., to celebrate the inauguration.

"The ceremony's footprint will be extremely limited, and the parade that follows will be reimaged," Biden's inaugural committee said in a statement.

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Biden said Friday that a "gigantic inaugural parade down Pennsylvania Avenue" was unlikely, although a big reviewing stand is being constructed in front of the White House.

After the swearing-in ceremony, Biden will deliver an inaugural address that "lays out his vision to beat the virus, build back better, and bring the country together," the inaugural committee said.

The committee announced that Dr. David Kessler, a former Food and Drug Administration commissioner, had been named as chief medical adviser for the inauguration.

"The pandemic is continuing to have a significant public health impact across the nation," Kessler said. "We are asking Americans to participate in inaugural events from home to protect themselves, their families, friends, and communities."

As it seeks to retain some of the traditional touchstones of the event and imagine new pandemic-era aspects, the committee is turning to the same production team that handled this year's Democratic National Convention. Features of that convention, such as the virtual roll call from every state, may be incorporated.

"I think you're going to see something that's closer to what the convention was like than a typical inauguration," Biden said last week.

COVID-19 concerns should also alter the political mathematics of who sits where on the VIP platform, which would normally hold about 1,600 people. No firm decisions have been made yet, but organizers are looking into limiting that number.

Paige Waltz, a spokesperson for the joint congressional committee charged with overseeing the event, said last week that lawmakers are considering requiring a COVID-19 test for anyone on the platform near the president-elect.

"Our goal is to create an inauguration that keeps people safe, honors the grand traditions of the Presidency, and showcases the Biden-Harris Administration's renewed American vision for an inclusive, equitable, and unified citizenry," Tony Allen, CEO of Biden's inauguration committee, said in a statement.

It's still unclear whether other traditional inaugural events, such as the inaugural balls, the luncheon with members of Congress or a pre-ceremony tea with the outgoing president, will happen this time. Washington's main convention center normally hosts multiple inauguration-related events, but the venue is now standing by as a emergency COVID-19 field hospital.

The Washington D.C. government, which normally works closely with its federal partners on such large national events in the capital, is also awaiting details.

Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser said last week that she had been in touch with the inauguration committee but that the process was understandably coming together later than a normal inauguration.

"At this point we await what the president-elect's plans are," she said.

A face-to-face between Trump and Biden is up in the air due to Trump's ongoing maneuvering rather than any virus concerns. The outgoing president still refuses to concede the election. When asked in a Sunday Fox News interview whether he would participate or attend the inauguration, Trump said, "I don't want to talk about that."

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Associated Press writers Jill Colvin and Kevin Freking contributed to this report.

## **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.

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"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. With the federal response fractured, 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.

"We don't have a long line of people outside of the door who want those jobs," said Dr. Gianfranco Pezzino, health officer in Shawnee County, Kansas, who had decided to retire from his job at the end of the year because, he said, he's burned out. "It's a huge loss that will be felt probably for generations to come."

But Pezzino did not even make it to Dec. 31. On Monday, after county commissioners loosened restrictions, he immediately stepped down.

"You value the pressure from people with special economic interests more than science and good public health practice," he wrote in a letter to the commissioners. "In full conscience I cannot continue to serve as the health officer for a board that puts being able to patronize bars and sports venues in front of the health, lives and well-being of a majority of its constituents."

## 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

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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 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.

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"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 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 depart-

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ments, 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.

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.



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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.

## 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 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 proce-

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sure 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?

On Tuesday, the EMA announced it was moving up a meeting originally scheduled for Dec. 29 to assess the Pfizer and BioNTech vaccine to next Monday, after receiving additional data from drugmakers.

The announcement came after Germany's health minister and others had publicly demanded that the agency move quicker.

During the EMA meeting, 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 has increased 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.

## 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.

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 has 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 deployed in a mass vaccination situa-

tion," EMA chief Cooke said, explaining that the agency 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.

On the day that Britain started its mass vaccination program last week, severe allergic reactions were reported in two people who got the shot. Officials are now investigating if those reactions were caused by the vaccine and have advised people with severe allergies not to get the shot.

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## EU regulators move up Pfizer vaccine assessment to Dec. 21

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Facing strong pressure from Germany and other European Union nations, the bloc's medicines agency on Tuesday moved up a meeting to assess the Pfizer-BioNTech coronavirus vaccine to Dec. 21, likely bringing vaccinations a step closer for millions of EU citizens.

The agency said it made the decision after receiving additional data from the vaccine makers. The announcement came after Germany's health minister and others had publicly demanded that the agency move quicker than its previously planned Dec. 29 meeting at which it was to discuss approving the vaccine.

The vaccine is already being given daily to thousands of people in Britain, Canada and the United States, galling some Europeans who note that BioNTech is a Germany company.

The European Medicines Agency said its human medicines committee "will conclude its assessment at the earliest possible timepoint and only once the data on the quality, safety and effectiveness of the vaccine are sufficiently robust and complete to determine whether the vaccine's benefits outweigh its risks."

After the committee recommends a marketing authorization, the EU's Executive Commission will "fast track its decision-making process" to giving the vaccine approval for all 27 EU nations and a few others within days, the EMA said.

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

Asked by The Associated Press whether he had received direct confirmation that the vaccine would be approved by Dec. 23, Spahn said he had, "otherwise I wouldn't have said that."

He added, however, "the EU has to announce it."

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.

Italy, where Europe's coronavirus outbreak erupted in February and which now leads the continent in the COVID-19 death count, also was 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.

The new vaccine developed by Germany's BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer 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.

"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 Tuesday, 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

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association, told the RND media group. "That way we could still go into nursing homes with mobile teams before Christmas and vaccinate the residents."

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 institute's chief warned that the case numbers would still go up for some time despite Germany's new lockdown.

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

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Mike Corder in The Hague, Nicole Winfield in Rome and Maria Cheng in Toronto contributed to this report.

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## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 16, the 351st day of 2020. There are 15 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 16, 2000, President-elect George W. Bush selected Colin Powell to become the first African-American secretary of state.

On this date:

In 1773, the Boston Tea Party took place as American colonists boarded a British ship and dumped more than 300 chests of tea into Boston Harbor to protest tea taxes.

In 1809, the French Senate granted a divorce decree to Emperor Napoleon I and Empress Josephine (the dissolution was made final the following month).

In 1811, the first of the powerful New Madrid (MAD'-rihd) earthquakes struck the central Mississippi Valley with an estimated magnitude of 7.7.

In 1905, the entertainment trade publication Variety came out with its first weekly issue.

In 1944, the World War II Battle of the Bulge began as German forces launched a surprise attack against Allied forces through the Ardennes Forest in Belgium and Luxembourg (the Allies were eventually able to turn the Germans back).

In 1950, President Harry S. Truman proclaimed a national state of emergency in order to fight "world conquest by Communist imperialism."

In 1960, 134 people were killed when a United Air Lines DC-8 and a TWA Super Constellation collided

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over New York City.

In 1980, Harland Sanders, founder of the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant chain, died in Shelbyville, Kentucky, at age 90.

In 1982, Environmental Protection Agency head Anne M. Gorsuch became the first Cabinet-level officer to be cited for contempt of Congress for refusing to submit documents requested by a congressional committee.

In 1985, Organized-crime chief Paul Castellano and his bodyguard were shot to death outside a New York City restaurant on orders from John Gotti.

In 1991, the U.N. General Assembly rescinded its 1975 resolution equating Zionism with racism by a vote of 111-25.

In 2001, after nine weeks of fighting, Afghan militia leaders claimed control of the last mountain bastion of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida fighters, but bin Laden himself was nowhere to be seen.

Ten years ago: The House joined the Senate in passing a massive bipartisan tax package preventing a big New Year's Day tax hike for millions of Americans. Interviewer Larry King, joined by a parade of former guests, concluded his CNN talk show after 25 years.

Five years ago: The Federal Reserve raised interest rates for the first time in nearly a decade, lifting its key rate by a quarter-point to a range of 0.25 percent to 0.5 percent. The first attempt to find a Baltimore police officer criminally responsible for Freddie Gray's death from a broken neck in a police van ended with a hung jury and a mistrial in the case of William Porter.

One year ago: House Democrats laid out their impeachment case against President Donald Trump; a sweeping report from the House Judiciary Committee said Trump had "betrayed the Nation by abusing his high office to enlist a foreign power in corrupting democratic elections." Boeing said it would temporarily stop producing its grounded 737 Max jet as it struggled to get approval from regulators to put the plane back in the air; it had been grounded since March after two deadly crashes. Drew Brees became the NFL's all-time leader in touchdown passes, throwing for four TDs to lead the New Orleans Saints to a 34-7 victory over the Indianapolis Colts. "The Rise of Skywalker," the conclusion of the third trilogy in the "Star Wars" movie franchise, was given a standing ovation at its world premiere in Hollywood.

Today's Birthdays: Civil rights attorney and co-founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, Morris Dees is 84. Actor Joyce Bulifant is 83. Actor Liv Ullmann is 82. CBS news correspondent Lesley Stahl is 79. Pop musician Tony Hicks (The Hollies) is 75. Pop singer Benny Andersson (ABBA) is 74. Rock singer-musician Billy Gibbons (ZZ Top) is 71. Rock musician Bill Bateman (The Blasters) is 69. Actor Xander Berkeley is 65. Actor Alison LaPlaca is 61. Actor Sam Robards is 59. Actor Jon Tenney is 59. Actor Benjamin Bratt is 57. Country singer-songwriter Jeff Carson is 57. Actor-comedian JB Smoove is 55. Actor Miranda Otto is 53. Actor Daniel Cosgrove is 50. Rhythm-and-blues singer Michael McCary is 49. Actor Jonathan Scarfe is 45. Actor Krysten Ritter is 39. Actor Zoe Jarman is 38. Country musician Chris Scruggs is 38. Actor Theo James is 36. Actor Amanda Setton is 35. Rock musician Dave Rublin (American Authors) is 34. Actor Hallee Hirsh is 33. Actor Anna Popplewell is 32. Actor Stephan James is 27.