

Groton Daily Independent

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"WE DON'T STOP
PLAYING
BECAUSE WE
GROW OLD;
WE GROW OLD
BECAUSE WE
STOP PLAYING."

-GEORGE BERNARD SHAW



Chicken Soup
for the Soul.

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

We will also be broadcasting both junior varsity games on GDILIVE.COM, starting at 4 p.m.



Hc **DH BB**

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



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

GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM



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

Basketball teams go 4-0 over Britton-Hecla

The Groton Area basketball teams went 4-0 in its games with Britton-Hecla.

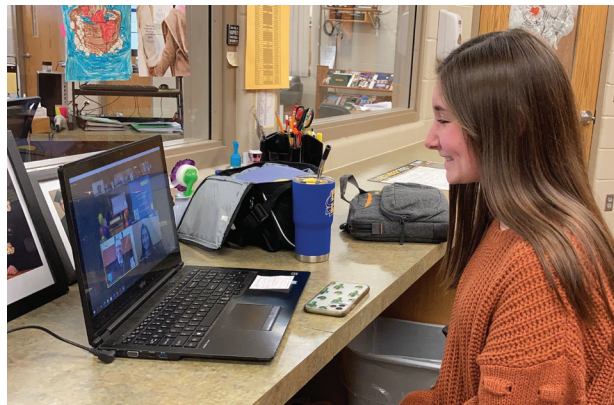
The girls traveled to Britton on Friday where the junior varsity team won, 46-16. Carly Guthmiller led the Tigers with 15 points followed by Sydney Leicht with 14, Emma Schinkel had eight, Anna Fjeldheim six, Lydai Meier two and Cadence Feist 1. Leicht and Guthmiller each made one three-pointer.

The girls varsity team won its game, 45-6, with Brooke Gengerke leading the way with 13 points followed by Alyssa Thaler with 11, Gracie Traphagen 10, Allyssa Locke nine and Kenzie McInerney 1. Thaler and Gengerke each made one three-pointer.

Then on Saturday, the boys hosted Britton-Hecla. Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 53-10. Jackson Cogley led the Tigers with 12 points followed by Jayden Zak and Favian Sanchez with eight each, Jacob Zak seven, Logan Ringgenberg six, Colby Dunker, Braxton Imrie and Holden Sippel each had three, Cade Larson two and Jordan Bjerke one. Cogley, Sanchez and Jayden Zak each made two three-pointers and Jacob Zak made one.

The varsity boys won their game, 66-45. Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 19 points followed by Tristan Traphagen with 12, Tate Larson 10, Isaac Smith seven, Jayden Zak six, Jacob Zak five, Wyatt Hearnen four and Cole Simon three. Tietz made three three-pointers while Simon, Jayden Zak and Jacob Zak each made one. All but one three-pointer were made in the second quarter.

All four games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The boys junior varsity game was sponsored by Jerry and Kathy Bjerke, the girls junior varsity game was sponsored by Laura and Shane Clark; the varsity games were both sponsored by Groton Vet Clinic, the John Sieh Agency, Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Still Massage Therapy and Yoga Studio by Mary Johnson, Blocker Construction, Harr Motors with Bary Keith, Bierman Farm Sales and Milbrandt Enterprises Inc.



Erdmann is BIG Idea Winner

The awards ceremony for the 2020 BIG Idea Competition was held via zoom. Tessa Erdmann, Groton Area, won the Ag Innovation award for the Big Idea Contest. The advisor os Adam Franken. She also received honorable mention in the Marketing Design division. (Photo by

Adam Franken)

#297 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

This was not a good day. We didn't set many records, but the numbers are uniformly awful. I have a bad feeling this is not the last time I'll have to say that before we're out the other end of this thing.

There were 235,900 new cases reported today. This is our third-worst day yet. Our total increased by 1.4% to 16,998,000. We didn't miss 17 million by much today, so tomorrow's certainly the day. That will make it five days for the 17th million.

Hospitalizations were at a record level again today—tenth consecutive record day. There are 112,814 Americans in the hospital with Covid-19 tonight.

And we have now lost 307,295 Americans to this disease. This is 1.1% more than we'd lost yesterday. There were 3439 deaths reported today, our second-worst day, less than ten off the record set last week and I expect this to continue to be bad for quite some time yet.

We've talked a lot over these months of the pandemic about the strain it has put on the health care system, and that's definitely a real thing which grows steadily worse. But we haven't talked so much about the strain on the system at the end of life, the so-called "last responders." Funeral directors report they're overwhelmed. Kevin Spitzer, a funeral director in a town just 35 miles from my home, told CNN they're working 12-15 hour days, seven days a week to keep up in a community with a population less than 30,000. Funeral directors report funerals are sparsely attended and being held without the usual singing and remembrances or the companionship of family and friends that offer so much comfort to the bereaved. They say they don't even have time to properly comfort and support the families, often having to rush from one funeral right to the next. I've known funeral directors, and it seems to me the vast majority of them go into this line of work because they want to help people at the worst times in their lives. I cannot imagine how frustrating and stressful it has to be to know you can't do your best at this most important aspect of your work.

Hospitals say they've had trouble moving the deceased from hospital to funeral home. Sometimes this is because family members are themselves sick and can't make arrangements, and sometimes it is because this is the second or third death in the family in a short time, and relatives are simply overwhelmed. And sometimes it is because funeral homes are full-up and too busy to come pick up another person for a day or longer. Hospital morgues are filling up. It seems no part of our society was prepared for death on this scale; moreover, it seems to me we shouldn't have to be prepared for death on this scale. Maybe we should see whether we can do something about that scale—like go to work to prevent transmission and the subsequent funerals. That would be a good idea.

I've had a lot of questions asking me to compare what we know about the two mRNA vaccines we're going to be leading with in our vaccination effort, the one from Pfizer/BioNTech and the one from Moderna. What you're about to read is based on what scientists who know a whole lot more than I do have to say. First thing to know is that they're extremely similar in safety profile and efficacy. The differences we are seeing between them are, for the most part, not statistically significant.

I should probably say a couple of words about statistical significance here because I suspect it's not a well-understood concept. Statistical significance is a mathematical construct, not a real-world one. Statistical significance is about the reproducibility of a result, that is, whether if you tested something a bunch of times in a row, the difference you saw in one run of the test keeps showing up in the subsequent runs too. A difference that keeps showing up is a statistically significant one, and that means the difference is not some fluke. So statistical significance is a researcher's way to know whether a difference we observe is a real one, one that's caused by the thing we're testing. The way significance computations are done, it happens that it's easier to find significance when you have a lot of cases of whatever it is that you're studying; the fewer horses or students or products or people with Covid-19 or whatever in your study, the less likely significance shows up; fewer cases means flukier results.

The other thing to understand about statistical significance is that it is not the same thing as real-world significance. Let's consider what would happen if you invented a pill you think raises people's IQ if taken

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daily for six months. So you test the drug in 20,000 people and discover your invention raises people's IQs four points and that this result is statistically significant. That means you didn't just have people who happened to feel great on the day the follow-up IQ tests were given so they did very well—a fluke. You have a drug that reliably produces a four-point IQ increase. Cool. Now, let's suppose your drug is pretty expensive to manufacture so you have to charge \$50 per daily dose. The question is whether people will be willing to spend some \$9000 for a four-point IQ gain, and I'm thinking the answer for most folks is going to be, "No." A four-point IQ increase, while it was statistically significant (that is, real), is probably not worth \$9000 to most folks, that is, significant to them. Not to me either.

Now that need for larger numbers is something of a drawback with these vaccine trials because you may recall that, while they were based on 30,000 or more participants, the data analysis was based on maybe 150 cases of Covid-19 that showed up, which means sometimes it's hard to know exactly what you've found out. Don't get me wrong: We absolutely know these vaccines work, and we have zero reason to think they're unsafe; so the bottom line stuff is solid: no need to panic on that. But some of the issues at the fringes are trickier to assess. So let's keep that in mind as we look at this comparison.

First, these vaccines have efficacy rates of 94 percent (Moderna) and 95 percent (Pfizer-BioNTech). This is the first difference we can't really show is significant, not with the small number of cases seen in each clinical trial. I think we can consider them functionally equivalent in their overall efficacy. There were some indications the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine showed something like 82 percent efficacy after the first dose and Moderna candidate around 80 percent after the first dose, both on limited data. And once again, because there were few cases, it's hard to know the significance of that. No one thinks you should get just one dose and skip the second one, but it may be that you have some level of protection while waiting for the second dose (21 days for Pfizer/BioNTech and 28 days for Moderna), which is comforting. (I still wouldn't do anything stupid between doses; who wants to get sick when you're that close to protected?)

The Moderna vaccine does appear to be slightly less effective in people 65 and over; when broken out by age, it was 96% effective in under-65s and 86% effective in 65 and over, but this is another difference which was not statistically significant. Could be a fluke. For the record, the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine appears to be pretty equally effective across the age span. And even if this is a reliable difference (no evidence it is), 86% is still really good. Really, really good. I am over 65, and I assure you, when my turn comes up to be vaccinated, if the Moderna vaccine is the available one, I intend to roll up my sleeve and get in line. I'm not going to quibble.

In addition to my understanding of statistical significance, another reason for my willingness is that both vaccines showed 100% or nearly 100% effectiveness against severe Covid-19. Remember that, during the clinical trials, any symptomatic infection at all was recorded as a case, so people who had very mild disease were counted. (This means that those 94 percent and 95 percent efficacy rates mean against any whisper of a symptom at all; it is important to recognize that all of these cases were confirmed with a RT-PCR test.) But here's the real news: Out of the vaccine recipients (roughly 15,000 for the Moderna candidate and around 21,000 for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine), there was—count 'em—ONE case of severe disease. It occurred in the Pfizer/BioNTech trial, but believe me, with just one case, that difference between the two doesn't have any statistical significance at all. Even if it should happen that this slightly lower old-person efficacy for the Moderna vaccine is statistically significant, it isn't very likely to be significant in the real world where people go to the hospital and die. So yes, either of them would be just dandy with me. Please call me and tell me it's my turn. I'm ready to go. (Still thinking I'm essential.)

Both of them were equally effective across racial and ethnic lines. I want to be clear here that I've seen no evidence there is any biological difference in susceptibility to this infection in different racial or ethnic groups; the disparity in infection and death rates we see in different groups is quite likely due to social and economic factors, not biological ones. That means there's no real reason to expect differences here; nonetheless, because there are some differences with some diseases, even among groups whose ancestors just have different national origins, this is a parameter that gets evaluated.

Both vaccines were also equally effective in men and women and in healthy people as well as those with comorbidities that we know predispose to severe disease.

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The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is authorized for use in individuals 16 years of age and older. Since there were no participants in the Moderna clinical trials who were under 18 years of age, I presume it will not be authorized for 16- and 17-year-olds. That would mean, if you are 16 or 17 years old, you're going to have to seek out the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, although since studies in children down to age 12 are underway, by the time children are eligible to receive it, that situation may have changed. Moderna is also commencing trials in children, so this situation is fluid as well. It is generally expected we'll have more information about use in younger children by late summer or early fall.

Side effects were not much different with the two vaccines. Rates of serious side effects were extremely low, around one percent. Less serious side effects seemed to be similar, soreness at the injection site, aches, fever, fatigue. These were more frequent and worse after the second dose than after the first one. Some side effects caused people to feel bad enough to miss a workday, but few missed more than that.

Supplies of these two vaccines are expected to be similar too. As I understand it, each company expects to have around 20 million doses available by the end of the month—enough to vaccinate 20 million people (remembering that each needs two doses per person). And it appears each is prepared to deliver another 100 million doses in the first quarter of next year, so there's another 100 million people. The government announced last week it has contracted for another 100 million doses from Moderna, and there are reports they are in negotiations with Pfizer/BioNTech for more, but there are reports this company has contracted out most of its capacity for the first half of the year to other countries already, so we'll have to see.

Logistics are different for the two vaccines. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is the one that requires ultra-low-temperature freezers to store and comes with a lot of doses in a package, so it will likely go to population centers, and the Moderna vaccine, which may be stored in ordinary freezer temperatures and ships in smaller containers, will more likely hit the rural areas.

Both will be provided free, paid for by the federal government, although you may have to pay a fee for administration, depending on the setting in which you receive it. I would expect health insurance will pay for administration fees, although I do not have confirmation of this. Check with your insurer to be sure.

Amid all the good vaccine news, there's more good vaccine news, this time about people's willingness to be vaccinated. This is a question that's been polled repeatedly for a few months now, and the Kaiser Family Foundation released another set of results yesterday. Their last poll was done in August and September and showed 63% of respondents said they definitely or probably would get vaccinated. This latest one done in late November/early December shows that number up to 71%. This is excellent news since this approaches the number we need to see vaccinated before herd immunity develops, a point we're going to talk about again in just a minute. The increase in willingness was seen across racial and ethnic groups as well as across the political spectrum, which is also good news; perhaps people are not as entrenched as we'd thought. The most common reasons given for reluctance were worry about possible side effects and mistrust in the government. Perhaps, as these vaccines roll out and people see that side effects, while unpleasant, are not disabling or dangerous, more will change their minds. We can hope.

On the related subject of achieving herd immunity through vaccination, which is the only way a sane person contemplates it, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told NPR this morning we might begin to approach early stages of herd immunity by late spring or summer as vaccinations continue across the country. He is estimating that "50% would have to get vaccinated before you start to see an impact. But I would say 75 to 85% would have to get vaccinated if you want to have that blanket of herd immunity." He projects we're going to have vaccines available to the general public by the end of March or early April; I'm guessing that's when the supply is predicted to have been sufficient to get the priority groups vaccinated. "Once we get there, if in the subsequent months, April, May, June, July, we get as many people vaccinated as possible, we could really turn this thing around before we get toward the end of the year." He also pointed out the "bittersweet" fact that, just as hope comes in on the wings of a vaccine, we are losing record numbers of Americans to this virus, saying, "We still have a raging outbreak that we need to get under control, so . . . we still have to implement the public health measures to prevent the surges we're seeing throughout the country." Truth. Let's

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not just stand around watching people die as these life-saving vaccines go out. Let's just not.

Santii Patel is seven years old, and she lives in Greece, New York. One day, she was at the park, playing on the playground equipment, when she noticed a child in a wheelchair watching. That's when she realized this child couldn't play on the equipment because she couldn't get out of her wheelchair. Santii didn't think that was right, so she set about discovering what kind of a swing set would work for wheelchair users. And she decided her park needed that equipment.

So she conceived the idea of selling hot cocoa. She told Spectrum News that, "I knew it was cold so I figured hot cocoa we could sell for money for kids who have wheelchairs so they can have fun with the wind in their hair with swings." She's been selling hot cocoa like mad ever since.

Her campaign got quite a boost when singer Kelly Clarkson heard about her project and hosted Santii and her mother on her talk show where she informed Santii that one of her sponsors wanted to order \$5000 worth of cocoa. Santii looked fairly horrified at this, but I suspect she'll learn she doesn't actually have to deliver all that cocoa. And the park's swing looks like a done deal. Good deeds beget other good deeds, and when that happens, we all win. There are places all around us where, if we just apply a little leverage, good things happen. We should be looking for those places.

Take care. We'll talk again.

Conde National League

Dec. 14 Team Standings: Cubs 3, Giants 3, Pirates 2, Braves 2, Tigers 1, Mets 1

Men's High Games: Collin Cady 234, Lance Frohling 222, Russ Bethke 217, 202, Ryan Bethke 204, Tim Olson 203

Men's High Series: Russ Bethke 600, Ryan Bethke 566, Collin Cady 562

Women's High Games: Tanah Messevou 196, 167; Joyce Walter 190; Nancy Radke 167

Women's High Series: Tanah Messevou 494, Joyce Walter 466, Nancy Radke 416

Groton Prairie Mixed

Dec. 10 Team Standings: Shih Tzus 16 ½, Cheetahs 13 ½, Jackelopes 13, Chipmunks 5

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

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

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

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

S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank

Groton

**Will be closing at noon on
Friday, Dec 18 for inventory.
They Will Reopen Saturday.**

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The Life of Douglas Doeden

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

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

On Wednesday, Dec. 9, 2020 Doug Doeden, loving husband and father of four children, 14 grandchildren and 2 great-grandchildren passed away at the age of 76.

Doug was born to Harris Oliver and Jennie Doeden in Sibley, Iowa on April 2, 1944. He moved to a farm located in the Lake Wilson, Minnesota area at the age of 10 with his parents and siblings. Doug attended country school and finished his education at Lake Wilson High School. After graduation he farmed with his dad and worked at the Lake Wilson lumberyard. On November 6, 1965 he married Arlis Nepp. Doug and Arlis along with their family moved to Slayton, Minnesota in 1970 where Doug began employment with UBC Lumberyard. In 1972 Doug and his family moved to Groton, SD where he was manager of the lumberyard in Groton. He continued to work at the S & S Lumberyard for Larry Schelle until he retired due to health reasons. Doug and Arlis raised two sons, Troy and Toby, and two daughters, Jodi and Jill.

Doug had a passion for many sports activities. He was awarded best supporting fan while attending high school. His love of sports continued throughout his life within his family and community. Doug coached youth basketball and enjoyed every minute. He loved his family and friends with a passion and never tired of spending time with his grandchildren. Doug loved playing and winning Euchre. He also enjoyed house renovation and remodeled several homes in Groton. In 1996 Doug and Arlis, and their son Toby and his wife Liz opened Paints n' More and after purchasing the old bank building added Olde Bank Christmas Shoppe to the mix. Doug truly enjoyed his years in this business.

Doug's friends and family enjoyed his quick wit and unusual way of communicating. Groton transit became a very important pillar in his life. Doug loved his years of service to the community transit. Driving the bus for the children was a highlight for him as well as being part of the "transit coffee crew".

Doug was preceded in death by his parents, Harris Oliver and Jennie and brother Kevin Doeden, mother and father-in-law Una and Mahlon Nepp. He is survived by his wife Arlis of 55 years, his children, Jodi (Ward) Votapka, Troy (Chris) Doeden, Jill (Bob) Sheehan, Toby (Liz) Doeden, 14 grandchildren, 2 great-granddaughters, and extended family Pam and Brad Hanson, Thomas Cranford, Nelly and Lukas Kustura. He is also survived by brothers Harris (Linda) Doeden, Keith Doeden, sisters Pat (Bob) Idzorik and Peg (Harvey) Erstad and sister-in-law Sandy Doeden.

Pallbearers will be Chase McKittrick, Connor McKittrick, Camden Hurd, Jackson Doeden, Oliver Doeden, Cade Sheehan, Thomas Cranford, Jonathan Doeden and Calder Sheehan.

Honorary Pallbearers will be Jim Ackman, Dave Blackmun, Jerry Bjerke, Gary Heitmann, Jay Johnson, Marc Johnson, Dave McGannon, Gordon Nelson, Tyke Nyberg, Randy Stanley and John Wheeting.

Honorary Pallbearers also include his granddaughters, Sophie Doeden, Josie Doeden, Grace Doeden, Carma Sheehan Townsend, Jennie Doeden and Audrey Doeden.



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Service Notice: Martha Farmen

Services for Martha Farmen, 80, of Groton, will be 11 a.m., Monday, December 21st at Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. Pastor Kari Foss will officiate. Burial will follow in Union Cemetery under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton. Services will be live streamed on GDILIVE.COM and will also be broadcast on GDIRADIO at 89.3FM within one mile of Groton.

Visitation will be held at the church on Sunday from 5-7 p.m. with a prayer service at 7:00 p.m.

Martha passed away Wednesday, December 16, 2020 at Sun Dial Manor in Bristol.

Christmas Programs on GDILIVE.COM

The Groton Area Elementary Christmas Program will be livestreamed only on Dec. 22. Members of the public cannot attend, due to the spread of COVID-19.

Due to the earlier schedule, the event will be livestreamed at 10 a.m. and will remain on-line at GDILIVE.COM until 2 p.m. on Dec. 22. Thereafter it will be archived at 397news.com where GDI subscribers will have access.

We will also be livestreaming St. John's Lutheran Pre-school programs on Dec. 21 at 10:30 a.m. and 3 p.m.

Check out GDILIVE.COM for other events being livestreamed.

Groton Area Announcements

Attention Groton Area Basketball fans....at tomorrow nights Varsity DH in Hamlin mask are REQUIRED! There is no limit on attendance. The concession stand will be open, but will only have prepackaged items.

Attention Groton Area Elementary Parents!!! School will dismiss at 2:00 on Tuesday, December 22nd. There will be no OST after school.

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December 16th 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: +905 (92,603 total) Positivity Rate: 11.9%

Total Tests: 7761 (696,690 total)

Hospitalized: +23 (5265 total). 412 currently hospitalized -12)

Avera St. Luke's: 18 (0) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (-1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 11 (-2) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (-1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +39 (1300 total)

Males: 22, Females: 15

50s=1, 60s=4, 70s=7, 80+=27.

Counties: Aurora-1, Beadle-1, Brown-3, Brule-1, Butte-1, Clark-1, Codington-5, Corson-1, Davison-1, Day-1, Deuel-1, Haakon-2, Hamlin-1, Gregory-1, Lawrence-1, Marshall-1, Minnehaha-5, Moody-1, Oglala Lakota-2,

Pennington-2, Perkins-1, Roberts-3, Union-2, Yankton-1, .

Recovered: +1397 (80,316 total)

Active Cases: -532 (10,987)

Percent Recovered: 86.7%

Beadle (33) +12 positive, +31 recovered (169 active cases)

Brookings (24) +34 positive, +33 recovered (292 active cases)

Brown (47): +28 positive, +47 recovered (434 active cases)

Clark (2): +3 positive, +2 recovered (41 active cases)

Clay (11): +14 positive, +33 recovered (154 active cases)

Codington (64): +36 positive, +39 recovered (457 active cases)

Davison (52): +12 positive, +31 recovered (236 active cases)

Day (15): +11 positive, +24 recovered (100 active cases)

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

Faulk (10): +2 positive, +1 recovered (24 active cases)

Grant (20): +11 positive, +15 recovered (126 active cases)

Hanson (3): +6 positive, +26 recovered (36 active cases)

Hughes (25): +26 positive, +31 recovered (209 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +26 positive, +41 recovered (284 active cases)

Lincoln (57): +65 positive, +98 recovered (721 active cases)

Marshall (4): +1 positive, +5 recovered (31 active cases)

McCook (21): +2 positive, +7 recovered (51 active cases)

McPherson (1): +5 positive, +5 recovery (28 active case)

Minnehaha (237): +186 positive, +318 recovered (2671 active cases)

Pennington (119): +126 positive, +171 recovered (1383 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +2 recovered (25 active cases)

Roberts (26): +10 positive, +18 recovered (144 active cases)

Spink (20): +5 positive, +13 recovered (104 active cases)

Walworth (13): +2 positive, +15 recovered (96 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 16:

- 7.3% rolling 14-day positivity
- 304 new positives
- 4,508 susceptible test encounters
- 160 currently hospitalized (-117)
- 2,956 active cases (-362)
- 1,194 total deaths (+24)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	390	351	742	8	Substantial	7.89%
Beadle	2438	2236	4954	33	Substantial	9.56%
Bennett	342	311	1066	6	Substantial	4.46%
Bon Homme	1432	1342	1826	21	Substantial	22.50%
Brookings	2769	2453	9488	24	Substantial	11.67%
Brown	4120	3639	10711	47	Substantial	17.62%
Brule	618	561	1649	6	Substantial	26.00%
Buffalo	403	377	838	10	Substantial	26.19%
Butte	818	723	2747	16	Substantial	20.54%
Campbell	109	104	202	1	Minimal	6.67%
Charles Mix	1046	904	3445	10	Substantial	27.42%
Clark	295	252	823	2	Substantial	6.25%
Clay	1527	1362	4356	11	Substantial	17.42%
Codington	3204	2683	7999	64	Substantial	21.28%
Corson	434	398	873	6	Substantial	22.64%
Custer	639	549	2306	8	Substantial	21.66%
Davison	2601	2313	5536	52	Substantial	13.88%
Day	492	377	1471	15	Substantial	17.95%
Deuel	381	309	957	6	Substantial	18.60%
Dewey	1202	924	3418	7	Substantial	30.23%
Douglas	346	296	799	6	Substantial	18.09%
Edmunds	310	251	868	3	Substantial	16.81%
Fall River	412	356	2214	10	Substantial	17.76%
Faulk	304	270	580	10	Substantial	23.08%
Grant	787	641	1857	20	Substantial	22.16%
Gregory	464	413	1050	24	Substantial	12.50%
Haakon	204	157	461	5	Substantial	21.43%
Hamlin	564	472	1455	29	Substantial	9.26%
Hand	307	285	687	2	Moderate	11.54%
Hanson	296	257	571	3	Substantial	16.28%
Harding	87	69	148	0	Moderate	21.43%
Hughes	1891	1657	5350	25	Substantial	12.33%
Hutchinson	666	566	1942	14	Substantial	23.60%

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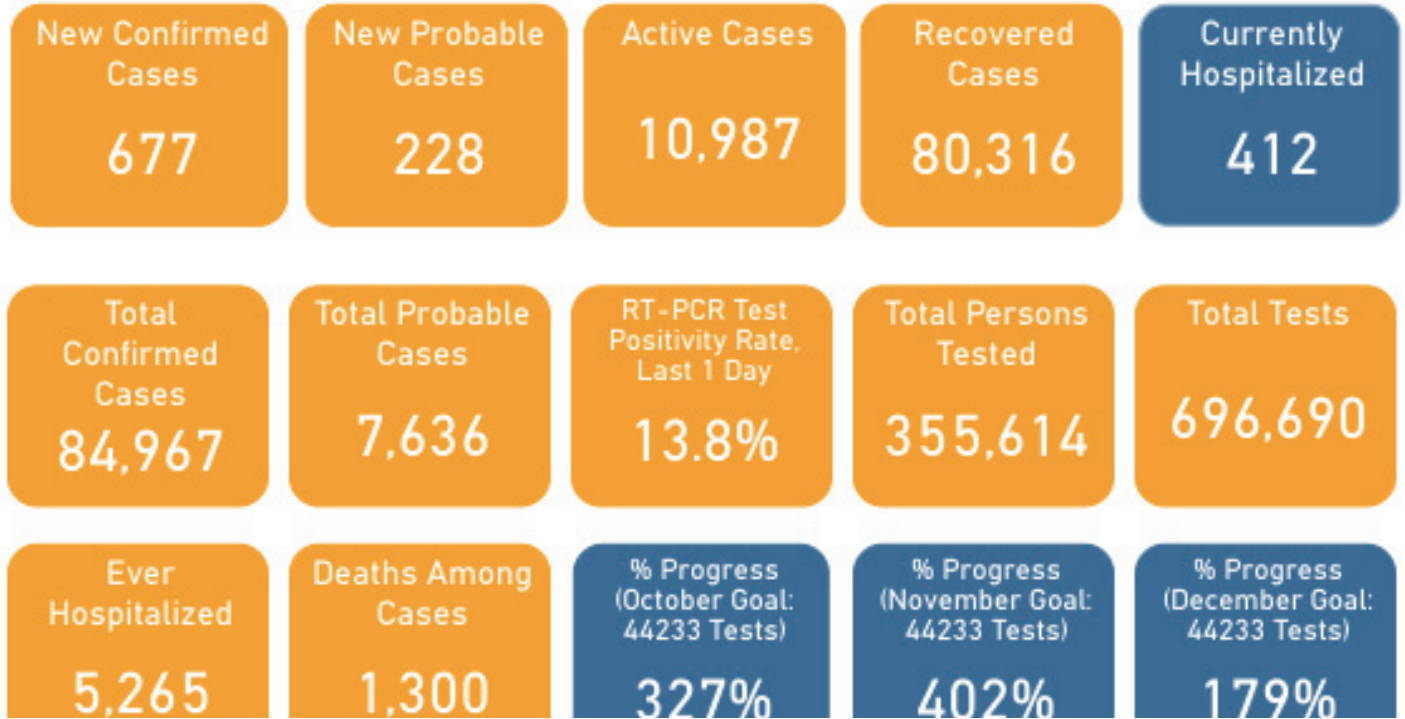
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Hyde	130	119	352	0	Minimal	12.50%
Jackson	254	201	844	8	Substantial	44.29%
Jerauld	252	223	480	15	Moderate	23.81%
Jones	63	62	178	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	490	433	1362	13	Substantial	12.66%
Lake	953	847	2670	12	Substantial	18.24%
Lawrence	2368	2057	7362	27	Substantial	17.95%
Lincoln	6220	5442	16572	57	Substantial	22.18%
Lyman	505	454	1662	9	Substantial	10.84%
Marshall	232	197	963	4	Substantial	24.68%
McCook	637	565	1356	21	Substantial	24.29%
McPherson	168	139	486	1	Moderate	3.97%
Meade	2074	1776	6465	20	Substantial	21.25%
Mellette	211	185	640	1	Substantial	21.43%
Miner	215	189	484	6	Substantial	4.35%
Minnehaha	23455	20547	64829	237	Substantial	19.39%
Moody	500	418	1532	14	Substantial	33.73%
Oglala Lakota	1835	1584	6106	33	Substantial	15.11%
Pennington	10218	8716	32474	119	Substantial	23.58%
Perkins	247	191	631	4	Substantial	15.56%
Potter	291	267	694	2	Substantial	13.33%
Roberts	879	709	3650	26	Substantial	25.94%
Sanborn	299	263	586	3	Substantial	12.12%
Spink	663	539	1804	20	Substantial	18.48%
Stanley	257	230	740	2	Moderate	12.20%
Sully	102	90	236	3	Moderate	0.00%
Todd	1105	996	3710	17	Substantial	17.28%
Tripp	598	514	1291	10	Substantial	15.49%
Turner	902	765	2295	47	Substantial	17.59%
Union	1453	1234	5129	27	Substantial	18.62%
Walworth	580	471	1573	13	Substantial	26.80%
Yankton	2271	1844	7902	18	Substantial	22.83%
Ziebach	278	191	684	7	Substantial	33.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1880	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3368	0
10-19 years	10147	0
20-29 years	17083	3
30-39 years	15372	12
40-49 years	13225	21
50-59 years	13177	64
60-69 years	10440	165
70-79 years	5489	271
80+ years	4302	764

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	48410	634
Male	44193	666

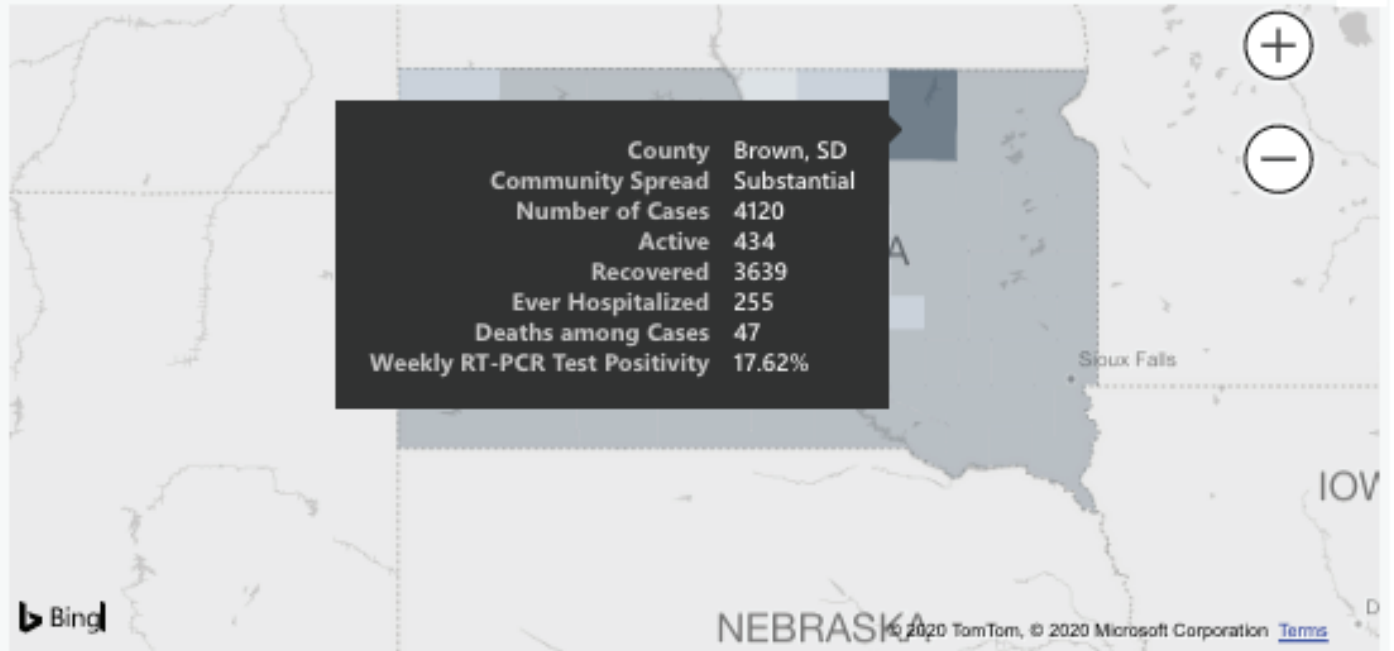
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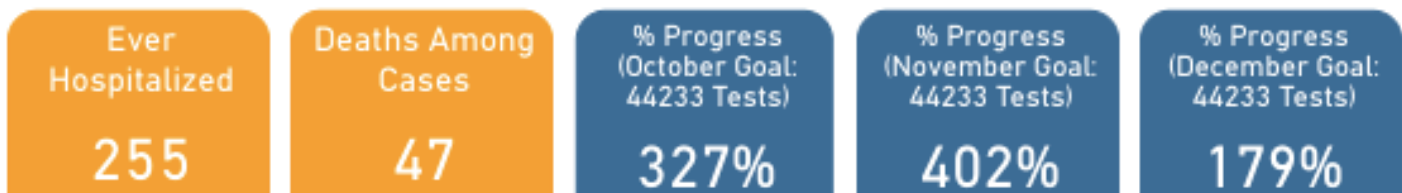
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



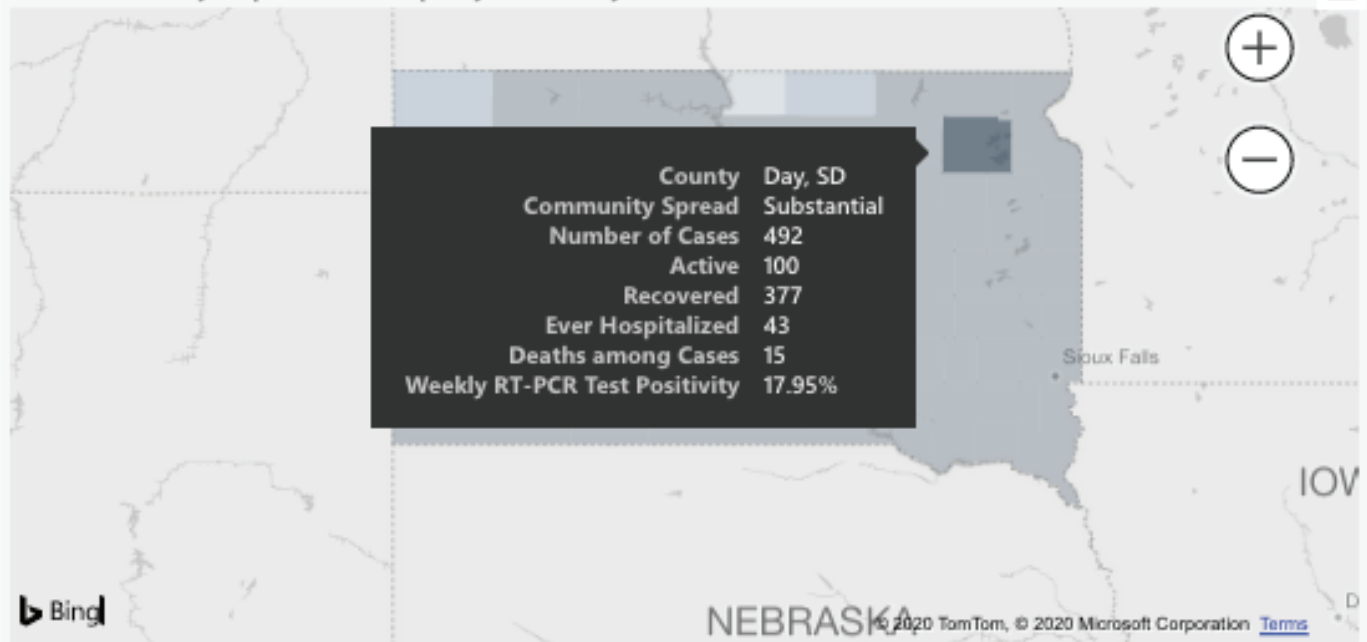
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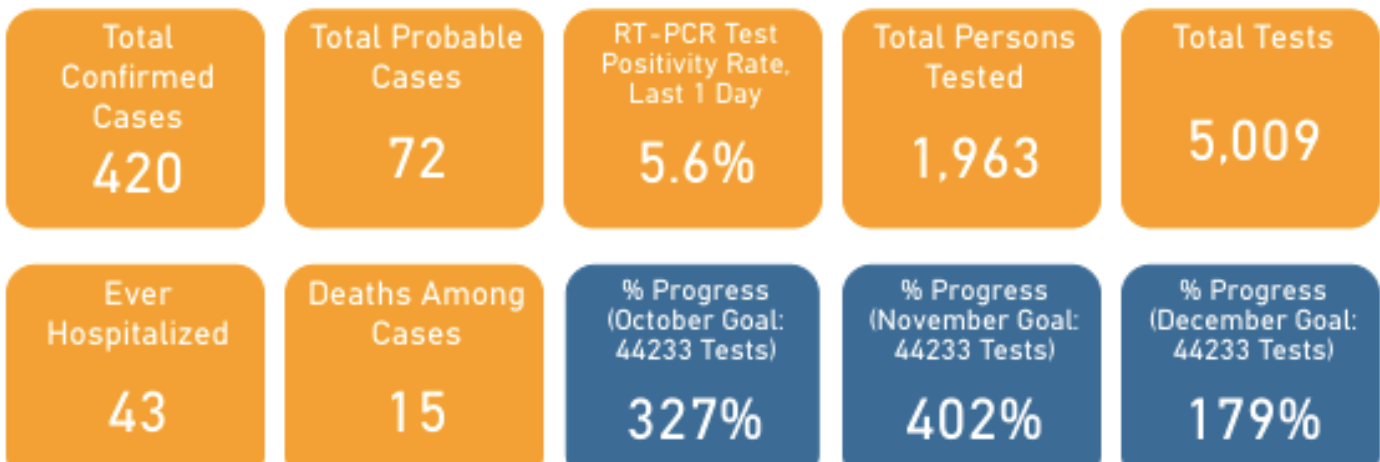
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



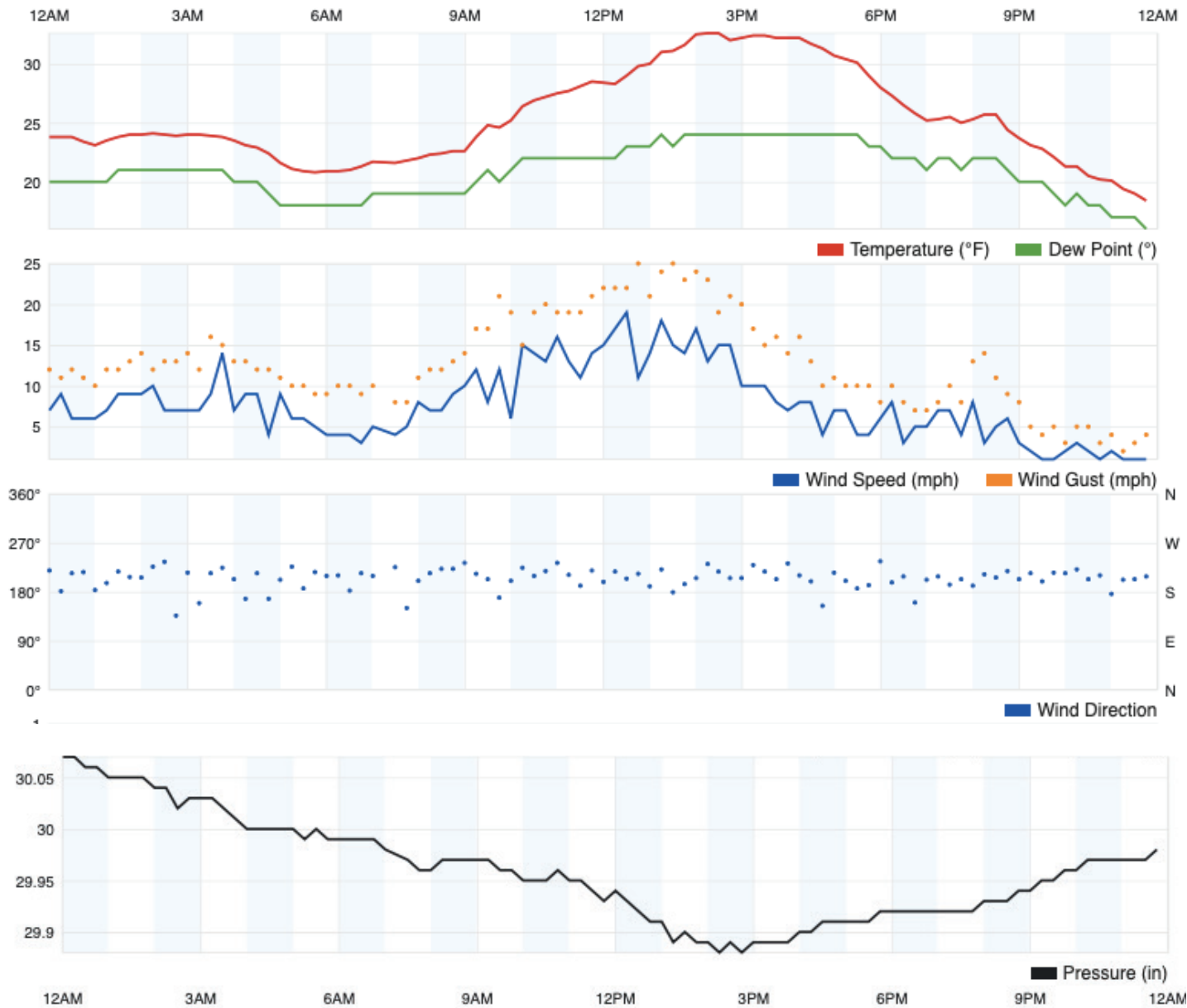
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today

Tonight

Friday

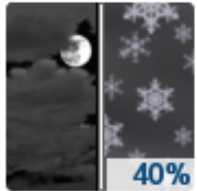
Friday
Night

Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 37 °F



Mostly Cloudy
then Chance
Snow

Low: 24 °F



Chance Snow
then Mostly
Sunny

High: 33 °F ↓



Mostly Clear

Low: 9 °F



Mostly Sunny

High: 36 °F

Strong Cold Front Moves Through Tonight

Today: Breezy over the Missouri River valley. Unseasonably mild air creating highs 10 to 20 degrees above normal.

Tonight: Cold frontal passage helps create a chance of rain or rain changing to snow.

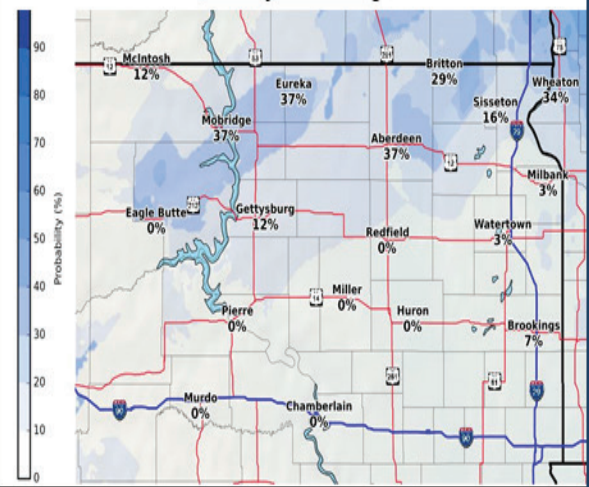
Friday: AM precip ending. High temperatures expected early mainly in the 30s. Temperature falling through the afternoon.

Cold Front Passing Through Tonight



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Chance of 0.1" or more of Snow Tonight into Friday Morning



Updated: 12/17/2020 4:50 AM Central

Another day of warmer than normal, for December, temperature is on deck across central and north-east South Dakota, over into west central Minnesota. Southeasterly breezes are expected today, as well, particularly over the Missouri River valley. Later tonight, a strong cold front will sweep through the region, turning winds around to the northwest. A few showers of rain or rain changing to snow may form as a result of this front moving through. Any precipitation that develops should be ending Friday morning, moving east out of the forecast area. Northwest winds could strengthen to 20 to 30 mph during the day on Friday, ushering notably colder air into the region.

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Today in Weather History

December 17, 1993: A prolonged period of snow occurred from December 15th through the 19th over the western half of South Dakota. Several accidents leading to injuries occurred due to ice on the 15th, and many vehicles slid into ditches. Snowfall amounts were 4 to 10 inches. McIntosh received three inches of snow; Timber Lake, Murdo, and Selby received five inches of snow; and six inches accumulated at McLaughlin. Eagle Butte recorded seven inches of new snow.

December 17, 1903: Wilbur and Orville Wright made four brief flights at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina with their first powered aircraft on this day. After having success with their 5-foot biplane kite, the brothers realized the weather conditions in Dayton were not ideal for their flying experiments. They wrote the Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C. requesting a list of suitable places on the east coast where winds were constant. Below is the response the Wright Brothers received from Joseph Doshier, who staffed the Weather Bureau office, wrote in August of 1900 regarding the suitability of Kitty Hawk.

December 17, 1924: From the Monthly Weather Review, "a severe glaze storm occurred in west-central Illinois on December 17 and 18, the area of great destruction embracing a territory about 75 miles in width and 170 miles in length. In the affected area, trees were badly damaged, wires broken, and thousands of electric poles went down. Electric services were paralyzed, and it required weeks to restore operation and months to permanently rebuild the lines.

The street railway company and the Illinois Traction System resumed complete operation 17 days after the storm. Electric light service was completely restored January 10. The ice had practically disappeared from the trees and wires by January 4, but on January 20, there was still considerable ice on the ground.

The Western Union Telegraph Co. lost 8,000 poles and the Illinois Bell Telephone Co. about 23,000. The total damage to wire service in Illinois probably equaled or exceeded \$5,000,000." If the loss of business, the damage to trees and possible injury to winter grains, the storm may be considered one of the most disastrous of its kind in the history of Illinois."

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)

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)

1989 - Fifty-seven cities from the Southern and Central Plains to the Appalachians reported record low temperatures for the date, including North Platte NE with a reading of 17 degrees below zero. Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced 18 inches of snow at Syracuse NY, and 30 inches at Carlisle IND. Low pressure brought heavy snow to northern New England, with 18 inches reported at Derby VT and Saint Johnsbury VT. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2000 - An F4 tornado hits communities near Tuscaloosa, AL, killing 11 people and injuring 125 others. It was the strongest December tornado in Alabama since 1950.

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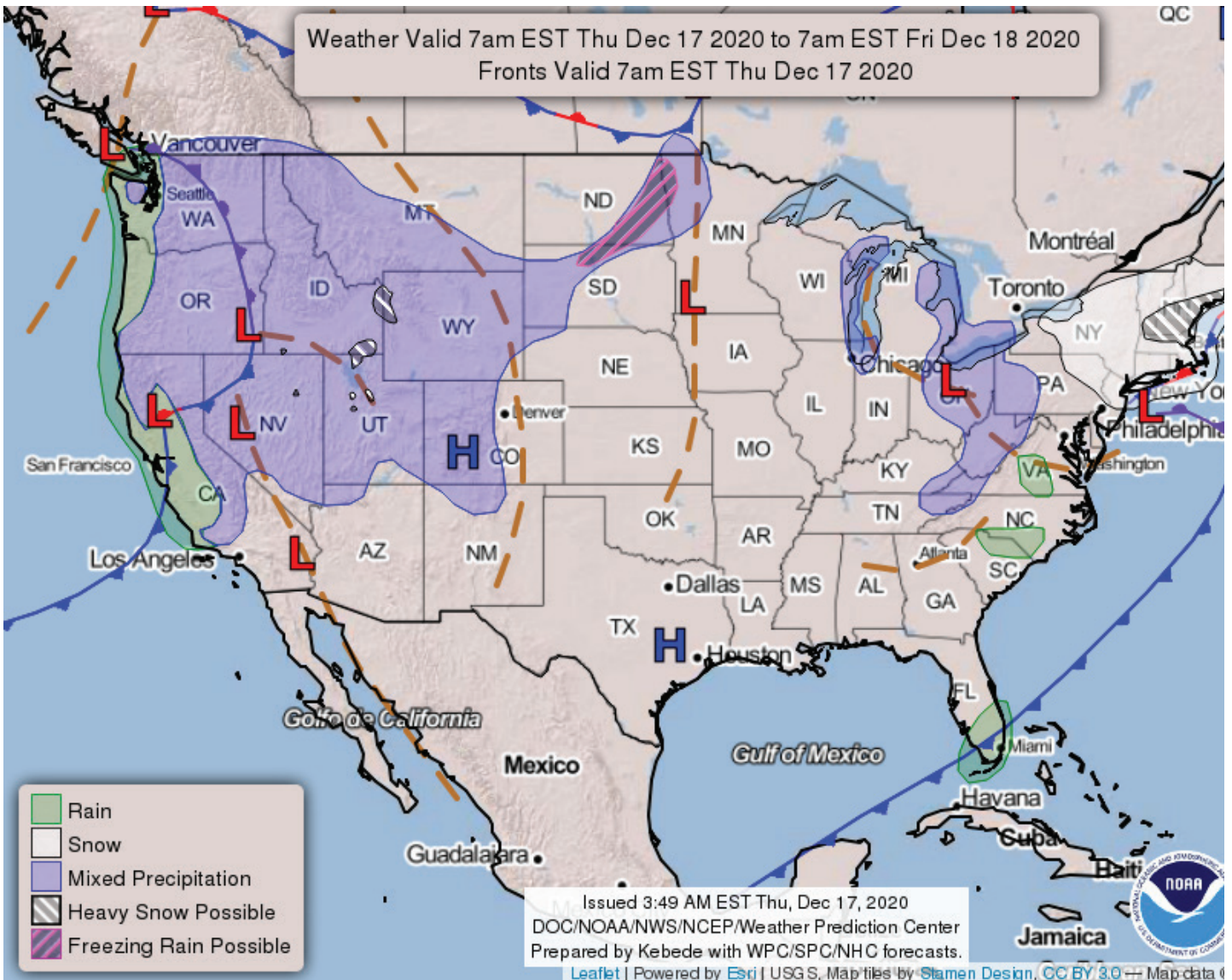
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 33 °F at 2:19 PM
Low Temp: 18 °F at 11:55 PM
Wind: 25 mph at 12:39 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 53° in 1939
Record Low: -32° in 2016
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.27
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.47
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:52 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09 a.m.



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NEVER QUIT!

"Don't let this be you!" said a coach to his football team after a difficult loss. He was pointing to a picture of a player sitting in front of his locker. His helmet was between his feet. His elbows were on his knees and his head was between his hands with a look of sadness in his eyes. Under his helmet were the words, "I quit!"

As we look into the manger this Christmas, we can rejoice together and say, "Thank You, God, that You didn't quit – that You never gave up!"

Whenever we think of the eternal love that God has for us, we often forget about the disappointments He must have endured. Imagine, if you can, what must have entered into His mind and heart when Adam and Eve rejected His plan and the path before them. Consider, if you will, the many agreements He made with people who promised to obey Him and then abandoned their word when they thought He was out of sight. We will never know the grief He suffered because of the hope He had that people would love Him and be obedient to Him.

But, He never gave up. He never quit. Finally, John wrote, "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world!"

All of us have suffered many losses in life. None, however, can ever be compared to God's losses. But He refused to give up even though it cost the life of His one and only Son.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for Your unfailing love and determination to rescue us. We are overwhelmed when we think that You would sacrifice Your Son for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: 1 John 4:14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

05-10-22-24-26

(five, ten, twenty-two, twenty-four, twenty-six)

Estimated jackpot: \$37,000

Lotto America

18-21-32-35-48, Star Ball: 7, ASB: 3

(eighteen, twenty-one, thirty-two, thirty-five, forty-eight; Star Ball: seven; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.1 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$310 million

Powerball

04-23-37-61-67, Powerball: 7, Power Play: 2

(four, twenty-three, thirty-seven, sixty-one, sixty-seven; Powerball: seven; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$287 million

Ten states sue Google for 'anti-competitive' online ad sales

By JAKE BLEIBERG and MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — Ten states on Wednesday brought a lawsuit against Google, accusing the search giant of "anti-competitive conduct" in the online advertising industry, including a deal to manipulate sales with rival Facebook.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton announced the suit, which was filed in a federal court in Texas, saying Google is using its "monopolistic power" to control pricing of online advertisements, fixing the market in its favor and eliminating competition.

"This Goliath of a company is using its power to manipulate the market, destroy competition, and harm you, the consumer," Paxton said in the video posted on Twitter.

Google, which is based in Mountain View, California, called Paxton's claims "meritless" and said the price of online advertising has fallen over the last decade.

"These are the hallmarks of a highly competitive industry," the company said in statement. "We will strongly defend ourselves from (Paxton's) baseless claims in court."

Paxton led a bipartisan coalition of 50 U.S. states and territories that announced in September 2019 they were investigating Google's business practices, citing "potential monopolistic behavior."

Now Texas is bringing the suit along other Republican attorneys general from Arkansas, Idaho, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota and Utah.

The complaint targets the heart of Google's business — the digital ads that generate nearly all of its revenue, as well as all the money that its corporate parent, Alphabet Inc., depends upon to help finance a range of far-flung technology projects.

As more marketers have increased their spending online, those digital ads have turned Google into a moneymaking machine. Through the first nine months of this year, Google's ad sales totaled nearly \$101 billion, accounting for 86% of its total revenue.

And now the states contend Google intends to use its alleged stranglehold on digital ads to choke off other avenues of potential competition and innovation. The company struck an illegal deal with Facebook, a major competitor for ads, to manipulate advertising auction, according to the complaint. Facebook declined to comment.

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"Google has an appetite for total dominance, and its latest ambition is to transform the free and open architecture of the internet," the suit alleges.

In the "ad tech" marketplace that brings together Google and a huge universe of online advertisers and publishers, the company controls access to the advertisers that put ads on its dominant search platform. Google also runs the auction process for advertisers to get ads onto a publisher's site. Nine of Google's products in search, video, mobile, email, mapping and other areas are estimated to have over a billion users each, providing the company a trove of users' data that it can deploy in the advertising process.

Google officials say the company shares the majority of its "ad tech" revenue with publishers, such as newspaper websites. An official recently rejected even the assertion that Google is dominant, saying that market dominance suggests abuse, which is foreign to the company.

The state's suit comes after the U.S. Justice Department sued Google in October for abusing its dominance in online search and advertising — the government's most significant attempt to buttress competition since its historic case against Microsoft two decades ago.

Separately, the FBI is investigating whether Paxton, a close ally of President Donald Trump, broke the law in using his office to help a wealthy donor who is also under federal investigation. This fall, eight of the attorney general's top deputies accused him of bribery, abuse of office and other crimes in the service of an Austin real estate developer who employs a woman with whom Paxton is said to have had an extramarital affair.

All eight of Paxton's accusers have since been fired or resigned, including the deputy attorney general who had been leading the office's probe of Google. The court complaint lists attorneys with private firms in Houston, Chicago and Washington, D.C., as the lead lawyers on the case.

Paxton announced the lawsuit the week after the U.S. Supreme Court rejected his legal push to overturn Joe Biden's victory in the presidential election, a case that prompted widespread speculation that the attorney general is angling for a preemptive pardon from Trump.

The American Economic Liberties Project, an organization that advocates for government action against business concentration, welcomed the states' suit.

"Google's current business model is a threat to democracy and the free press," Sarah Miller, the group's executive director, said in a statement. ____

Liedtke reported from San Ramon, California. Associated Press writer Marcy Gordon in Washington contributed to this report.

Lakota-owned bookstore fills void in Rapid City

By TANYA MANUS Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A new location in the heart of downtown Rapid City gives Lily Mendoza more space to support education, advocate for other women, and promote Native American books and authors.

Mendoza is the owner of the Bird Cage Book Store and Mercantile, a shop she ran in The Racing Magpie for four years. In October, Mendoza relocated to her own shop at 524 7th St. The new location is a hub from which her family runs a wholesale book business, Dakota West Books LLC, and online resource Word Carrier Trading Post, along with the brick-and-mortar book store and mercantile.

"There aren't very many Lakota-owned book stores in the state of South Dakota, especially woman-owned, so (this new location) gives me an opportunity to put it out there that we're here," Mendoza said. "We really are a family-owned business. ... It has been a really good move for us."

Though online business is busy, Mendoza is trying to create a safe in-person atmosphere for customers, the Rapid City Journal reported. She requires masks in her store. She limits the number of customers inside to allow for social distancing, especially when elderly shoppers are there. Upon request, customers can schedule private shopping times.

"We ship books nationwide, especially with the holidays right now. A lot of people are shopping online and a lot of books we carry they can't find anywhere else, especially if they're interested in Native American culture and history," Mendoza said.

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A 30-year resident of the Black Hills, Mendoza learned the book business working in community relations and marketing for Borders. Over time, she saw and filled an unmet need in the industry.

"What I began to see was the need for access to literature on the reservations. I had enough training and skill to go out on my own, so I decided to do Native American book fairs in schools," Mendoza said.

She launched Word Carrier Trading Post and took book fairs, which she likens to Scholastic book fairs, to reservations.

"Ours was Native American literature. We would go in with thousands of books and teachers could purchase resources for their classrooms. We did that all over the Northern Plains," Mendoza said.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, in-person book fairs have stopped but online shopping is booming, Mendoza said.

"Now schools are ordering books and we ship them out," she said. "Schools getting books into the hands of families is always a good thing."

At book fairs, Mendoza said people continually asked if she had a book store. Eventually she opened Bird Cage Book Store and Mercantile in Racing Magpie, which houses multiple businesses.

"I really would like to thank (directors and co-owners) Peter Strong and Mary Bordeaux. They gave me the opportunity to fulfill that vision by welcoming me to open a book store at Racing Magpie. As I set up my little corner, it grew," she said.

In 2018 her family acquired the wholesale business, Dakota West Books LLC, which her son Cameron Ducheneaux owns. Mendoza is the sales representative and office manager for the wholesale business, and her children help her put orders together and make deliveries. The company sells and distributes books to variety of venues such as Crazy Horse Memorial.

"My children and even my little grandchildren are learning the business and they're very well educated on literature as well," Mendoza said.

An aspect of the wholesale business she's especially proud of is the ability to print out-of-print books on demand, and sell them to large and small distributors

The Bird Cage Book Store and Mercantile gives Mendoza a place to promote causes she's passionate about. Mendoza is active in the Red Ribbon Skirt Society, which raises awareness and offers support to families of missing and murdered Indigenous women.

"The space was big enough to house the Center for Healing, which is part of the Red Ribbon Skirt Society," Mendoza said. "We have 83 red dresses we hang, and it also gave us the opportunity to visually educate people in our community, especially people walking by. When people come in during tourist season so they can look and see what this is about. It's important to educate people."

Next to the Circle of Healing room, Mendoza is creating an Indigenous women's art gallery. Her daughter is among the artists whose work is showcased there.

"I've already started hanging some pieces," she said. "Those pieces are to look at and educate people about the amount of talented Indigenous women we do have, and then eventually we'll be moving into selling pieces."

Mendoza believes in supporting other women entrepreneurs and uses her shop for that, as well.

"One of the things I've wanted to do is create a space for women's cottage industries, so the (downtown location) allowed me to purchase items from women at a good rate and resell those items in my store. I have ribbon skirts and shirts, beautiful decorations made by local women, and masks," she said.

Sioux Falls extends mask mandate; 39 new deaths confirmed

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The Sioux Falls City Council on Tuesday extended the city's mask mandate to the middle of March, following an hour of testimony from citizens who were mostly opposed to the move.

The ordinance is identical to the one passed on Nov. 17, with no penalty for violating it. It was due to expire on Jan. 1.

The council, as it has on previous mask mandate votes, passed the extension by a 6-2 vote. Councilor Marshall Selberg, who supported it, admitted that the extension was a "bit of a hard sell," and he would

likely change his mind if another extension proposal comes up without a significant rise in cases.

State health officials on Wednesday reported 39 new deaths due to complications from COVID-19, increasing the total fatalities to 1,300. The state reported 904 new cases, lifting the total to 92,603. Officials said that 405 doses of the coronavirus vaccine had been administered as of Tuesday.

South Dakota led the nation a couple of weeks ago in cases per capita, but has since dropped to sixth, according to The COVID Tracking Project. One in every 189 people in the state tested positive in the past week, the Johns Hopkins University group reported.

Attorney general speaks publicly about fatal crash

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg said he's confident he didn't commit a crime when he struck and killed a man as he drove along a dark highway in September.

It's the first time Ravensborg has talked publicly about the crash that killed 55-year-old Joseph Boever along Highway 14 near Highmore. He previously issued a statement.

An investigation into the fatality is ongoing. Investigators are working with the Hyde County State's Attorney's Office to determine whether charges are warranted.

"I believe I have not committed any crime. I believe that we will, when we have all the facts, not a selected amount of facts, we'll know the full story and we'll make a full statement," he told reporters this week.

State Secretary of Public Safety Craig Price has said Ravensborg was distracted when he drove onto a highway shoulder where he struck and killed Boever. Price did not describe what led Ravensborg to become distracted.

Boever was walking on the side of the road and displaying some type of light on the night of Sept. 12 when Ravensborg's 2011 Ford Taurus hit him, Price said.

Ravnsborg called 911 that night and told a dispatcher that he hit "something" and that "it was in the middle of the road." When the dispatcher asked if it could have been a deer, Ravensborg initially said, "I have no idea" before adding, "It could be."

Boever's relatives believe he had been walking toward his truck that had crashed earlier that evening.

Ravnsborg found Boever's body the next day when he was returning the Hyde County sheriff's personal vehicle he had used Saturday night to finish the drive back to Pierre after the crash.

The attorney general was driving home from a Republican fundraiser some 110 miles (180 kilometers) away in Redfield. Ravensborg said he had nothing to drink.

A toxicology report taken roughly 15 hours after the crash showed no alcohol in Ravensborg's system, although at least one expert said that would have been enough time for any alcohol to leave his body.

A crash reconstruction expert from Wyoming and the North Dakota Bureau of Criminal Investigation assisted the South Dakota Highway Patrol in the investigation.

Sioux Falls police seek 17-year-old in fatal shooting

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sioux Falls police say they're looking for a 17-year-old boy believed to be involved in the fatal shooting of another teenager during a drug deal.

The boy and a friend were meeting the victim, Ephraim Shulue, and another person to sell marijuana last Wednesday night, according to police.

Police Lt. Terry Matia says a disagreement took place in what turned into a robbery and gunfire erupted in a parking lot. Police say at least three guns were involved in the shootout — Shulue's, one that belongs to his friend and a third fired by the suspect.

Officials said Shulue's was struck by gunfire as he tried to flee the scene, KELO-TV reported.

Investigators say they're not getting much cooperation from sources and possible witnesses.

Former teacher pleads guilty to soliciting a student

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A former Sioux Falls high school teacher accused of having an inappropriate

relationship with a student has reached a plea deal.

Daylan Fargo, 27, pleaded guilty to soliciting a minor in Minnehaha County Tuesday. Charges of having sexual contact with a child under 16 and sexual exploitation of a minor will be dropped. The deal calls for a maximum five years in prison.

Fargo was charged in January after the victim's family went to police about the relationship, which began in 2017 when the student was 14.

Fargo had been an assistant show choir director at Washington High School.

Prosecutors said Fargo gave the student a tablet that contained sexually explicit photos and during a choir trip the two exchanged sexually explicit photos, the Argus Leader reported.

Fargo was arrested in February, shortly after a parent of a student at Washington High School filed a protection order against him. The protection order alleges that the former assistant choir director had inappropriate contact with a teenager at the school and "stalked" the teen at home.

No sentencing date has been scheduled.

Macron is the latest world leader to catch COVID-19

Associated Press undefined

French President Emmanuel Macron is the latest world leader to test positive for COVID-19, joining a growing list of others just as inoculation drives against the illness are beginning in a number of countries.

Macron, 42, has repeatedly said he is sticking to strict sanitary protocols during the pandemic, including not shaking hands, wearing a mask and keeping distance from other people. The Elysee Palace announced on Thursday that Macron would be isolating for seven days.

DONALD TRUMP

President Donald Trump announced in October that he and his wife, first lady Melania Trump, tested positive for the coronavirus. For months, Trump was accused of downplaying the virus that has killed more than 300,000 Americans. At 74, the U.S. president was the oldest head of state to become infected with the virus to date, and his age put him at higher risk of serious complications from COVID-19. Trump was hospitalized for three days, and after staging a dramatic return to the White House, he continued to minimize the severity of the virus.

BORIS JOHNSON

The British prime minister was the first major world leader confirmed to have COVID-19, after facing criticism for downplaying the pandemic. He was moved to intensive care in April after his symptoms dramatically worsened a day after he was hospitalized for what were called routine tests. He was given oxygen but did not need a ventilator, officials said. He later expressed his gratitude to National Health Service staff for saving his life when his condition could have "gone either way." Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, also tested positive in March and showed mild symptoms.

JAIR BOLSONARO

The Brazilian president announced his illness in July and used it to publicly extol hydroxychloroquine, the unproven malaria drug that he'd been promoting as a treatment for COVID-19 and was taking himself. For months he had flirted with the virus, calling it a "little flu," as he flouted social distancing at lively demonstrations and encouraged crowds during outings from the presidential residence, often without a mask.

JUAN ORLANDO HERNANDEZ

The Honduras president announced in June that he had tested positive, along with two other people who worked closely with him. Hernández said he had started what he called the "MAIZ treatment," an experimental and unproven combination of microdacyn, azithromycin, ivermectin and zinc. He was briefly hospitalized and released. He has added his voice to growing pleas for equitable access to any COVID-19 vaccine, asking the recent U.N. gathering of world leaders, "Are people to be left to die?"

ALEXANDER LUKASHENKO

The president of Belarus, who dismissed concerns about the virus as "psychosis" and recommended drinking vodka to stay healthy, said in July he had contracted it himself but was asymptomatic. Belarus

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is one of the few countries that took no comprehensive measures against the virus. Other top officials in former Soviet states who were infected include Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin.

PRINCE ALBERT II OF MONACO

The palace of Monaco in March said the ruler of the tiny Mediterranean principality tested positive but his health was not worrying. He was the first head of state to publicly say he was infected.

ALEJANDRO GIAMMATTEI

The Guatemalan president said he tested positive for the virus in September. "My symptoms are very mild. Up to now, I have body aches, it hurt more yesterday than today, like a bad cold," he said during a televised address. "I don't have a fever, I have a bit of a cough." He said he'd be working from home.

JEANINE ANEZ

The virus drove the Bolivian interim president into isolation in July, but she said she was feeling well.

LUIS ABINADER

The newly elected president of the Dominican Republic contracted and recovered from COVID-19 during his campaign. He spent weeks in isolation before the country's July election.

IRAN

Iran, the epicenter of the Mideast's initial coronavirus outbreak, has seen several top officials test positive. Among them are senior Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and Vice President Massoumeh Ebtekar. Cabinet members have tested positive, too.

INDIA

Vice President M. Venkaiah Naidu, 71, recently tested positive but his office said he had no symptoms and was quarantined at home. Home Minister Amit Shah, the No. 2 man in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government, was hospitalized for COVID-19 last month and has recovered. Junior Railways Minister Suresh Angadi last week was the first federal minister to die from COVID-19.

ISRAEL

Then-Health Minister Yaakov Litzman tested positive in April and recovered. Litzman is a leader in Israel's ultra-Orthodox community, which has seen a high rate of infection as many have defied restrictions on religious gatherings. The minister for Jerusalem affairs, Rafi Peretz, tested positive over the summer as cases surged nationwide and recovered.

SOUTH AFRICA

The country's defense minister, Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula, mineral resources and energy minister, Gwede Mantashe, and labor minister, Thulas Nxesi, were infected as cases surged in June and July.

SOUTH SUDAN

Vice President Riek Machar was among several Cabinet ministers infected.

GAMBIA

Vice President Isatou Touray tested positive in July along with the ministers of finance, energy and agriculture.

GUINEA-BISSAU

Prime Minister Nuno Gomes Nabiam in April said he tested positive.

Associated Press writers around the world contributed.

Russia's COVID-19 vaccine rollout draws wary, mixed response

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — While excitement and enthusiasm greeted the Western-developed coronavirus vaccine when it was rolled out, the Russian-made version has received a mixed response, with reports of empty Moscow clinics that offered the shot to health care workers and teachers — the first members of the public designated to receive it.

Kremlin officials and state-controlled media touted the Sputnik V vaccine as a major achievement after it

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was approved Aug. 11. But among Russians, hope that the shot would reverse the course of the COVID-19 crisis has become mixed with wariness and skepticism, reflecting concerns about how it was rushed out while still in its late-stage testing to ensure its effectiveness and safety.

Russia faced international criticism for approving a vaccine that hasn't completed advanced trials among tens of thousands of people, and experts both at home and abroad warned against its wider use until the studies are completed.

Despite those warnings, authorities started offering it to certain high-risk groups, such as front-line medical workers, within weeks of approval. Alexander Gintsburg, head of the Gamaleya Institute that developed the vaccine, said last week over 150,000 Russians have gotten it.

One recipient was Dr. Alexander Zatsepin, an ICU specialist in Voronezh, a city 500 kilometers (310 miles) south of Moscow, who received the vaccine in October.

"We've been working with COVID-19 patients since March, and every day when we come home, we worry about infecting our family members. So when some kind of opportunity to protect them and myself appeared, I thought it should be used," he said.

But Zatsepin said he still takes precautions against infection because studies of the vaccine's effectiveness aren't over.

"There is no absolute confidence yet," he said.

After Britain announced Dec. 2 it had approved a vaccine developed by drugmakers Pfizer and BioNTech, President Vladimir Putin told authorities to start a large-scale inoculation campaign, a sign of Moscow's eagerness to be at the front of the race against the pandemic.

Russia approved its vaccine after it was tested on only a few dozen people, touting it as "the first in the world" to receive a go-ahead. Developers named it "Sputnik V," a reference to the Soviet Union's 1957 launch of the world's first satellite during the Cold War.

More than just national pride is at stake. Russia has recorded more than 2.7 million cases of COVID-19, and over 49,000 deaths, and it wants to avoid another damaging lockdown of its economy.

On Dec. 2, Putin cited a target of over 2 million doses in the coming days. Despite such a limited supply for a nation of 146 million, Moscow immediately widened who was eligible for it. Shots are free to everyone in medical or educational facilities, both state and private; social and municipal workers; retail and service workers; and those in the arts.

The European Medicines Agency said it has not received a request from the vaccine makers to consider licensing it for use in the EU, but some data have been shared with the World Health Organization. The U.N. agency does not typically approve vaccines itself but waits for regulatory agencies to weigh in first. The Russian vaccine is reportedly under consideration for use in a global effort led by WHO to distribute COVID-19 vaccines to poorer countries.

Unlike in the U.K., where the first shots are going to the elderly, Sputnik V is going to those aged 18 to 60 who don't have chronic illnesses and aren't pregnant or breastfeeding.

Putin himself hasn't gotten a Russian-made shot yet. The 68-year-old Russian leader said the shots in Russia are currently being recommended to people of a certain age, adding that "vaccines have not yet reached people like me." "But I will definitely do it, as soon as it becomes possible," Putin told the annual news conference Thursday.

Its developers have said study data suggests the vaccine was 91% effective, a conclusion based on 78 infections among nearly 23,000 participants. That's far fewer cases than Western drugmakers have accumulated during final testing before analyzing their candidates' efficacy, and important demographic and other details from the study have not been released.

Some experts say such efficacy rates inspire optimism, but public trust may be an issue.

"I don't so much worry about Sputnik V being unsafe or less effective than we need it to be," said Judy Twigg, a political science professor at Virginia Commonwealth University specializing in global health. "I worry about whether or not people are going to be willing to take it in Russia."

A poll conducted in October by the Levada Center, Russia's top independent pollster, showed that 59%

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of Russians were unwilling to get the shots even if offered for free.

Denis Volkov, sociologist and deputy director of the Levada Center, says respondents cited unfinished clinical trials, saying the vaccine was "raw" and they were suspicious of the claims that Russia was the first country to have a vaccine while others were still working on theirs.

Some medical workers and teachers interviewed by The Associated Press expressed skepticism about the vaccine because it hasn't been fully tested.

Dr. Yekaterina Kasyanova of Siberia's Kemerovo region said she didn't trust it enough to get the shot and has advised her mother, a teacher, not to get it either, adding: "The vaccine is several months old. ... Long-term side effects are not known, its effectiveness hasn't been proven."

Dzhamilya Kryazheva, a teacher in Krasnogorsk near Moscow, echoed that sentiment.

"I don't intend to experiment on my body. I have three children," she said.

For other health care workers, the choice to be vaccinated was easy.

"People are dying here every day. Every day, we carry out corpses. What's there to think about?" said Dr. Marina Pecherkina, an infectious disease specialist in the Far East city of Vladivostok. She got her shots in October because of her daily work with coronavirus patients.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said around 15,000 people received the shots since vaccinations started Dec. 5. But some media reports about the first days of the Moscow campaign showed empty clinics and medical workers offering the shots to anyone who walked in. In some instances, this was because the vaccine must be stored at minus 18 degrees Celsius (minus 0.4 degrees Fahrenheit), and each vial contains five doses. Once defrosted, it must be administered within two hours or discarded.

The rollout outside Moscow and the surrounding region appeared to go much slower, with Health Minister Mikhail Murashko declaring that all regions started the vaccination Dec. 15.

Media reports suggested there may be problems with scaling up the manufacture and distribution of Sputnik V. It uses two different adenovirus vectors for the two-shot regimen, which complicates production. In addition, the low-temperature storage and transport makes it harder to move across the vast country.

There also were confused signals about whether recipients should consume alcohol. Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova said those getting vaccinated should refrain from drinking three days before and after the shots.

Several medical workers in Siberia who received the vaccine later reported contracting the virus, but health officials said not enough time had passed for them to develop the antibodies.

Dr. Yevgenia Alexeyeva in the Siberian city of Tomsk tested positive for the virus 12 days after her second shot. Alexeyeva said she wasn't surprised by the result and that it didn't shake her confidence in the vaccine.

"The vaccine doesn't guarantee that the person wouldn't get infected. But it should protect us from developing a severe case," Alexeyeva said.

Vladimir Kondrashov and Anatoly Kozlov in Moscow, and Tatyana Salimova in Tomsk, contributed to this report.

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Snow continues to fall on Northeast US, with vaccines in tow

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Snow continued to fall Thursday during a key period in the coronavirus pandemic, days after the start of the U.S. vaccination campaign and in the thick of a virus surge that has throngs of people seeking tests daily.

Snow fell from northern Virginia to parts of New England on Wednesday. It carried on north into the

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evening, sustaining a storm that was poised to drop as much as 2 feet (0.6 meters) of snow in some places by Thursday.

Officials said they didn't expect the winter blast to disrupt vaccine distribution, which began Monday for frontline health care workers.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said Wednesday that the government is tracking the vaccine shipments precisely, has staffers already in place to receive them and believes the companies transporting them can navigate the storm.

"This is FedEx, this is UPS express shipping. They know how to deal with snow and bad weather. But we are on it and following it," he told Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends."

The need for vaccines prompted New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy to exempt vaccine delivery trucks from a storm-related prohibition on commercial traffic on some highways. The state was anticipating more than two dozen vaccine deliveries in the next day or two.

The National Weather Service said Wednesday that the storm was "set to bring an overabundance of hazards from the mid-Atlantic to the Northeast," including freezing rain and ice in the mid-Atlantic, heavy snow in the New York City area and southern New England, strong winds and coastal flooding, and possibly even severe thunderstorms and some tornadoes in North Carolina's Outer Banks.

The heaviest snowfall was expected in central Pennsylvania, where forecasters in the state capital of Harrisburg said a six-decade-old record for a December snowfall could potentially be broken. The National Weather Service reported that parts of Centre County were hit with as much as 13 inches (33 centimeters) of snow by Wednesday night.

A crash in the state killed two people and involved dozens of vehicles on a major highway Wednesday afternoon, police said, while issuing a reminder to only travel if "absolutely necessary."

And a western Pennsylvania man was killed when he was struck by a snow plow. According to authorities, John Vichie, 63, of North Versailles, was walking with a snow blower when he was hit just after sunset Wednesday by a public works truck that was backing up.

Associated Press writers Tom Hays in New York; Wayne Parry in Point Pleasant, New Jersey; Mike Catalini and Shawn Marsh in Trenton, New Jersey; Skip Foreman in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Philip Marcelo in Boston, and Dino Hazell in Washington contributed.

Beyond the no-knock: Push in states to reform police tactics

By CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — After a year marked by police killings of Black men and women and mass civil unrest over racial injustice, some activists are taking aim at police tactics that can lead to deadly middle-of-the-night raids they say are used overwhelmingly in communities of color.

Rather than waiting for direction from lawmakers, a group of academics, policing experts and activists called Campaign Zero has created model legislation around so-called no-knock warrants they hope will be attractive to cities, states and President-elect Joe Biden, as they work to curtail police tactics that lead to both civilian and officer casualties. While Biden has said his administration will support criminal justice reforms, it's unclear where he will focus.

SWAT team and tactical drug raids — in which heavily armed police teams bust down doors — have ballooned from about 3,000 in the early 1980s to more than 60,000 annually in the last few years, mostly because of drugs and drug task forces, according to Peter Kraska, a criminology professor at Eastern Kentucky University who has studied police raids for decades. The data includes no-knock and other warrants.

Generally, under the law, police must knock and announce their presence when serving a warrant, meaning they must wait before entering a property. But with no-knock warrants, officers don't have to say anything and don't have to wait. That's because the warrants are reserved for extraordinarily dangerous moments or if suspects are likely to destroy evidence if they are alerted to officers' presence, but critics

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say not always.

"There has been an historic issuance of no-knock warrants for inappropriate purposes, basically for fishing expeditions for drug evidence," said Kraska, who helped Campaign Zero write its recommendations. "There are very few situations where Timothy McVeigh is standing behind that door when it gets knocked down."

Kraska said the raids happen disproportionately in communities of color. Officers were executing such a warrant in Kentucky when 26-year-old emergency medical technician Breonna Taylor was fatally shot.

"The rest of us got to see that level of militarization with the protests ... but it's happening literally every night in these communities," Kraska said. "You have to think there's going to be some lasting trauma from that."

But just banning the warrants isn't enough, because the raids would only continue in other ways, said Campaign Zero manager Katie Ryan, which is why the group has included in its legislation a complement of reforms, including requiring officers to be in uniforms that make them easily identifiable, requiring warrants to be served between 9 a.m. and 7 p.m. and requiring the officers to know when asking for the warrant who lives at the residence including whether there are children, older people or anyone with a disability.

"We had to create something comprehensive to cut off flimsy legislation and get real change," Ryan said.

The model also mandates officers use body-worn cameras and fill out within 72 hours a warrant execution report that is reviewed by an independent board. It would also require any property seized during those raids to be returned if a person isn't convicted of a crime.

Campaign Zero was started by police reform activists in 2015 after Michael Brown was fatally shot by a Ferguson, Missouri, police officer, triggering protests nationwide. Capitalizing on this year's resurgence of police reform protests following the death of George Floyd, they worked with at least 315 cities and eight states that adopted portions of their recommendations to reduce fatal force, including banning officers from putting their knees on the neck or head of suspects to restrain them.

The group is now working with 37 cities and states to introduce legislation on no-knock warrants. A bill filed earlier this month in New York by Sen. James Sanders, D-New York City, is among the first to include all 15 of the campaign's recommendations.

Sanders said Taylor's death brought the practice to people's attention, but his district has its own examples of dangerously executed raids.

The family of Alberta Spruill, a 57-year-old grandmother who died of a heart attack in 2003 after police officers fired a flash bang into her apartment, has given Sanders its support. Officers had been looking for a drug dealer who lived in a different apartment and who they already had in custody.

Sanders said the bill will work its way through the legislative process after the new year. He's heard a lot of support from other legislators, and he's hoping to hear support from law enforcement, too. Officers are often injured in such raids.

"I'm a Marine, and I think (the police officers) know I would never do anything to endanger their lives," Sander said. "We're talking about the majority of these warrants being served in non-violent situations for non-violent crimes. There's a safer way to do this for everyone involved."

In Charlotte, North Carolina, when police Chief Johnny Jennings took over his post in July he dug into the issue of no-knock warrants and ended their use for the department's 1,800 officers.

"We found that if there is something that is so dangerous that it requires a no-knock search warrant, that we did not need to take that risk. We use other means to try to get someone to come out of a structure," he said.

Some law enforcement advocates have cautioned that departments need warrants for situations like human trafficking or kidnapping, and others have said a recommendation that officers wait 30 seconds to enter after announcing their presence could open a window for suspects to fire on police.

Mark Lomax, a retired major with the Pennsylvania State Police and the past executive director of the National Tactical Officers Association, worked with the campaign to make sure there are exceptions in some of the recommendations.

"When it comes to narcotics, knocking down doors to go in and get a pound of weed can be dangerous not only to people on the other side of the door but to the officers also," he said. "I'm thinking of Breonna

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Taylor losing her life, but I'm also thinking of the officer who was shot in the leg.
"Neither needs to happen."

Moon rocks in hand, China prepares for future moon missions

By SAM McNEIL Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Following the successful return of moon rocks by its Chang'e 5 robotic probe, China is preparing for future missions that could set the stage for an eventual lunar base to host human explorers, a top space program official said Thursday.

China's next three lunar missions are on track, along with programs for returning samples from Mars and exploring asteroids and the planet Jupiter, Deputy Chief Commander of the China Lunar Exploration Program Wu Yanhua said.

"Exploring the truth of the universe is just beginning," Wu said at a news conference held hours after the Chang'e 5's capsule parachuted to a landing in Inner Mongolia carrying the first lunar samples to be brought to Earth in more than 40 years.

Named after the Chinese goddess of the moon, the Chang'e program has made three landings there, including on its less explored far side. Chang'e 6, scheduled for a 2023 launch, is to collect more samples from the lunar south pole, while its two successors are to conduct detailed surveys and test technologies needed for the construction of a science base on the moon.

No dates have been given for Chang'e 7 and 8, or for a crewed mission to the moon that China says is in the works, or for the construction of a lunar base.

"China is willing to keep on contributing to the world and enhancing human well-being with Chinese space solutions," Wu said.

The capsule of the Chang'e 5 probe and its cargo of samples were flown to the space program's Beijing campus after landing just before 2 a.m. on Thursday.

The mission achieved firsts for China's lunar exploration program in collecting samples, launching a vehicle from the moon's surface and docking it with the capsule to transfer the samples for their voyage to Earth, the China National Space Administration said in a statement issued following the landing.

"As our nation's most complex and technically groundbreaking space mission, Chang'e 5 has achieved multiple technical breakthroughs ... and represents a landmark achievement," it said.

China in 2003 became just the third country to send an astronaut into orbit on its own after the Soviet Union and the United States and its space program has proceeded along a steady, cautious track, largely avoiding the fatalities and launch failures that marred the U.S.-Soviet space race of the 1960s.

Wu said the latest flight featured collaboration with the European Space Agency, along with Argentina, Namibia, Pakistan and other nations with which Chinese cooperates on monitoring and communicating with its spacecraft. China in the future will "encourage more scientists around the world to participate to obtain more scientific results," Wu said.

One exception remains the United States. Amid concerns over the Chinese space program's secrecy and close military connections, American law forbids cooperation between NASA and the CNSA unless Congress gives its approval. That has prevented China from taking part in the International Space Station and helped drive Beijing to launch a now-defunct experimental space station and formulate plans to complete a permanent orbiting outpost within the next two years.

Two of Chang'e 5's four modules 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 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.

The newly collected rocks are thought to be billions of years younger than those obtained earlier 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 are expected to be shared with other countries.

The age of the samples will help fill in a gap in knowledge about the history of the moon between roughly 1 billion and 3 billion years ago, Brad Jolliff, director of the McDonnell Center for the Space Sciences at Washington University in the U.S. city of St. Louis, wrote in an email. They may also yield clues as to the availability of economically useful resources on the moon such as concentrated hydrogen and oxygen, Jolliff said.

"These samples will be a treasure trove!" Jolliff wrote. "My hat is off to our Chinese colleagues for pulling off a very difficult mission; the science that will flow from analysis of the returned samples will be a legacy that will last for many, many years, and hopefully will involve the international community of scientists."

Whether U.S. researchers will have access to the samples depends on American policy, Wu said.

"Regardless of whether they are American government departments, commercial operations, scientists or engineers, we sincerely seek friendly cooperation on the basis of equality, mutual benefit and peaceful application," Wu said.

Snow days, virtual opera: The office holiday party goes on

By KELVIN CHAN and ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — An online murder mystery. Law-themed opera arias. A snowman-building competition.

With dancing, drinking and fancy dinners a no-go because of virus concerns, companies are getting creative about their holiday office parties this year. The challenge is how to organize a virtual celebration that doesn't feel like yet another Zoom meeting.

Many are forgoing parties altogether and instead giving employees gift baskets, extra time off or donations to charities of their choice. Just 23% of companies were planning celebrations, down from 76% last year, in a survey of 189 companies by global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Nearly three-quarters of parties this year will be virtual.

The companies going ahead found their pandemic-weary employees want some kind of bash to break up the anxiety and isolation permeating the holidays.

"People are itching to see each other in person, but I also don't feel totally comfortable holding a typical dinner and open bar," said John Ross, president of Test Prep Insight, a small online education company with 10 employees based in Sacramento, California. "And I know some Zoom-style virtual party just won't cut it."

He landed on the idea of a snow day at a resort near Lake Tahoe, with sledding, snowshoeing and a snowman-building competition. There will be a catered lunch, but no alcohol. Oh, and no plus-ones.

Still, "people are thrilled it's back on," Ross said.

Demand has been high for off-the-wall virtual parties, said Jonathan Como, founder of Offsyte, a marketplace for corporate team events, which has organized online holiday events for companies including health insurance giant Blue Shield, the ride-hailing company Lyft, and the dating app Tinder.

Most popular are celebrations that involve sending food and drink to employees for online cocktail or chocolate-making classes, Como said. Also big are virtual escape rooms where employees can play games.

That's the route marketing firm Rank Fuse is taking, bringing its employees together for a virtual murder mystery through Red Herring Games, said Chelsea Roller, culture manager at the Overland Park, Kansas, firm, which normally organizes a holiday dinner or bowling party.

"It will likely be very silly because every employee will be given a character to play," Roller said. "Truthfully, we almost didn't have a company party. However, numerous people started asking about one, so we decided it was the least we could do."

Many companies are using virtual celebrations to offer something people have missed throughout the pandemic: live entertainment.

HireSpace, a U.K. event booking site, is organizing 50 virtual office parties in December, according to co-founder Edward Poland. The party "rooms" will include live jazz, cabaret acts, magic shows and stand-

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up comedy.

On Site Opera, a New York City group that performs at non-traditional venues, got an unusual request to perform arias for a team of lawyers at a California firm. The numbers will include an aria from Carmen in which the title character tries to negotiate herself out of prison — a favorite of the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who famously loved opera, said Artistic Director Eric Einhorn.

"It's just a chance for the attendees to nerd out with us, to have a good time," Einhorn said.

Some larger companies are spreading out events over several weeks and letting employees choose between ugly sweater contests, cooking lessons or pet costume competitions. Others are dividing celebrations up between teams.

A team of social media managers at PC maker Dell organized a Secret Santa gift exchange and a virtual show-and-tell for employees to share a meaningful memory or thing. The team is new and had only met in person once before the pandemic erupted in the spring.

"It's been a wild year, and as a new team we had to work extra hard — and in new and different ways — to build community," said Susie Gidseg, the team's senior manager.

The caution in the private sector contrasts with the White House, which has been hosting a series of indoor holiday celebrations. With virus cases on the rise, the Centers for the Disease Control of Prevention has urged Americans to avoid large gatherings during the holidays, particularly indoors, where the virus spreads more easily.

President Donald Trump defended the parties in remarks to reporters Monday, saying the number of attendees have been reduced and that he has seen "a lot of people at the parties wearing masks."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also caused an outcry after the Washington Post reported that he had invited hundreds of people to indoor parties hosted by him and his wife. The American Foreign Service Association, the union of U.S. diplomats, called on Pompeo to cancel the parties, voicing concern that State Department employees would be compelled to attend.

A statement released by the State Department said all events followed the department's own "Diplomacy Strong" virus protocols. That included a mask requirement for all attendees and temperature checks at the entrances.

"We've taken every precaution to thin out the number of individuals," the statement said. "We do not anticipate any problems in monitoring the number of individuals in these indoor spaces."

The statement noted that the sheer number of State Department events was partially a reflection of that diligence, as normally large events were being broken up in multiple smaller gatherings to limit the crowds.

Chan reported from London.

French President Macron tests positive for COVID-19

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron tested positive for COVID-19 Thursday, following a week when he has met with numerous European leaders. The French and Spanish prime ministers are among those self-isolating because they had recent contact with him.

Macron took a test "as soon as the first symptoms appeared" and will self-isolate for seven days, the presidency said in a brief statement. It did not detail what symptoms Macron experienced or any treatment he might be receiving.

The 42-year-old president "will continue to work and take care of his activities at a distance," the statement added. His wife, Brigitte, 67, will also self-isolate but has no symptoms and tested negative on Tuesday ahead of a visit to a Paris hospital, her office said.

Macron attended a European Union summit at the end of last week, where he notably had a bilateral meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel. It was not immediately clear what contact tracing efforts were in progress.

EU leaders met in person on Dec 10-11, for the first time since October. The media has been kept away

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from the summit venue in Brussels, but television images showed the leaders wearing masks, generally keeping good distancing – preferring elbow bumps to the usual handshakes, kisses and hugs – and occasionally using hand gel dispensers in the room.

“During the European Council of Thursday 10 and Friday 11 December all sanitary measures were observed and we have not been informed of any other participant or staff present during the summit who tested positive,” said an EU official, who was not allowed to be identified publicly.

Macron had lunch on Wednesday with the prime minister of Portugal. There was no immediate comment from Portuguese officials.

The Spanish government, however, announced that Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who met Macron in Paris on Monday, will place himself in quarantine until Dec. 24. Sánchez informed Spain’s King Felipe VI of the decision and canceled a Thursday appearance at Spain’s National Library.

Macron also held the government’s weekly Cabinet meeting Wednesday. French Prime Minister Jean Castex’s office said that he will also self-isolate for seven days. A day earlier, Macron had lunch with the heads of political groups at the National Assembly, France’s lower house of parliament.

The French presidency confirmed that Macron’s trip to Lebanon scheduled for next week is being canceled.

EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who attended last week’s EU summit, and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson both wished Macron a speedy recovery on Twitter.

Macron and other government officials repeatedly say that they are sticking to strict sanitary protocols during the pandemic, including not shaking hands, wearing a mask and keeping distance from other people.

For several months, masks have been required in all indoor public places in France and everywhere outdoors in big cities. Macron wears one at all public events though usually removes it to give speeches or at press conferences where he is a safe distance from others.

Macron has always been an active president who travels frequently. He has scaled down his activities somewhat this year but continued holding in-person meetings in Paris, other cities in France and in Brussels during France’s second virus lockdown that started in October.

The lockdown, which was lifted partially Tuesday, allowed people to go to school and work but limited travel for most French people and required all restaurants, tourist sites and most other public places to close.

The French president is following national health authorities’ recommendations that since September have reduced the self-isolation time from 14 days to seven. Authorities said at the time that this is the period when there is the greatest risk of contagion and that reducing it allows better enforcement of the measure.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends to isolate for at least 10 days after symptoms first appear.

Since the pandemic first surfaced in Europe in February, EU leaders have held several summits via videoconference. Many, though, have complained about the lack of privacy attached to video calls and the impossibility of thoroughly resolving thorny issues, like the stalemate over the EU’s massive long-term budget and recovery fund, which was resolved in person last week.

In October, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin both had to leave the summit after separately being in contact with people who later tested positive for the coronavirus.

A summit planned for September was postponed for a week after EU Council President Charles Michel, who chairs the meetings, went into coronavirus quarantine after one of his security officers tested positive for COVID-19.

Elaine Ganley in Paris, Barry Hatton in Lisbon, Lorne Cook in Brussels and Ciaran Giles in Madrid contributed.

Asia Today: S. Korea marks deadliest day, over 1,000 cases

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea has added more than 1,000 infections to its coronavirus

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caseload for the second straight day amid growing fears that the virus is spreading out of control in the greater capital area.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Thursday said the COVID-19 death toll was now at 634 after 22 patients died in the past 24 hours, the deadliest day since the emergence of the pandemic. Among 12,209 active patients, 242 are in serious or critical condition.

Nearly 800 of the 1,014 new cases were reported from the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area, where health officials have raised alarm about a looming shortage in hospital capacities. Thursday marked the 40th consecutive day of triple digit daily jumps, which brought the national caseload to 46,453.

The viral resurgence came after months of pandemic fatigue, complacency and government efforts to breathe life into a sluggish economy.

Officials are now mulling whether to raise social distancing restriction to maximum levels, which could possibly include bans on gatherings of more than 10 people, shutting tens of thousands of businesses deemed non-essential and requiring companies to have more employees work from home.

Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region:

— The World Health Organization says the coming COVID-19 vaccines will not end the pandemic quickly and countries of the Western Pacific region are not guaranteed to have early access to the shots. WHO Regional Director Dr. Takeshi Kasai says the vaccines are not “a silver bullet that will end the pandemic in the near future.” He says, “The development of safe and effective vaccines is one thing. Producing them in adequate quantities and reaching everyone who needs them is another.” While some countries that have independent vaccine purchase agreements might start vaccination campaigns in the coming months, others could see vaccination begin in the middle or late 2021, said Dr. Socorro Escalante, WHO’s coordinator for essential medicines and health technologies. “It’s important to emphasize that most, if not all, the countries in the Western Pacific region are a part of the COVAX Facility,” said Escalante. COVAX was set up by WHO, vaccines alliance GAVI and CEPI, a global coalition to fight epidemics, in an effort to ensure equitable access to vaccines across the world. WHO representatives also urged that high-risk groups should be prioritized for vaccination as vaccines will only be available in limited quantities.

— Tokyo reported 822 new cases of the coronavirus, a new high for the Japanese capital. Infections have been on the steady climb nationwide for several weeks. Japan on Friday reported 2,988 new cases for a total of 187,103, including 2,739 deaths. Experts on the Tokyo task force raised caution levels for the medical systems to the highest, suggesting that most Tokyo hospitals have little extra manpower or beds to continue their ordinary treatment for other patients. “We must stop further acceleration of the infections,” Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike said. “In order to prevent serious cases and deaths and save the medical systems from collapsing, I ask for everyone to cooperate.” Koike said Tokyo is extending an early closure request for drinking places, which was to end Thursday, through mid-January. Norio Ohmagari, director of the Disease Control and Prevention Center, said that the number of daily cases could exceed 1,000 within weeks. About half of the cases are no longer traceable as infections are transmitted at homes, offices and schools, experts said. Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, apparently reluctant to further damage businesses already hit by the pandemic, has been slow to take steps. After repeated calls from experts, Suga last Friday announced plans to suspend the government’s travel promotion campaign from Dec. 28 to Jan. 11 following media surveys showing a sharp decline in his approval ratings.

— Authorities are searching for the source of an emerging COVID-19 cluster in Sydney’s northern coastal suburbs. Australia’s largest city had gone 12 consecutive days without community transmission until Wednesday, when a driver who transported international air crews in a van to and from Sydney Airport tested positive for the coronavirus. By Thursday, six people had been infected with the virus through community transmission in Sydney, as well as six returned travelers who had been infected overseas and tested positive while in hotel quarantine. The new infections include a woman who works at the Pittwater Palms aged care home, which has since been closed to visitors. A drummer in a band that had played in several clubs around Sydney has also been infected. The New South Wales Health Department said later Thursday that 17 people had been infected in Sydney’s northern coastal suburbs. Residents in the North-

ern Beaches Local Government Area were advised to work from home and remain at home as much as possible for the next three days. Others were advised to avoid traveling to the area.

— The Australian Open men's tennis tournament will begin three weeks later than planned on Feb. 8 because of the pandemic. The ATP said men's qualifying for the season's first Grand Slam tournament is being moved to Doha, Qatar, from Jan. 10-13. That will be followed by a period of about 2 1/2 weeks set aside for travel to Melbourne and a 14-day quarantine period for players and their coaches or other support staff. Other tournaments that will not take place next year include the New York Open and an event in Auckland, New Zealand. The ATP is looking for new dates for the Rio Open, which was supposed to begin Feb. 17 but now conflicts with the two-week Australian Open main draw. As with other sports, tennis was disrupted this year because of the COVID-19 outbreak, including several months with no competition, the postponement of the French Open's start from May to September, and the cancelation of Wimbledon for the first time since World War II.

— New Zealand's economy has bounced back close to where it was before the coronavirus hit after GDP rose by a record 14% in the third quarter. The rise followed a record 11% drop in the second quarter and a small drop in the first quarter, according to Statistics New Zealand. In the year to September, GDP declined by 2.2%. Leading the rebound in the third quarter were goods-producing industries, up 26%, and service industries, up 11%. New Zealand has eliminated community spread of the virus, at least for now, and many aspects of life have returned to normal. The nation's borders, however, remain shut.

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

Will children be able to get COVID-19 vaccines?

By The Associated Press undefined

Will children be able to get COVID-19 vaccines?

Not until there's enough data from studies in different age groups, which will stretch well into next year.

The Pfizer vaccine authorized in the U.S. this month is for people 16 and older. Testing began in October in children as young as 12 and is expected to take several more months. The Food and Drug Administration will have to decide when there's enough data to allow emergency use in this age group.

Depending on the results, younger children may be enrolled for study as well.

Moderna, which is expected to become the second COVID-19 vaccine greenlit in the U.S., began enrolling study participants ages 12 to 17 this month, and will track them for a year. Testing in children younger than 12 is expected to start in early 2021.

It is uncertain if the results on younger children will come in time for vaccinations to begin before the next school year.

Positive outcomes in adult studies are reassuring and suggest it is safe to proceed in testing kids, said Dr. Buddy Creech, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at Vanderbilt University and director of its vaccine research program.

Even though children usually don't get very sick from COVID-19, they can spread the virus to others, said Dr. Robert Frenck, who is the lead researcher for Pfizer's study in kids at Cincinnati Children's Hospital. At least 1.6 million youth have been infected, 8,000 have been hospitalized and 162 have died from the virus, he noted.

"It's really important, not only for themselves but also for society," Frenck said.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org.

Read previous Viral Questions:

Can I stop wearing a mask after getting a COVID-19 vaccine?

What does COVID-19 vaccine effectiveness mean?

Do I need to wear a mask if I'm 6 feet away from others?

Self-immolation persists as grim form of protest in Tunisia

By FRANCESCA EBEL Associated Press

KASSERINE, Tunisia (AP) — In his old life, Hosni Kalaia remembers strolling the streets of his hometown of Kasserine in central Tunisia with confidence. He flashed his heavy gold bracelets and rings, and puffed out his chest, broad and sculptured from regular workouts.

Today, Kalaia hides his face from the world behind dark sunglasses and beneath a woolen hat. On his left hand, three blackened, gnarled fingers protrude from one glove; on his right, he has none at all.

He lost them in the few seconds it took to disfigure his life forever, when — angry and distraught about the abuse and injustice he'd suffered at the hands of a local police chief — Kalaia doused himself in gasoline and set himself on fire.

He's among hundreds of Tunisians who have turned to the desperate act of self-immolation in the past 10 years, following the example of Mohammed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old fruit seller in the town of Sidi Bouzid who set himself ablaze on Dec. 17, 2010, to protest police harassment.

Bouazizi's gruesome death unwittingly unleashed mass demonstrations against poverty and repression, leading to the downfall of Tunisia's dictator of 23 years. That in turn sparked the Arab Spring uprisings and a decade of crackdowns and civil wars across the region.

"I would never describe the act of self-immolation as an act of courage because even the bravest person in the world couldn't do it," Kalaia, 49, told The Associated Press in his family home. "When I poured the petrol over my head, I didn't think very much, because I wasn't really conscious about what I was doing. Then I saw a flash, I felt my skin start to burn and I fell down. I woke up eight months later in hospital."

He says it hasn't gotten any easier seeing the shock on people's faces when he removes his hat and sunglasses. Rivulets of scars fray and splinter across his face and misshapen ears, and there are livid, deep welts on his arms and stomach.

His younger brother set himself ablaze too, killing himself, and his mother tried to do the same, their family a graphic reminder of the chaos and economic turmoil in this North African nation.

Most everywhere in the Arab world, the demonstrators' dreams have been shattered. Tunisia is often considered a success story and a Tunisian democracy group won the 2015 Nobel Peace Prize, but while it has more civil liberties, free expression and political plurality, the country is plagued by an ever-worsening economic crisis.

Lack of socio-economic reforms, the devaluation of the Tunisian dinar and weak, inefficient governance have failed to alleviate poverty or fully revive investment. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment has risen to 18%. Attempts to migrate to Europe by sea have soared.

"There is a huge gap between people's aspirations and their means. It is this gap that pushes people further into misery," said Abdessater Sahbani, a sociologist at the University of Tunis. "You can have a good job and be well-educated, but it doesn't give you anything substantial."

The number of self-immolations has tripled since 2011, and "the rise has persisted right into 2020," said Dr. Mehdi Ben Khelil of Tunis' Charles Nicolle Hospital, who studies the phenomenon.

After the revolution, Ben Khelil said, "there was a contrast between what we hoped for versus what we gained. Disillusion kept on growing."

Although there are no official statistics, the Tunisian Social Observatory of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights recorded 62 such suicides or attempts in the first 10 months of 2020.

Most occur near local administration or government buildings to protest financial insecurity and suffering, said Najla Arfa, project manager at the observatory. Police abuse is often a trigger.

The overwhelming majority are working-class men in their 20s and 30s, living in deprived interior areas such as Kairouan and Sidi Bouzid. Of 13 survivors contacted by AP, all said they needed financial help.

In the decade since Bouazizi's suicide, little has changed in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid. Huddles of jobless young men sit chain-smoking on plastic chairs in cafés. Others stand in line to buy canisters of

cooking gas after a strike disrupted supplies and forced people to use firewood.

With monuments in his memory, the town has become a shrine to Bouazizi, whose life resembles those of millions of other Tunisians. But not everyone regards his legacy positively.

"His act had a negative effect on the whole country and especially for Sidi Bouzid," says 30-year-old accounting assistant Marwa Hamdouni. "I think only his family benefited. But for the governorate of Sidi Bouzid, the revolution did not bring anything good."

In 2013, Bouazizi's family moved to Montreal. Experts say that tales of his family gaining financially from his death spawned other such suicides, notably right after the revolution.

Ben Khelil, the doctor, says the reasons go beyond that: "Behind immolation, there is the desire to express their words and suffering. For certain people, the desire it not to die but to be heard."

Survivors face immense psychological, physical and financial challenges.

"Some scars may heal badly and might hinder certain functions such as sitting, chewing and expressing facial emotions," Ben Khelil says. "There can be a lot of persistent pain, especially when the scars are deep and touch the nerves."

Kalaia spent three years in a hospital and then a private clinic recovering from his burns. He cannot hold a bottle of water, dress himself without assistance or fall asleep without medication. His arms are still riddled with infections.

"I'm not going to tell you I regret waking up, but dying would have been better," Kalaia says, dragging on a cigarette. "Nowadays, I don't think about killing myself another time, but I ask God for death because I'm so tired."

The Quran forbids suicide, and many Muslim societies regard it as taboo. This does not prevent hundreds of Tunisians attempting it every year.

In 2014, Kalaia's mother, Zina Sehi, now 68, tried to burn herself to death in front of the president's palace in Tunis, protesting the government's lack of support for the family. The next year, his 35-year-old brother Saber did the same, dying instantly. Kalaia blames himself for their actions.

The government created a committee to prevent such suicides in 2015, but political turmoil has led to a series of short-term governments that have taken little deep action to help survivors or their families.

"Do you see what this state did for me? It is the state that left me in this corner," Kalaia says, gesturing to a mattress on the floor of his home where he sleeps. "It's over, my life is over."

Palestinians left waiting as Israel is set to deploy vaccine

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — Israel will begin rolling out a major coronavirus vaccination campaign next week after the prime minister reached out personally to the head of a major drug company. Millions of Palestinians living under Israeli control will have to wait much longer.

Worldwide, rich nations are snatching up scarce supplies of new vaccines as poor countries largely rely on a World Health Organization program that has yet to get off the ground. There are few places where the competition is playing out in closer proximity than in Israel and the territories it has occupied for more than half a century.

Next year could bring a sharp divergence in the trajectory of the pandemic, which until now has blithely ignored the national boundaries and political enmities of the Middle East. Israelis could soon return to normal life and an economic revival, even as the virus continues to menace Palestinian towns and villages just a few miles (kilometers) away.

Israel reached an agreement with the Pfizer pharmaceutical company to supply 8 million doses of its newly approved vaccine — enough to cover nearly half of Israel's population of 9 million since each person requires two doses. That came after Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu personally reached out multiple times to Pfizer Chief Executive Albert Bourla, boasting that at one point he was able to reach the CEO at 2 a.m.

Israel has mobile vaccination units with refrigerators that can keep the Pfizer shots at the required minus

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70 degrees Celsius (minus 94 Fahrenheit). It plans to begin vaccinations as soon as next week, with a capacity of more than 60,000 shots a day. Israel reached a separate agreement with Moderna earlier this month to purchase 6 million doses of its vaccine — enough for another 3 million Israelis.

Israel's vaccination campaign will include Jewish settlers living deep inside the West Bank, who are Israeli citizens, but not the territory's 2.5 million Palestinians.

They will have to wait for the cash-strapped Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the occupied West Bank in accordance with interim peace agreements reached in the 1990s. Israel captured the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem, territories the Palestinian seek for their future state, in the 1967 Mideast war.

The PA hopes to get vaccines through a WHO-led partnership with humanitarian organizations known as COVAX, which aims to provide free vaccines for up to 20% of the population of poor countries, many of which have been hit especially hard by the pandemic.

But the program has secured only a fraction of the 2 billion doses it hopes to buy over the next year, has yet to confirm any actual deals and is short on cash. Rich countries have already reserved about 9 billion of the estimated 12 billion doses the pharmaceutical industry is expected to produce next year.

Complicating matters is the fact that the Palestinians have only one refrigeration unit — in the oasis town of Jericho — capable of storing the Pfizer vaccine. They are among nearly 3 billion people worldwide for whom lack of adequate refrigeration capacity could pose a major obstacle.

Dr. Ali Abed Rabbo, a senior Palestinian health official, said the PA is in talks with Pfizer and Moderna — whose vaccines require extra-cold storage — as well as AstraZeneca and the makers of a largely untested Russian vaccine, but has yet to sign any agreements beyond COVAX.

The PA hopes to vaccinate 20% of the population through COVAX, beginning with health workers, he said. "The remainder will depend on Palestine purchasing from the global supply, and we are working with several companies," he said.

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have struggled to contain their outbreaks, which have fed off one another as people travel back and forth — mainly tens of thousands of Palestinian laborers employed in Israel. Israel has reported more than 350,000 cases, including more than 3,000 deaths.

The Palestinian Authority has reported more than 85,000 cases in the West Bank, including more than 800 deaths, and the outbreak has intensified in recent weeks. The situation is even more dire in Gaza, home to 2 million Palestinians, which has been under an Israeli and Egyptian blockade since the Hamas militant group seized power in 2007. Authorities there have reported over 30,000 cases, including 220 deaths.

With Gaza's Hamas rulers shunned by the international community, the territory will also rely on the Palestinian Authority. That means it could be several months before any large-scale vaccinations are carried out in the impoverished coastal strip.

Dr. Gerald Rockenschaub, the head of the WHO office for the Palestinian territories, said the PA will provide vaccines to Gaza, but they will arrive in batches and it will take time to reach the first 20%. "We hope that sometime during the first quarter of the next year that the first vaccines will start arriving," he said.

Israel's Deputy Health Minister Yoav Kisch told Kan Radio that Israel was working to attain a surplus of vaccines for Israelis and that "should we see that Israel's demands have been met and we have additional capability, we will certainly consider helping the Palestinian Authority." He said doing so would help prevent a resurgence of outbreaks in Israel proper.

Dr. Ashi Shalmon, an Israeli Health Ministry official, said its approach is in line with past agreements. The Oslo accords require the PA to maintain international vaccination standards and for the sides to exchange information and cooperate in combating epidemics.

Israel, which intends to start by inoculating health workers and nursing home residents, plans to issue special "passports" to those who have been vaccinated, exempting them from restrictions and paving the way for the revival of travel and commerce.

But the pandemic would continue to rage in Palestinian cities like Bethlehem — where hotels and shops have been empty for months and Christmas celebrations were mostly called off — even as a sense of

normalcy is restored in Israel and in nearby settlements.

Still, tens of thousands of Palestinians work in Israel and the settlements. They could potentially transfer the virus to Israelis who have not been vaccinated, slowing Israel's path to herd immunity, the point at which the virus can no longer easily spread.

Physicians for Human Rights-Israel, a group that advocates for more equitable health care, says Israel has a legal obligation as an occupying power to purchase and distribute vaccines to the Palestinians. It says Israel must also ensure that vaccines that don't meet its own safety guidelines — like the Russian shot — are not distributed in areas under its control.

"Israel still maintains control over many aspects of the Palestinians' lives, whether checkpoints, importing goods and medication, and controlling the movement of people," said Ghada Majadle, the director of the group's activities in the Palestinian territories.

"The Palestinian health system, whether in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, is in dire condition, mainly (because of) restrictions imposed by Israel."

Associated Press writers Jelal Hassan in Ramallah, West Bank, Ilan Ben Zion in Jerusalem and Fares Akram in Gaza City, Gaza Strip contributed to this report.

Close but not yet: Deal near on COVID-19 economic aid bill

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional negotiators are closing in on a \$900 billion COVID-19 economic relief package that would deliver additional help to businesses, \$300 per week jobless checks, and \$600 stimulus payments to most Americans. But there was no deal quite yet.

The long-delayed measure was coming together as Capitol Hill combatants finally fashioned difficult compromises, often at the expense of more ambitious Democratic wishes for the legislation, to complete the second major relief package of the pandemic.

A hoped-for announcement Wednesday failed to materialize as lawmakers across the spectrum hammered out details of the sprawling legislation and top negotiators continued to trade offers. But lawmakers briefed on the outlines of the aid bill freely shared them.

It's the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the landmark CARES Act in March, which delivered \$1.8 trillion in aid and more generous jobless benefits and direct payments to individuals. Since then, Democrats have repeatedly called for ambitious further federal steps to provide relief and battle the pandemic, while Republicans have sought to more fully reopen the economy and to avoid padding the government's \$27 trillion debt.

President-elect Joe Biden is eager for an aid package to prop up the economy and deliver direct aid to the jobless and hungry, even though the package falls short of what Democrats want. He called the emerging version "an important down payment" and promised more help next year.

Republicans, too, are anxious to approve some aid before going home for the year.

"We're still close and we're gonna get there," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky told reporters Wednesday evening as he left the Capitol. And during a Senate GOP lunchtime call a day earlier, party leaders stressed the importance of reaching an agreement before the upcoming Georgia Senate runoff election.

The details were still being worked out, but lawmakers in both parties said leaders had agreed on a top-line total of about \$900 billion, with direct payments of perhaps \$600 to most Americans and a \$300-per-week bonus federal unemployment benefit to partially replace a \$600-per-week benefit that expired this summer. It also includes the renewal of extra weeks of state unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless. More than \$300 billion in subsidies for business, including a second round of "paycheck protection" payments to especially hard-hit businesses, are locked in, as is \$25 billion to help struggling renters with their payments and provide food aid and farm subsidies, and a \$10 billion bailout for the Postal Service.

Democrats acknowledged that the removal of a \$160 billion-or-so aid package for state and local govern-

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ments whose budgets have been thrown out of balance by the pandemic was a bitter loss.

"It's heartbreaking for us," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, whose state has big fiscal problems.

The emerging package was serving as a magnet for adding on other items, and the two sides continued to swap offers. It was apparent that another temporary spending bill would be needed to prevent a government shutdown at midnight on Friday. That was likely to easily pass.

House lawmakers returned to Washington on Wednesday in hopes of a vote soon on the broader package, which would combine the COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion governmentwide funding bill and a host of other remaining congressional business, including extending expiring tax breaks and passing other unfinished legislation.

Negotiations intensified on Tuesday after months of futility. Before the election, with Democrats riding high in the polls, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took a hard line for more aid. Now, McConnell is playing a strong hand after a better-than-expected performance in the elections limited GOP losses in Senate races.

The frightening, record surge in COVID caseloads and deaths, combined with troubling economic indicators, however, is mandating an agreement, though the emerging package contains less economic stimulus than the March aid bill.

"The case for fiscal policy right now is very, very strong," Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday. "I think that is widely understood now. It's a very positive thing that we may finally be getting that."

McConnell successfully pushed to get Democrats to drop their much-sought \$160 billion state and local government aid package while giving up a key priority of his own — a liability shield for businesses and other institutions like universities fearing COVID-19 lawsuits. Democrats cited other gains for states and localities in the emerging deal such as help for transit systems, schools and vaccine distribution.

The addition of the \$600 direct payments came after recent endorsements from both President Donald Trump and progressives including Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who remains dissatisfied about the overall package.

"Everything that is in that package is vitally needed," Sanders said Wednesday on MSNBC. "The problem is that it is a much smaller package than the country needs in this moment of economic desperation."

A poisonous dynamic has long infected the negotiations, but the mood was businesslike in two meetings in Pelosi's Capitol suite Tuesday that resulted in a burst of progress.

Pressure for a deal is intense. Unemployment benefits run out Dec. 26 for more than 10 million people. Many businesses are barely hanging on after nine months of the pandemic. And money is needed to distribute new vaccines that are finally offering hope for returning the country to a semblance of normalcy.

The looming agreement follows efforts by a bipartisan group of rank-and-file lawmakers to find middle ground between a \$2.4 trillion House bill and a \$500 billion GOP measure fashioned by McConnell.

Their \$908 billion proposal has served as a template for the talks, although the bipartisan group, led by Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, favored aid to states and localities instead of another round of stimulus payments. The CARES Act provided for \$1,200 payments per individual and \$500 per child.

"I think that the work that our bipartisan group did really helped to stimulate this," Collins said.

With Congress otherwise getting ready to close up shop, lawmakers are eager to use the relief package to carry other unfinished business.

A leading candidate is a 369-page water resources bill that targets \$10 billion for 46 Army Corps of Engineers flood control, environmental, and coastal protection projects. Another potential addition would extend favorable tax treatment for "look through" entities of offshore subsidiaries of U.S. corporations. Meanwhile, thousands of craft brewers, wineries, and distillers are facing higher taxes in April if their tax break isn't extended.

The end-of-session rush also promises relief for victims of shockingly steep surprise medical bills, a phenomenon that often occurs when providers drop out of insurance company networks. That measure, combined with an assortment of other health policy provisions, generates savings for federal funding for community health centers.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed.

Chinese capsule returns to Earth carrying moon rocks

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese lunar capsule returned to Earth on Thursday with the first fresh rock samples from the moon in more than 40 years, offering the possibility of new insights into the history of the solar system and marking a new landmark for China's rapidly advancing space program.

The capsule of the Chang'e 5 probe landed just before 2 a.m. (1800 GMT Wednesday) in the Siziwang district of the Inner Mongolia region, the China National Space Administration reported.

The capsule had earlier separated from its orbiter module and performed a bounce off Earth's atmosphere to reduce its speed before passing through and floating to the ground on parachutes. Following recovery, the capsule and its cargo of samples were flown to the space program's campus in Beijing to begin the process of disassembly and analysis, the space administration said.

The mission achieved new firsts for the lunar exploration program in collecting samples, launching a vehicle from the moon's surface and docking it with the capsule to return the samples to Earth, the administration said.

"As our nation's mostly complex and technically groundbreaking space mission, Chang'e 5 has achieved multiple technical breakthroughs ... and represents a landmark achievement," it said.

Two of the Chang'e 5's four modules 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 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.

Much to the amusement of viewers, footage run by state broadcaster CCTV showed a furry white animal, possibly a fox or rodent, running in front of the capsule as it lay on the ground, stopping briefly as if to inquire into the unfamiliar object.

Chinese leader Xi Jinping, in a statement read out at the Beijing Aerospace Control Center, called it a major achievement that marked a great step forward for China's space industry. Xi expressed hope that mission participants would continue to contribute toward building China into a major space power and national rejuvenation, state-run Xinhua News Agency said.

Recovery crews had prepared helicopters and off-road vehicles to home in on signals emitted by the lunar spacecraft and locate it in the darkness shrouding the vast snow-covered region in China's far north, long used as a landing site for China's Shenzhou crewed spaceships.

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

The newly collected rocks are thought to be billions of years younger than those obtained earlier 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 are expected to be shared with other countries.

The age of the samples will help fill in a gap in knowledge about the history of the moon between roughly 1 billion and three billion years ago, Brad Jolliff, director of the McDonnell Center for the Space Sciences at Washington University in the U.S. city of St. Louis, wrote in an email. They may also yield clues as to the availability of economically useful resources on the moon such as concentrated hydrogen and oxygen, Jolliff said.

"These samples will be a treasure trove!" Jolliff wrote. "My hat is off to our Chinese colleagues for pulling off a very difficult mission; the science that will flow from analysis of the returned samples will be a legacy that will last for many, many years, and hopefully will involve the international community of scientists."

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Chang'e 5 blasted off from a launch base in China's southern island province of Hainan on Nov. 24 and appeared to have completed its highly technically sophisticated mission without a hitch.

It marked 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.

In 2003, China became the third country to send an astronaut into orbit on its own after the Soviet Union and the United States and its space program has proceeded more cautiously than the U.S.-Soviet space race of the 1960s, which was marked by fatalities and launch failures. By taking incremental steps, China appears on the path toward building a program that can sustain steady progress.

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.

This report corrects the date of the Chang'e 5 mission's launch.

Lives Lost: Doctor chose to stay, work in war-torn Syria

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

Dr. Adnan Jasem had every reason to leave war-torn Syria after surviving a bomb blast that broke his legs four years ago and receiving job offers from abroad.

Still, Jasem stayed, committed to treating the people in his homeland. It was no surprise that he would be on the front lines when the first coronavirus cases appeared in northwest Syria this summer.

By Sept. 6, Jasem started feeling ill. Four days later, the 58-year-old was dead.

"It's just so tragic," said Jasem's cousin, Dr. Ziad Alissa, who lives in Paris.

Alissa called doctors to get Jasem on a ventilator, but it was too late and he died the next day.

"He cared for so many people and saved so many lives, but we couldn't save him," said Alissa, director of the French chapter of the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, or UOSSM, a group founded by Syrian doctors in 2012 to provide free medical care, equipment and other aid to hospitals and clinics inside Syria.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is part of an ongoing series of stories remembering people who have died of the coronavirus around the world.

Jasem is the reason Alissa, who is five years younger, became a doctor.

The two grew up in a farming region. Jasem's father was the first to break from the family's long history of wheat and cotton farming and go to college. He came back home to teach.

His father instilled in Jasem the sense of duty to serve your community. Jasem, too, returned after finishing medical school in Damascus, specializing in anesthesia.

He and his wife, a gynecologist, had four children and worked as local doctors in eastern Syria's Deir el-Zour region, near the border with Iraq.

Syria's civil war erupted after an Arab Spring-inspired uprising, which began with peaceful protests in 2011 and escalated into an armed rebellion following a government crackdown.

Their lives were constantly under threat: As doctors, they were seen with suspicion every time a new

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group — from government forces to Islamic State fighters — took control of an area.

In the past year alone, 85 medical facilities in northern Syria have been attacked, according to UOSSM. Medical equipment was regularly moved to hospital basements to protect it from bombings. With the sound of planes conducting airstrikes overhead, briefly hiding in a safe place was a routine part of Jasem's workday. Sometimes he treated fellow doctors who were injured in the blasts.

Syria's nine-year war has killed about a half-million people, wounded more than a million and forced about 5.6 million to flee as refugees, mostly to neighboring countries. Another 6 million of Syria's prewar population of 23 million are internally displaced.

Jasem and his family were uprooted several times because of the violence, including when a bomb blast destroyed his home four years ago as he huddled with his wife and children in the basement. Both his legs were broken and he underwent surgeries to walk again.

Jasem received job offers from doctors who had left the country, inviting him to join them in Turkey and raise his family there.

His cousin said Jasem's response was always the same: "If there are no doctors here, who was going to help the people?"

Syria's health care system was already struggling when the first coronavirus cases appeared. Jasem had been working since 2017 in the intensive care unit at the hospital in al-Bab, a Turkish-controlled zone in northwestern Syria. Turkey supports opposition fighters battling Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Jasem did his best to teach his co-workers and patients how to protect themselves against the virus, his cousin said, but there was a shortage of masks, gloves, gowns, disinfectant, even soap.

When Jasem came home sick, he told his family not to worry, that he would rest and recover while quarantining. He figured he had survived so much already.

But within days, he struggled to breathe and ended up in the same intensive care unit where he had treated numerous patients. He spent only one night there before he died.

"During this war, thousands of doctors have left because they couldn't live there, couldn't tolerate the life there," Alissa said. "He did it despite everything — despite the danger, the fear, the attacks, the bombings. He knew the people needed him. That is what made him an extraordinary human being. Those doctors are very few."

Jasem dreamed of someday opening a hospital in Syria that would offer free medical services to everyone. His family hopes to make that dream a reality in his honor.

Jasem's wife, Dr. Ruba Alsayed, plans to keep working as a doctor in Syria, raising their 14-year-old son on her own. Their 18-year-old son wants to be a doctor as well. He is considering studying medicine in Europe but plans to return to his homeland to continue his father's work.

Jasem inspired so many, said Alissa, who returns regularly to Syria to volunteer as a doctor.

"He loved his country, loved his home," Alissa said. "Above all, he loved to help his people."

Watson reported from San Diego. Associated Press reporter Zeina Karam in Beirut contributed to this report.

States grapple with next steps on evictions as crisis grows

By SARA CLINE Associated Press/Report for America

CORVALLIS, Ore. (AP) — Ryan Bowser looked somber as he sat in his cramped Oregon apartment, worried whether he, his pregnant girlfriend and her 10-year-old daughter would have a roof over their heads in the new year. It may well depend on state lawmakers.

The family is three months behind on the \$1,165 in rent they pay for their two-bedroom unit in the college town of Corvallis. Bowser, a custodian at Oregon State University, took eight weeks off because he was sick and couldn't afford child care.

They're among thousands hoping Oregon extends an eviction moratorium until July 1 in a special legislative session next week. The proposal also would create a \$200 million fund mainly to compensate landlords. If passed, it would go further than a one-month extension of a federal eviction moratorium expected in

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a coronavirus relief package nearing consensus in Congress.

"We are forced to make decisions between which bills to pay — rent, car or groceries," said Bowser, adding that they may have to sleep in their car, stay on friends' couches or move to another state to crash with distant relatives. "We don't know if we will have a home next year."

The plight of Bowser and other renters on the edge foreshadows a national crisis that's expected to grow next year, with states and cities that granted renters a reprieve amid the coronavirus-battered economy now wrestling with what comes next. While states like Oregon and California are trying to pass much longer moratoriums, some don't have more protections in the works.

"This has the potential of being the biggest housing crisis of our lifetime," said David Dworkin, president and CEO of the National Housing Conference, a nonprofit dedicated to affordable housing for all Americans.

About one-third of U.S. households say they're behind on rent or mortgage payments and likely to face eviction or foreclosure in the next two months, according to data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau.

Eyes are on congressional leaders who are closing in on a massive COVID-19 relief package, including an extension of the federal eviction moratorium until February and \$25 billion in rental assistance as well as a new round of stimulus checks, bonus unemployment benefits and many other efforts to deliver aid.

Eviction moratoriums instituted by 44 states beginning in March have mostly expired. In response, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued the federal moratorium in September that broadly prevents evictions through the end of 2020. The nationwide directive was seen as the best hope to prevent more than 23 million renters from being displaced.

Now, some states want to extend eviction bans further than the federal government. Lawmakers in heavily Democratic California are proposing their moratorium last until 2022, as long as renters pay at least 25% of their rent and attest to financial hardship.

And a six-month extension is the top issue for the Democratic-led Oregon Legislature in a special session Monday. Its one of 15 states where eviction moratoriums are now in place through year's end, according to the Eviction Lab at Princeton University.

"The consequences of not acting before the expiration of the eviction moratorium would be catastrophic," said Rep. Julie Fahey, a Democrat from the city of Eugene who helped write the proposal.

A main sticking point is that for landlords to receive back rent through a proposed compensation fund, they must forgo 20% of past-due payments. A Republican leader called it "dramatically unfair."

"It's not right to tell (landlords) that they have to pay to get support when the government is the one who asked them to share this responsibility and bear this burden to keep renters housed, which they have done that," said Rep. Christine Drazan, leader of the House Republican Caucus.

Democratic Senate President Peter Courtney said there will be "some concerns, but I am convinced that we will pass something."

While moratoriums have helped people stay in their homes during the pandemic, experts warn that extending them isn't a long-term solution.

"This is just kicking the can down the road, because it doesn't actually pay the rent," Dworkin said. "If a tenant cannot afford to pay three months of rent or one month of rent, then they are not going to be able to pay nine or 12 months of rent — and they are eventually going to get evicted unless we pay their rent."

He suggests states fund efforts that cover both rent and back payments for landlords. Through October, the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimated states and cities have set aside over \$4 billion for rental assistance — far less than what they say is needed.

Like Oregon, Hawaii, Nebraska and New Jersey are among those offering payments to landlords for missed rent.

But with states' tax revenue shrinking during the pandemic and recession, expensive efforts to combat the eviction crisis are further straining resources.

"States are under severe stress themselves financially," Dworkin said. "In many ways, the states are being put in the situation of robbing Peter to pay Paul."

Bowser said delays by lawmakers, locally and nationally, have crippled his family.

"All (lawmakers) have to do right now in this situation is the bare minimum to keep people in their

homes," Bowser said.

He and his girlfriend, Taylor Wood, have closely followed updates on possible extensions to state and federal moratoriums as they debate which bills to pay that month and which necessities to sacrifice. They're desperately developing a plan for what to do if they find an eviction notice tacked to their door in the new year.

"It's frustrating, and I know we are not the only people in this situation — there are thousands like us," Wood said. "I just keep thinking, 'Well, (lawmakers) won't just let us go homeless ... right?'"

Health officials track safety as COVID-19 vaccines roll out

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

As COVID-19 vaccinations roll out to more and more people, health authorities are keeping close watch for any unexpected side effects.

On Tuesday, a health worker in Alaska suffered a severe allergic reaction after receiving the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine. She is in the hospital for another night under observation while another worker, vaccinated Wednesday, has recovered. Doctors already knew to be on the lookout after Britain reported two similar cases last week.

In the U.S., vaccine recipients are supposed to hang around after the injection in case signs of an allergy appear and they need immediate treatment — exactly what happened when the health worker in Juneau became flushed and short of breath 10 minutes after the shot. The second worker experienced eye puffiness, light headedness and scratchy throat.

Allergies are always a question with a new medical product, but monitoring COVID-19 vaccines for any other, unexpected side effects is a bigger challenge than usual. It's not just because so many people need to be vaccinated over the next year. Never before have so many vaccines made in different ways converged at the same time — and it's possible that one shot option will come with different side effects than another.

The first vaccine beginning widespread use in the U.S. and many Western countries, made by Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech, and a second option expected soon from competitor Moderna Inc. both are made the same way. The Food and Drug Administration says huge studies of each have uncovered no major safety risks.

But the allergy concern "points out again the importance of real-time safety monitoring," said Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, a former FDA vaccine chief.

And authorities have multiple ways of tracking how people fare as these COVID-19 vaccines, and hopefully additional ones in coming months, get into more arms.

HOW WILL I FEEL AFTER VACCINATION?

Getting either the Pfizer-BioNTech shot or the Moderna version can cause some temporary discomfort, just like many vaccines do.

In addition to a sore arm, people can experience a fever and some flu-like symptoms — fatigue, aches, chills, headache. They last about a day, sometimes bad enough that recipients miss work, and are more common after the second dose and in younger people.

These reactions are a sign that the immune system is revving up. COVID-19 vaccines tend to cause more of those reactions than a flu shot, about what people experience with shingles vaccinations. But some are similar to early coronavirus symptoms, one reason hospitals are staggering when their employees get vaccinated.

WHAT ABOUT SERIOUS RISKS?

The FDA found no serious side effects in the tens of thousands enrolled in studies of the two vaccines. Still, problems so rare they don't occur in even very large studies sometimes crop up when a vaccine is used more widely and without the stringent rules of a clinical trial.

The first allergy reports from England were in people with a history of serious allergies, and British authorities warned those with severe prior experiences to hold off vaccination as they determine what

ingredient might be a problem.

U.S. health authorities are giving more nuanced advice. People always are asked about allergies before vaccinations, and instructions for the Pfizer-BioNTech shot say avoid it if you're severely allergic to one of its ingredients or had a severe reaction to a prior dose. Health workers can go over the ingredient list.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advises people to stick around for 15 minutes after vaccination, and those with a history of other allergies for 30 minutes, so they can be treated immediately if they have a reaction.

The Alaska health worker, who doctors said had no history of allergies, was following that advice and got prompt care for a particularly severe reaction called anaphylaxis. She has recovered after a night of observation in the hospital — but won't be allowed a second vaccine dose.

Alaska doctors alerted U.S. authorities, who will continue the monitoring required to tell just how common this kind of reaction really is. That will be especially important as enough vaccine arrives for injections to be given outside of health care settings that have lots of experience handling this type of reaction.

"Balancing any potential risks with the benefits the vaccine provides in the pandemic is an ongoing process," CDC's Dr. Jay Butler cautioned Wednesday.

WHAT IF OTHER RISKS CROP UP?

The challenge is telling whether the vaccine caused a health problem or if it's coincidence. Don't jump to conclusions that there's a connection, health authorities stress.

The way to tell: Comparing any reports of possible side effects with data showing how often that same condition occurs routinely in the population.

The government has multiple ways to do that. Doctors are required to report any patient problems. But the FDA is scrutinizing massive databases of insurance claims for early red flags that any health problems are occurring more often in the newly vaccinated than everyone else.

On its list to check is Bell's palsy, a temporary facial paralysis that occurred in a handful of people in both vaccine studies. The FDA said it's probably coincidence, but will track to be sure.

Vaccine recipients can help with the extra safety tracking. Called "v-safe," the program run by CDC automatically sends a daily text the first week after each vaccine dose asking how people feel, and then a weekly text for the next five weeks. Any responses that suggest concern prompt a phone call for further information.

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'If not one thing, it's another': Storm rolls into Northeast

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A major snowstorm rolled into the Northeast on Wednesday at a key moment in the coronavirus pandemic, days after the start of the U.S. vaccination campaign and in the thick of a virus surge that has throngs of people seeking tests per day.

Snow was falling from northern Virginia to points north of New York City by late afternoon. The storm was poised to drop as much as 2 feet (0.6 meters) of snow in some places by Thursday, and the pandemic added new complexities to officials' preparations — deciding whether to close testing sites, figuring out how to handle plowing amid outdoor dining platforms in New York City streets, redefining school snow days to mean another day of learning from home, and more.

"Our theme today ought to be, 'If it's not one thing, it's another,'" New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy said as he gave residents storm guidance that's new this year — mask up if you help your neighbors shovel.

Still, officials said they didn't expect the winter blast to disrupt vaccine distribution, which began Monday for frontline health care workers, the first group of Americans to get the shots. The first 3 million shots are being strictly limited to those workers and to nursing home residents.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said Wednesday that the government is tracking

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the vaccine shipments precisely, has staffers already in place to receive them and believes the companies transporting them can navigate the storm.

"This is FedEx, this is UPS express shipping. They know how to deal with snow and bad weather. But we are on it and following it," he told Fox News Channel's "Fox & Friends."

With 35 vaccine deliveries to New Jersey hospitals expected over the next day or two, Murphy said his administration was focused on making sure they continued, including by exempting vaccine delivery trucks from a storm-related prohibition on commercial traffic on some highways. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said his state's first-round vaccine shipment had already been distributed to some 90 hospitals, with the next delivery not due until roughly Tuesday, well after the storm.

The National Weather Service said the storm was "set to bring an overabundance of hazards from the mid-Atlantic to the Northeast," including freezing rain and ice in the mid-Atlantic, heavy snow in the New York City area and southern New England, strong winds and coastal flooding, and possibly even severe thunderstorms and some tornadoes in North Carolina's Outer Banks.

In Virginia, the salvo of snow, sleet and freezing rain knocked out power to several thousand homes and businesses by Wednesday afternoon. The state police said that as of 3 p.m., troopers had responded to approximately 200 crashes, including a wreck on Interstate 81 that killed a North Carolina man.

The heaviest snowfall was expected in central Pennsylvania, where forecasters in the state capital of Harrisburg said a six-decade-old record for a December snowfall could potentially be broken. A crash in the state killed two people and involved dozens of vehicles on a major highway Wednesday afternoon, police said, while issuing a reminder to "stay home and do not travel unless it is absolutely necessary."

Some areas from West Virginia to Maine could get a foot (0.3 meters) of snow — for some, more than they saw all last winter. In New York City, officials braced for the biggest storm in about three years.

"Take this seriously," Mayor de Blasio warned residents.

In addition to the usual rolling out of plows and salt spreaders, the nation's most populous city was adding some pandemic-era preparations to its list, such as closing city-run testing sites Wednesday afternoon and suspending outdoor dining in the sometimes elaborate spaces that now occupy parking spaces outside some restaurants.

The eateries aren't being required to break down their wooden enclosures and other structures for outdoor dining, currently the only form of restaurant table service allowed in the city. But they are being told to secure outdoor furniture, remove heaters and take other steps to make way for plows. The city's snow-removal chief, Acting Sanitation Commissioner Ed Grayson, said the agency had been planning and training since summer to maneuver around the structures.

De Blasio also announced that Thursday would also be a snow day — 2020-style — for the nation's largest school district. School buildings will be closed, but students will be expected to go to class online (many would anyway, as middle and high schools are currently all online, and many families have chosen all-remote learning).

"I know we all grew up with the excitement of snow days, but this year is different," the mayor tweeted. Rhode Island, meanwhile, closed state-run coronavirus testing sites for Thursday.

Associated Press writers Tom Hays in New York; Wayne Parry in Point Pleasant, New Jersey; Mike Catalini in Trenton, New Jersey; Skip Foreman in Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Philip Marcelo in Boston, and Dino Hazell in Washington contributed.

US angling to secure more of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. officials say they're actively negotiating for additional purchases of Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine after passing up a chance to lock in a contract this summer since it was still unclear how well the shots would work.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and special adviser Dr. Moncef Slaoui also told reporters

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Wednesday that Pfizer had been unable to commit to a firm delivery date. Azar called that "the core issue."

There was no immediate comment from the company, whose CEO Albert Bourla told CNN this week it is "working very collaboratively" with the government to deliver additional vaccine through the federal Operation Warp Speed. That's a White House-backed, taxpayer-funded effort to quickly develop coronavirus vaccines and treatments.

Meanwhile, the FDA said late Wednesday that some Pfizer vaccine vials may contain more than the standard five doses. The FDA statement followed reports from hospital and pharmacy staff that some vials are apparently overfilled. The FDA advised health professionals to use every full dose possible "given the public health emergency." The agency said it is communicating with Pfizer about the issue.

The Trump administration has come under scathing criticism from congressional Democrats after news leaked out last week about the missed opportunity to secure more vaccine.

"We are concerned the failure to secure an adequate supply of vaccines will needlessly prolong the COVID-19 pandemic in this country, causing further loss of life and economic devastation," a group of senators led by Patty Murray of Washington and Ron Wyden of Oregon wrote HHS. "We fear this is yet another instance in which the Trump administration's failure to develop a comprehensive national vaccines plan in a timely manner could jeopardize efforts to get people vaccinated and ultimately end this pandemic."

Azar sought to rebut that concern Wednesday, saying that pending contracts with a number of manufacturers will ensure enough vaccine for all Americans by around the middle of next year. A second vaccine from Moderna appears headed for Food and Drug Administration approval within days, and more vaccine candidates are advancing through clinical trials.

But the one from Pfizer and German pharmaceutical BioNTech was first into the arms of Americans, raising hopes of taming a pandemic that has killed more than 300,000 people in the U.S. and hobbled much of the national economy. Health care workers and nursing home residents top the list as local TV stations across the country are broadcasting scenes of the first vaccinations. Some polls show skepticism about getting vaccinated may be easing.

After early failures with testing, Trump administration officials are hoping to write a very different ending with vaccines. Operation Warp Speed has financed the development, manufacture and distribution of millions of doses, with the goal of providing a free vaccine to any American who wants one.

Pfizer was not as closely involved with Operation Warp Speed as other manufacturers, preferring to retain control over its own development and manufacturing. But the government did enter into a contract to buy 100 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the first of which were shipped this week.

At issue is the purchase of another 100 million doses for delivery as early as the middle of next year.

"We are engaged in active negotiations," said Azar.

Slaoui, a world-renowned vaccine scientist who is helping lead the federal effort, said the goal all along was to have several promising vaccines in development, with taxpayers assuming the financial risk if any given vaccine failed to secure FDA approval.

"We built a portfolio of vaccines to ensure one of them at least would make it to the finish line," he said.

Back in the summer, "it wouldn't make sense to preorder more from a manufacturer before we knew how a vaccine worked."

Although initial signals were positive about the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, the full FDA review did not take place until earlier this month.

Slaoui and Azar also said that because of Operation Warp Speed's arm's length relationship with Pfizer, officials had less of a window into the company's manufacturing and any potential problems that might develop.

"We of course would welcome having another 100 million doses," said Slaoui, adding that it's his expectation that negotiations with Pfizer will be successful.

With at least one other vaccine appearing headed for approval, they're already talking about a surplus that could be sent out to the rest of the world.

Vaccinations reach nursing homes as California faces crisis

By ADAM GELLER and TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

POMPANO BEACH, Fla. (AP) — The first COVID-19 vaccinations are underway at U.S. nursing homes, where the virus has killed more than 110,000 people, even as the nation struggles to contain a surge so alarming it has spurred California to dispense thousands of body bags and line up refrigerated morgue trucks.

With the rollout of shots picking up speed Wednesday, lawmakers in Washington closed in on a long-stalled \$900 billion coronavirus relief package that would send direct payments of around \$600 to most Americans. Meanwhile, the U.S. appeared to be days away from adding a second vaccine to its arsenal.

At the same time, a major snowstorm pushing its way into the Northeast raised concern it could disrupt distribution of the first vaccine.

Nursing home residents in Florida began receiving shots Wednesday, after nearly 2,000 such vaccinations were administered in West Virginia on Tuesday. Thousands more are scheduled there in the coming days. Other states are expected to follow soon.

The elderly and infirm in long-term care have been among the most vulnerable to the virus and, together with health workers, are first in line to get the limited, initial supplies of the vaccine developed by Pfizer and Germany's BioNTech. Nursing home residents and workers account for more than one-third of the nation's 300,000 or so confirmed deaths from COVID-19.

In Florida, the longtime retirement haven whose 141,000 nursing home residents are the second most of any state behind California, eagerness to get the vaccine was mixed with some anxiety.

"I hope it will help me from getting COVID," said 88-year-old retired schoolteacher Vera Leip, a resident of John Knox Village near Fort Lauderdale. "I don't know anything about it, but I would prefer not to have it."

The home is not requiring its employees to get the vaccine, and only 80 of the 200 staffers in the skilled nursing facility volunteered for the first wave, said Mark Rayner, its director of health services. He said many of those declining the shot are African-American and don't trust it, given the nation's history of medical experimentation on Black people.

"They are frightened," he said. "There is that culture line even as much as we educate them."

West Virginia, with one of the oldest and unhealthiest populations in America, is working with small and local pharmacies to reach nursing homes across the heavily rural state, leapfrogging states that are relying on a partnership with the CVS and Walgreens drugstore chains to kick in any day now.

Marty Wright, head of the West Virginia Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes and assisted living communities, said the state's pharmacies expect to get 7,000 doses into arms by the end of the week.

The developments come as the crisis grows increasingly dire by many measures.

The U.S. recorded over 3,000 deaths on Tuesday for the third time in less than a week, easily eclipsing the peaks seen last spring. New cases are running at over 212,000 a day on average. And the number of Americans in the hospital with COVID-19 hit another all-time high Tuesday of about 113,000.

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. The state is averaging 163 virus deaths per day, up from 63 just two weeks ago.

Many California hospitals are running out of space in intensive care wards, as the state records an average of about 32,500 new virus cases a day. That is up from about 14,000 a day at the start of the month.

"Our hospitals are under siege and our models show no end in sight," said Los Angeles County Health Services Director Dr. Christina Ghaly.

In Fresno County, officials said just a few ICU beds remained available and were filling rapidly. To keep up, the county's hospital system has contracted with a Virginia company to supply doctors, nurses and others to staff a temporary 50-bed facility that will start receiving patients by the end of the week.

In Orange County, health officials planned to send large tents to four hospitals to help accommodate patients.

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Bruce Barton, EMS director for Riverside County, said a couple of hospitals hit capacity in the past week and local officials had to step in to take some bodies.

Hospitals are also under pressure in Arizona, where a record 92% of beds are filled, nearly half of them with people with COVID-19.

"That's a staggering statistic when you think about the things that can afflict people," said Dr. Joshua LaBaer, executive director of Arizona State University's Biodesign Institute. "And it certainly means that hospitals at this point are having to make decisions about keeping people out of the hospital to keep beds available for the COVID patients."

In the nation's capital, congressional leaders said they hoped to seal a deal on a package that would extend aid to individuals and businesses and help ship vaccines to millions. It would include enhanced federal unemployment benefits and another round of stimulus checks. A hoped-for announcement Wednesday failed to materialize, however, as lawmakers across the spectrum hammered out details of the sprawling legislation and top negotiators continued to trade offers.

On Thursday, a government advisory panel will consider whether to endorse emergency use of a second vaccine, made by Moderna.

Meanwhile, officials supervising distribution of the first vaccine said they didn't expect the winter storm to disrupt distribution.

U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said the government is tracking the vaccine shipments precisely, has staffers in place to receive them and believes the companies transporting them — FedEx and UPS — have the expertise to navigate the storm.

Associated Press writers Cuneyt Dil in Charleston, West Virginia; Olga R. Rodriguez in Fresno, California; Bob Christie in Phoenix; John Antczak in Los Angeles and Andrew Taylor in Washington contributed to this report.

Close but not yet: Deal near on COVID-19 economic aid bill

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congressional negotiators closed in Wednesday on a \$900 billion COVID-19 economic relief package that would deliver additional help to businesses, \$300 per week jobless checks, and \$600 stimulus payments to most Americans. But there was no deal quite yet.

The long-delayed measure was coming together as Capitol Hill combatants finally fashioned difficult compromises, often at the expense of more ambitious Democratic wishes for the legislation, to complete the second major relief package of the pandemic.

A hoped-for announcement Wednesday failed to materialize as lawmakers across the spectrum hammered out details of the sprawling legislation and top negotiators continued to trade offers. But lawmakers briefed on the outlines of the aid bill freely shared them.

It's the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the landmark CARES Act in March, which delivered \$1.8 trillion in aid and more generous jobless benefits and direct payments to individuals. Since then, Democrats have repeatedly called for ambitious further federal steps to provide relief and battle the pandemic, while Republicans have sought to more fully reopen the economy and to avoid padding the government's \$27 trillion debt.

President-elect Joe Biden is eager for an aid package to prop up the economy and deliver direct aid to the jobless and hungry, even though the package falls short of what Democrats want. He called the emerging version "an important down payment" and promised more help next year.

Republicans, too, are anxious to approve some aid before going home for the year.

"We're still close and we're gonna get there," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky told reporters Wednesday evening as he left the Capitol. And during a Senate GOP lunchtime call a day earlier, party leaders stressed the importance of reaching an agreement before the upcoming Georgia Senate runoff election.

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The details were still being worked out, but lawmakers in both parties said leaders had agreed on a top-line total of about \$900 billion, with direct payments of perhaps \$600 to most Americans and a \$300-per-week bonus federal unemployment benefit to partially replace a \$600-per-week benefit that expired this summer. It also includes the renewal of extra weeks of state unemployment benefits for the long-term jobless. More than \$300 billion in subsidies for business, including a second round of "paycheck protection" payments to especially hard-hit businesses, are locked in, as is \$25 billion to help struggling renters with their payments and provide food aid and farm subsidies, and a \$10 billion bailout for the Postal Service.

Democrats acknowledged that the removal of a \$160 billion-or-so aid package for state and local governments whose budgets have been thrown out of balance by the pandemic was a bitter loss.

"It's heartbreaking for us," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, whose state has big fiscal problems.

The emerging package was serving as a magnet for adding on other items, and the two sides continued to swap offers. It was apparent that another temporary spending bill would be needed to prevent a government shutdown at midnight on Friday. That was likely to easily pass.

House lawmakers returned to Washington Wednesday in hopes of a vote soon on the broader package, which would combine the COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion governmentwide funding bill and a host of other remaining congressional business, including extending expiring tax breaks and passing other unfinished legislation.

Negotiations intensified on Tuesday after months of futility. Before the election, with Democrats riding high in the polls, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took a hard line for more aid. Now, McConnell is playing a strong hand after a better-than-expected performance in the elections limited GOP losses in Senate races.

The frightening, record surge in COVID caseloads and deaths, combined with troubling economic indicators, however, is mandating an agreement, though the emerging package contains less economic stimulus than the March aid bill.

"The case for fiscal policy right now is very, very strong," Federal Reserve Board Chairman Jerome Powell said Wednesday. "I think that is widely understood now. It's a very positive thing that we may finally be getting that."

McConnell successfully pushed to get Democrats to drop their much-sought \$160 billion state and local government aid package while giving up a key priority of his own — a liability shield for businesses and other institutions like universities fearing COVID-19 lawsuits. Democrats cited other gains for states and localities in the emerging deal such as help for transit systems, schools and vaccine distribution.

The addition of the \$600 direct payments came after recent endorsements from both President Donald Trump and progressives including Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who remains dissatisfied about the overall package.

"Everything that is in that package is vitally needed," Sanders said Wednesday on MSNBC. "The problem is that it is a much smaller package than the country needs in this moment of economic desperation."

A poisonous dynamic has long infected the negotiations, but the mood was businesslike in two meetings in Pelosi's Capitol suite Tuesday that resulted in a burst of progress.

Pressure for a deal is intense. Unemployment benefits run out Dec. 26 for more than 10 million people. Many businesses are barely hanging on after nine months of the pandemic. And money is needed to distribute new vaccines that are finally offering hope for returning the country to a semblance of normalcy.

The looming agreement follows efforts by a bipartisan group of rank-and-file lawmakers to find middle ground between a \$2.4 trillion House bill and a \$500 billion GOP measure fashioned by McConnell.

Their \$908 billion proposal has served as a template for the talks, although the bipartisan group, led by Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Susan Collins, R-Maine, favored aid to states and localities instead of another round of stimulus payments. The CARES Act provided for \$1,200 payments per individual and \$500 per child.

"I think that the work that our bipartisan group did really helped to stimulate this," Collins said.

With Congress otherwise getting ready to close up shop, lawmakers are eager to use the relief package to carry other unfinished business.

A leading candidate is a 369-page water resources bill that targets \$10 billion for 46 Army Corps of Engineers flood control, environmental, and coastal protection projects. Another potential addition would extend favorable tax treatment for "look through" entities of offshore subsidiaries of U.S. corporations. Meanwhile, thousands of craft brewers, wineries, and distillers are facing higher taxes in April if their tax break isn't extended.

The end-of-session rush also promises relief for victims of shockingly steep surprise medical bills, a phenomenon that often occurs when providers drop out of insurance company networks. That measure, combined with an assortment of other health policy provisions, generates savings for federal funding for community health centers.

AP Congressional Correspondent Lisa Mascaro contributed.

Senate report: Opioid industry has paid advocacy groups \$65M

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A bipartisan congressional investigation released Wednesday found that key players in the nation's opioid industry have spent \$65 million since 1997 funding nonprofits that advocate treating pain with medications, a strategy intended to boost the sale of prescription painkillers.

The report from Sens. Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Ron Wyden of Oregon found the contributions continued in recent years, even as the industry's practices and the toll of opioid addiction came under greater scrutiny.

The senators, the top Republican and Democrat on the Senate Finance Committee, are considering legislation to expand an existing federal system that tracks payments from companies to doctors so it will include payments to nonprofit organizations.

They also want guidelines to require more transparency on the federal task forces and panels that help the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services develop policies.

"We've found that the possibility of donor influence could and has undermined the efforts to develop and advocate good policy," Grassley said in a statement. "When it comes to opioids, we need to make sure there is transparency and accountability to prevent what, in this case, led to serious public misunderstanding of the risks of these highly addictive drugs."

Opioids include prescription drugs such as OxyContin and Vicodin as well as illegal ones like heroin and illicitly-made fentanyl. They have been linked to 470,000 deaths in the U.S. since 2000. In a 2016 investigation, The Associated Press and Center for Public Integrity found that opioid makers were backing advocacy groups that supported access to the drugs.

For the report released Wednesday, the senators' staffs examined financial records for 10 advocacy groups that endorsed access to powerful prescription painkillers from 2012 through 2019. The investigation added the new findings to previous Senate investigations that tracked similar information back to 1997.

Wednesday's report identified a series of connections between the contributions and the work done by the groups.

In 2017, one of the groups, the Alliance for Patient Access, took over the Alliance for Balanced Pain Management, a project previously run by Mallinckrodt. The company, one of the nation's biggest makers of generic prescription opioids, paid the group \$200,000 that year to help support its efforts.

The nonprofit has said that it alone determines the group's advocacy efforts, which include using physical therapy, chiropractic care and yoga as alternatives to opioids for pain treatment after surgery. It said it would have a response to the Senate report later Wednesday. Mallinckrodt did not immediately respond to questions.

Mallinckrodt this year announced a \$1.6 billion settlement of thousands of lawsuits over its opioids and later declared bankruptcy, in part to allow it to pay the settlement over time.

The report also found that the drugmaker Daiichi Sankyo paid the American Chronic Pain Association \$75,000 in 2018 as part of the group's efforts to promote formulations of opioids that were supposed

to deter abuse. That type of drug has not been found to be less addictive than other types of opioids, though it is harder to crush or dissolve to get a faster or more powerful high. The American Chronic Pain Association did not immediately respond to a message seeking comment.

A month after the payment, the advocacy group posted a video on its website in which a doctor seems to downplay the addiction risk of that type of drug, saying it's an "unusual" occurrence. In a statement, company spokeswoman Kimberly Wix described the payment as an unsolicited grant intended to support the nonprofit's online survey on abuse-deterrent formulations.

"Daiichi Sankyo has no influence over content, communications, activities, etc., developed by third-party organizations to which we provide financial support through grants or charitable contributions," she said.

Daiichi Sankyo was the fifth-largest contributor to the groups from 2012 to 2019. The top four, all of which gave at least \$2 million over that span, were Teva, Pfizer, Insys and Purdue Pharma. Daiichi Sankyo did not immediately respond to messages from the AP.

"The potential dangers presented by opioids makes this Trojan horse-style of marketing particularly troubling," Wyden said in a statement. "But make no mistake that such practices are widespread across the pharmaceutical industry, and consumers are often left in the dark."

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The Latest: Biden, Pence set to get COVID-19 vaccine soon

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Latest on President-elect Joe Biden (all times local):

6:30 p.m.

President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President Mike Pence are set to receive the COVID-19 vaccine soon.

According to two transition officials familiar with the matter, Biden will receive the vaccine publicly as early as next week. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss it publicly.

The White House says Pence and his wife, Karen, will receive the vaccine publicly on Friday.

Biden said on Tuesday that Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert, advised him to get the vaccine "sooner than later." Biden has said that he wants to keep front-line health care workers and vulnerable people as the top priority as the vaccine is rolled out throughout the country.

But he's also noted the importance of him getting the vaccine publicly to build confidence among Americans to get vaccinated.

Biden said, "I don't want to get ahead of the line, but I want to make sure we demonstrate to the American people that it is safe to take."

— By AP writer Aamer Madhani

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PRESIDENT-ELECT JOE BIDEN'S TRANSITION TO THE WHITE HOUSE:

President-elect Joe Biden has tapped former presidential rival Pete Buttigieg as his nominee for transportation secretary, adding a youthful voice to an incoming administration so far dominated by people with decades of Washington experience.

Read more:

- Turning the page? Republicans acknowledge Biden's victory
- Biden's challenge: Creating a COVID-19-free White House
- McConnell warns GOP off Electoral College brawl in Congress
- 'With reservations': Trump voters grapple with Biden's win
- Trump asking about special prosecutor for Hunter Biden case

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS GOING ON:

4:50 p.m.

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President-elect Joe Biden has told governors from more than 30 states that the federal government needs to "get its act together" amid a surge in coronavirus infections and deaths.

Biden made the comments in a Wednesday afternoon Zoom call with the bipartisan group of state leaders. He said his administration would seek to partner closely with state governments once he takes office on Jan. 20.

Without mentioning President Donald Trump by name, Biden said the governors had often been negotiating through the crisis with "very little help." He promised the governors that his team would look to them for their input on what in the federal-state coordination has worked and where they need more help.

The U.S. is experiencing about 3,000 coronavirus deaths per day, as well as 200,000 new diagnoses every day. More than 300,000 people have died in the country, the worst in the world.

2:30 p.m.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi says Democratic Rep. Deb Haaland would make an "excellent choice" as interior secretary in President-elect Joe Biden's administration, even though the departure would narrow the already razor-slim House majority.

Pelosi's statement Wednesday opens the door for Biden to choose Haaland, a front-runner for the post. Backers say her potential history-making nomination as the first Native American to serve in a Cabinet would excite Americans and energize progressive Democrats.

The speaker called the New Mexico congresswoman "one of the most respected and one of the best members of Congress" with whom she has served.

Haaland is one of the first two Native American women elected to Congress, part of the 2018 midterm election wave that delivered Democrats majority control. She chairs the Natural Resources Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

Rep. James Clyburn, the third-ranking Democrat in the House, also supports Haaland for interior.

The Democratic majority in the new Congress could be as tight as 222 to 213, the narrowest partisan gap in the House in two decades. A couple of races have yet to be called.

1 p.m.

Transportation secretary nominee Pete Buttigieg, who will be the first openly gay person to serve in a Cabinet, on Wednesday tipped his hat to a Bill Clinton-era ambassadorial nominee whose nomination was blocked by Senate Republicans because of his sexuality.

Clinton eventually used a recess appointment to make Ambassador James Hormel his envoy to Luxembourg in 1997 after Sen. Majority Leader Trent Lott refused to allow Hormel a floor vote.

Buttigieg, who was 17 at the time but not yet out, recalled following the news of the fight over Hormel's nomination and being struck by "some of the limits that exist in this country."

"So two decades later, I can't help but think of a 17-year-old somewhere who might be watching us right now," Buttigieg said. "And I'm thinking about the message that today's announcement is sending to them."

12:15 p.m.

President-elect Joe Biden says his Cabinet will be more representative of the American people than any other in U.S. history.

Biden championed the diversity of his Cabinet nominees on Wednesday in Wilmington, Delaware, as he announced that he has chosen Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary. If confirmed, Buttigieg would be the first openly gay person to lead a Cabinet department and one of the youngest members ever.

Buttigieg is a former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, and a former presidential candidate.

Biden says there will be more people of color and more women in his Cabinet than any other before, including the first Black defense secretary and the first Latino to head the Department of Health and Human Services.

Fed keeps rate near zero and sees brighter economy in 2021

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve said Wednesday that it will keep buying government bonds until the economy makes “substantial” progress, a step intended to reassure financial markets and keep long-term borrowing rates low indefinitely.

The Fed also reiterated after its latest policy meeting that it expects to keep its benchmark short-term interest rate near zero through at least 2023. The Fed has kept its key rate there since March, when it took a range of extraordinary steps to fight the pandemic recession by keeping credit flowing.

Chair Jerome Powell said he and other Fed officials expect the economy to rebound at a healthy pace next year as viral vaccines become widely distributed. But the next three to six months will likely be painful for the unemployed and small businesses as pandemic cases spike, Powell said at a news conference.

In a statement and in Powell’s answers to reporters, the Fed signaled that it’s prepared to keep rates ultra-low for the long run to help the economy withstand those threats and sustain a recovery. Yet Powell also pointedly stressed the need for further rescue aid from Congress to ease the impact of increased apartment evictions and business failures, and he expressed optimism about the deal under consideration by Congress.

“The case for fiscal policy right now is very, very strong,” Powell said, “and I think that is widely understood now. It’s a very positive thing that we may finally be getting that.”

Congressional leaders appear to be nearing agreement on a \$900 billion relief package that would provide extended unemployment benefits, more loans for small businesses and possibly another round of stimulus checks for individual Americans.

“Ongoing fiscal negotiations are more important than anything the Fed did today,” said Eric Winograd, U.S. economist at asset manager AllianceBernstein.

The Fed’s policymakers made just one notable change to the statement they issue after each meeting. On Wednesday, they said the central bank will continue to buy at least \$80 billion of Treasuries and \$40 billion of mortgage-backed securities a month “until substantial further progress has been made” toward the Fed’s goals of maximum employment and stable prices.

Those purchases are intended to hold down longer-term rates, including borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans and some business loans. Previously, the Fed had said only that the purchases would continue “over coming months.” The new guidance suggests that the bond buys will continue indefinitely.

“The key message is still that policy will remain unusually accommodative — with near-zero rates and asset purchases — continuing for several more years,” said Paul Ashworth, chief U.S. economist for Capital Economics.

Some economists faulted the phrasing as too evasive. More precise guidance might prevent financial markets from anticipating an end to the purchases before the Fed intends to reduce them.

“The Fed’s forward guidance is disappointingly vague,” Winograd said, and could lead investors to force up interest rates sooner than the Fed would prefer.

In quarterly economic projections that the policymakers issued Wednesday, they painted a brighter picture for next year. Their upgrades likely reflect the expected impact of new coronavirus vaccines. The officials now foresee the economy contracting 2.4% this year, less than the 3.7% decline it envisioned in September. For next year, in anticipation of a rebound, the officials have upgraded their growth forecast from 4% to 4.2%.

By the end of 2021, the Fed expects the unemployment rate to fall to 5% from the current 6.7% — lower than the 5.5% rate it had forecast in September.

The Fed’s latest policy statement coincides with an economy that is stumbling and might even shrink over the winter as the raging pandemic forces new business restrictions and keeps many consumers at home. Weighing the bleak short-term outlook and the brighter long-term picture has complicated the Fed’s policymaking as it assesses how much more stimulus to pursue.

At his news conference, Powell acknowledged that challenge.

“The case numbers are so high and so widespread across the country ... this will have the effect of sup-

pressing activity," he said, particularly in-person services such as eating out and traveling.

"At the same time, people are getting vaccinated, now," he added. "You have to think sometime in the middle of next year, you'll see people comfortable going out and engaging in a broader range of activities."

Recent economic reports have generally reflected a sharply slowing recovery. On Wednesday, the Commerce Department reported the sharpest drop in retail sales in seven months. Americans held back on spending in November at the start of the holiday shopping season, which typically accounts for a quarter or more of retailers' annual sales.

And last week, the number of people seeking unemployment aid rose for the third time in four weeks, evidence that companies are increasingly cutting jobs nine months since the erupted of the pandemic caused a deep recession.

Some economists had expected the Fed to announce a shift in its bond purchases by buying more longer-term bonds and fewer shorter-term securities — a step they could still take in future meetings.

Such a move would seek to deliver more immediate help for consumers and businesses. Buying more 10-year Treasuries, for example, lowers their yield, and the 10-year yield influences mortgage rates and other borrowing costs. Yields on two- or three-year bonds, by contrast, don't affect many other rates. But the Fed may prefer to keep that step in reserve in the event that the economy significantly worsens next year.

Powell also addressed the Fed's decision Tuesday to join the Network of Central Banks and Supervisors for Greening the Financial System, an organization of 83 central banks and regulators that is considering how to gauge the risk climate change poses for banks' lending portfolios.

"Climate change is an emerging risk to financial institutions, the financial system and the economy," Powell said. "And we are, as so many others are, in the very early stages of understanding what that means, what needs to be done about it and by whom."

Biden picks deal-makers, fighters for climate, energy team

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Joe Biden is picking deal-makers and fighters to lead a climate team he'll ask to remake and clean up the nation's transportation and power-plant systems, and as fast as politically possible.

While the president-elect's picks have the experience to do the heavy lifting required in a climate overhaul of the U.S. economy, they also seem to be reassuring skeptics that he won't neglect the low-income, working class and minority communities hit hardest by fossil fuel pollution and climate change.

Progressives, energy lobbyists, environmental groups and auto workers on Wednesday welcomed Biden's choice of popular former Mayor Pete Buttigieg as transportation secretary. His expected picks of former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm for energy secretary and former Environmental Protection Agency chief Gina McCarthy as leader of domestic climate efforts also were met with general applause.

Along with the yet-to-be-named heads of EPA and the Interior Department, Buttigieg, Granholm and McCarthy will be part of an effort to rapidly build and develop technology to retool the United States' transportation and power grid systems from petroleum and coal to a greater reliance on solar, wind and other cleaner forms of energy.

Democratic Rep. Deb Haaland of New Mexico is considered the frontrunner for Interior — and won a key endorsement Wednesday from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi — but Biden has not announced his choice. If selected, Haaland would be the first Native American to serve as a Cabinet secretary.

Biden has pledged to make slowing the impacts of climate change a top priority and has laid out an ambitious plan to reduce U.S. greenhouse emissions to net-zero by 2050. The plan includes an immediate return to the global 2015 Paris Agreement on climate and a pledge to stop all climate-damaging emissions from U.S. power plants by 2035.

Among those on his climate team, Granholm as Michigan's governor helped nudge auto workers toward accepting a switch to production of more electric vehicles. That will be one of several big ticket clean-energy efforts she and others in the administration will be pushing under Biden's promised \$2 trillion climate plan, which will face obstacles from Republicans in Congress and battles over which priorities to implement first.

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"She's a good lady," said retired United Auto Workers local president Pat Sweeney, who remembers Granholm for helping to broker the Detroit auto bailout during the 2008-09 financial crisis. "She'll do a good job."

Sweeney recalled Granholm personally telephoning him and other local union officials – more than once – to push for concessions needed to close the multibillion-dollar federal bailout to keep U.S. auto plants open. "She told us she was counting on us not to let her down, after she put her neck on the line for us," Sweeney said.

Also helping drive Biden's plan will be McCarthy, who as EPA head under President Barack Obama pushed for landmark rules to cut planet-warming pollution. In her new position, which does not require Senate confirmation, McCarthy will oversee a broad interagency effort to address climate change across the federal government.

McCarthy would be the domestic counterpart to former Secretary of State John Kerry, who will serve as a special climate envoy.

McCarthy will be "an equal match to Kerry's presence on the international side," said energy lobbyist Frank Maisano. "You have two high-profile, serious people leading climate efforts."

A spokesman for the Sunrise Movement, which has pushed for the Green New Deal and other progressive policies, called McCarthy's selection "very encouraging," because "she understands the urgent threat of the climate crisis."

McCarthy is popular among Democrats, but has tangled repeatedly with Republicans, who accused the Obama administration of punishing U.S. businesses and stifling the economy when she led EPA.

"The real test" of Biden's commitment will be "if the role has the teeth needed to be effective," said spokesman Garrett Blad.

Meanwhile, progressive criticism seems to have stalled momentum for California clean-air regulator Mary Nichols, once seen as the near-certain choice to lead EPA. More than 70 groups signed a letter saying Nichols failed to do enough to help low-income and Black, Hispanic and other minority communities that disproportionately live next to polluting refineries, factories and freeways.

Nichols' "bleak track record in addressing environmental racism" makes her unfit to lead EPA, groups led by the California Environmental Justice Alliance said in a letter to Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris.

The criticism opened the field to a half-dozen new contenders, include former EPA officials Michael Regan of North Carolina and Heather McTeer Toney of Mississippi and clean-air legal expert Richard Revesz.

Nichols, asked about her environmental justice record, pointed to a new program that aims to tackle air pollution in some of the state's most polluted cities. "Nobody thinks we've done everything we could or should do, but it's generally agreed that we're decades ahead of others in addressing these issues," she said.

Just the fact people speaking for the impact on communities of color were heard was good, said Michael Mendez, a professor of environmental policy at the University of California at Irvine and author of the book "Climate Change from the Streets."

"I've never seen these discussions before" as a president-elect formed his administration, Mendez said.

The climate effort laid out in Biden's plan would take a series of heavy lifts. His plan involves pouring billions of dollars into technological research to better store solar and wind power and clean up emissions from fossil fuel plants, build electric charging stations and other infrastructure around the country, and make every aspect of life more energy efficient.

Environmental groups are hailing Granholm's selection, saying she will bring a focus on electric cars and renewable energy that is 180 degrees from the Trump administration's emphasis on coal and other fossil fuels.

"The days of dirty fossil fuels and exorbitantly expensive nuclear reactors as the nation's primary energy are in the rearview mirror," said Ken Cook, president of the Environmental Working Group, a Washington-based advocacy group.

Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City. Associated Press writers Tom Krisher in Detroit and Kathleen Ronayne in Sacramento, Calif., contributed to this story.

Biden hails transportation nominee Buttigieg as 'new voice'

By AAMER MADHANI and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden introduced his one-time Democratic primary rival Pete Buttigieg as his nominee for transportation secretary Wednesday, saying the 38-year-old can be "a new voice" in the fight against economic inequality, institutional racism and climate change.

Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Indiana, would be the first openly gay person confirmed by the Senate to a Cabinet position. Biden hailed that milestone while saying, by the time he's done filling out his new administration's top jobs, it will have more women and people of color than ever, including "a Cabinet that is opening doors and breaking down barriers, and accessing the full brains and talent we have so much of."

Biden said Buttigieg offers "a new voice with new ideas determined to move past old politics."

"We need someone who knows how to work with state, local and federal agencies," Biden said, noting that highways are in disrepair and that some bridges "are on the verge of collapse."

Beyond standard transportation fixes, which are easier to promise than for administrations to get through Congress, Biden wants to rejuvenate the post-coronavirus pandemic economy and create thousands of green jobs by making environmentally friendly retrofits and public works improvements.

The president-elect noted that much of the nation, including his home state of Delaware, face the risk of rising sea levels. A more immediate challenge, though, will be enforcing Biden's promised mask-wearing mandate for airplanes and public transportation systems to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

"At its best, transportation makes the American dream possible, getting people and goods to where they need to be, directly and indirectly creating good-paying jobs," Buttigieg said. "At its worst, misguided policies and missed opportunities can reinforce racial, economic and environmental injustice, dividing or isolating neighborhoods, undermining government's basic role to empower everyone to thrive."

Buttigieg mentioned his affinity for trains while acknowledging that he would be only the "second-biggest" Amtrak enthusiast in the administration, given that Biden rode the rails for years between Washington and Wilmington, Delaware, while serving in the Senate.

Buttigieg also mentioned that he proposed to his husband, Chasten, at Chicago O'Hare International Airport.

Buttigieg was the only Cabinet choice, after Biden's defense secretary nominee, retired Army Gen. Lloyd Austin, to appear at a solo announcement ceremony rather than be introduced with other picks. Vice President-elect Kamala Harris joined via videoconference from Washington because of a snowstorm.

Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, said Buttigieg was "more than ready to finally address our nation's infrastructure crisis." Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., applauded Biden for tapping someone with "plenty of intellect, vision and drive" to take a shot at modernizing America's crumbling transportation infrastructure.

Others weren't as thrilled.

"I don't know him at all," Maine Sen. Susan Collins, a pivotal Republican in the closely divided Senate, told reporters in Washington. She instead brought up Rahm Emanuel, a former Chicago mayor and chief of staff to President Barack Obama. Emanuel was mentioned as a potential candidate for several Biden Cabinet posts but drew strong backlash from progressives.

"I think Rahm Emanuel would have been a strong choice," Collins said.

As Biden, Harris and Buttigieg talked about how they got to know one another during the contested Democratic primary, it was easy to imagine the 2024 campaign beginning to take shape as the Cabinet introduction unfolded. Biden, 78, has said he sees himself as a bridge to a new generation of leaders such as Buttigieg.

If Biden opts not to run again in 2024, Harris would be his political heir apparent. But that may not stop Buttigieg and other rising Democrats from launching primary challenges.

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Buttigieg praised Harris for her “trailblazing leadership and friendship,” and Harris used virtually the same language, calling Buttigieg a “trailblazing leader.”

During the primary, Buttigieg was initially written off as the leader of a small town competing against far more established figures. But he 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.

Buttigieg’s 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 relatively early backing of Biden ushered in a remarkably swift unification of the party around its ultimate nominee.

In the primary, Biden took a shining to Buttigieg, who he said reminded him of his late son, Beau Biden, a former Delaware attorney general who had urged his father to make a third run for the White House. Beau Biden died in 2015.

Biden’s selection of Buttigieg for transportation secretary drew praise from LGBTQ rights groups.

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

But the South Bend chapter of Black Lives Matter denounced the nomination. The group had made its displeasure with 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.”

VIRUS TODAY: Nursing homes start shots; Congress nears deal

By The Associated Press undefined

Here’s what’s happening Wednesday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— The first COVID-19 vaccinations are underway at U.S. nursing homes, where the coronavirus has killed more than 110,000 people — about a third of American fatalities from the disease.

— Top congressional leaders are getting closer to an agreement on a long-delayed COVID-19 relief package, hoping to seal a deal as early as Wednesday that would extend aid to individuals and businesses and help ship vaccines to millions.

— Dozens of children who attended a Christmas tree-lighting event in Georgia may have been exposed to COVID-19 after a pair performing as Santa and Mrs. Claus tested positive for the virus, officials said.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling positivity rate for testing in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 10.1% on Dec. 1 to 11.1% on Tuesday, according to data through from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: Deaths in the U.S. stand at 304,000, or about the population of Cincinnati.

QUOTABLE: “Our theme today ought to be, ‘If it’s not one thing, it’s another.’” — New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, speaking during a news conference on a major snowstorm that was unfolding as delivery trucks distribute COVID-19 vaccine across the state.

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

ON THE HORIZON: On Thursday, a government advisory panel will consider whether to endorse emergency use of a second vaccine, this one made by Moderna.

Find AP’s full coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

MLB reclassifies Negro Leagues as major league

NEW YORK (AP) — Willie Mays will add some hits to his record, Monte Irvin’s big league batting average should climb over .300 and Satchel Paige may add nearly 150 victories to his total.

Josh Gibson, the greatest of all Negro League sluggers, might just wind up with a major league record,

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too.

The statistics and records of greats like Gibson, Paige and roughly 3,400 other players are set to join Major League Baseball's books after MLB announced Wednesday it is reclassifying the Negro Leagues as a major league.

MLB said Wednesday it was "correcting a longtime oversight in the game's history" by elevating the Negro Leagues on the centennial of its founding. The Negro Leagues consisted of seven leagues, and MLB will include records from those circuits between 1920-48. The Negro Leagues began to dissolve one year after Jackie Robinson became MLB's first Black player with the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Those leagues were excluded in 1969 when the Special Committee on Baseball Records identified six official "major leagues" dating to 1876.

"It is MLB's view that the Committee's 1969 omission of the Negro Leagues from consideration was clearly an error that demands today's designation," the league said in a statement.

The league will work with the Elias Sports Bureau to review Negro Leagues statistics and records and figure out how to incorporate them into MLB's history. There was no standard method of record keeping for the Negro Leagues, but there are enough box scores to stitch together some of its statistical past.

For instance, Mays could be credited with 17 hits from his 1948 season with the Alabama Black Barons. Irvin, a teammate of Mays' with the New York Giants, could see his career average climb from .293 to .304 if numbers listed at Baseball-Reference from his nine Negro League seasons are accurate. And Paige, who currently is credited with 28 major league wins, should add at least 146 to his total.

While some have estimated Gibson slugged over 800 homers during 16 Negro League seasons, it's unlikely that enough records exist for him to officially pass Barry Bonds for the career record at 762.

Depending on what Elias and MLB rule, though, Gibson could wind up with another notable record. His .441 batting average in 1943 would be the best season mark ever, edging Hugh Duffy's .440 from 1894. Gibson's line came in fewer than 80 games, however, far short of the modern standard of 162.

"We couldn't be more thrilled by this recognition of the significance of the Negro Leagues in Major League Baseball history," said Edward Schauder, legal representative for Gibson's estate and co-founder of the Negro Leagues Players Association. "Josh Gibson was a legend who would have certainly been a top player in the major leagues if he had been allowed to play."

MLB said it considered input from the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum, the Negro League Researchers and Authors Group and studies by other baseball authors and researchers.

"The perceived deficiencies of the Negro Leagues' structure and scheduling were born of MLB's exclusionary practices, and denying them major league status has been a double penalty, much like that exacted of Hall of Fame candidates prior to Satchel Paige's induction in 1971," baseball historian John Thorn said. "Granting MLB status to the Negro Leagues a century after their founding is profoundly gratifying."

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

Senate hearing elevates baseless claims of election fraud

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican senators on Wednesday further perpetuated President Donald Trump's baseless claims of widespread voter fraud, two days after Democrat Joe Biden's victory was sealed by the Electoral College.

Lawmakers bickered heatedly at times during a committee hearing as Democrats pushed back against the unfounded allegations and a former federal cybersecurity official who oversaw election security said continued attempts to undermine confidence in the process were corrosive to democracy.

The session, held by the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee over Democratic protests, elevated the groundless claims of fraud to the highest levels of government and provided two of Trump's lawyers with one more public opportunity to make the false assertions after repeatedly losing in court.

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The hearing mimicked those held in some battleground states with local lawmakers, where Trump's personal attorney Rudy Giuliani led some Republicans in airing their election grievances without any proof. Those hearings were held after consistent legal defeats.

GOP Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, the committee chairman and one of Trump's fiercest defenders, said his goal was to have a bipartisan hearing to examine the election. But he repeated Trump's assertions without evidence and focused heavily on the claims being made by the president's team.

There was no testimony from state or local election officials who conducted extensive checks to ensure the accuracy of the election before certifying the results. Those officials have said there was no indication of any widespread fraud.

Democrats did solicit the testimony of Christopher Krebs, who led the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency until he was fired by Trump in a Nov. 17 tweet. Under Krebs, the agency operated a "rumor control" webpage that debunked some of the conspiracy theories being perpetuated by Trump and his allies.

Under questioning, Krebs acknowledged that some of his staff had been approached about making changes to the webpage but none was made and he said voting systems were secure in the 2020 election.

"I'm seeing these reports, that are factually inaccurate, continue to be promoted," Krebs said. "We have to stop this. It's undermining confidence in democracy."

Attorney General William Barr has similarly addressed the baseless claims of criminal fraud, telling The Associated Press earlier this month that there had been no indication of fraud on the level that could change the outcome of the election. On Tuesday, Trump announced Barr would leave his post by the Christmas holiday after the president publicly expressed his frustration over the comments.

During the session, Trump tweeted that Krebs was "totally excoriated and proven wrong at the Senate Hearing on the Fraudulent 2020 Election" and the president insisted that "Massive FRAUD took place."

Trump and his allies have pushed conspiracies involving voting machines manipulated by dead foreign leaders and argued that tens of thousands of fraudulent mail ballots somehow escaped layers of security and scrutiny by election workers. The president and his supporters have filed the lawsuits without evidence, tried to pressure state lawmakers into seating their own presidential electors and sought to influence low-level party members who sit on the state and local boards that certify election results.

At one point during the hearing, Johnson and the committee's top Democrat, Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, yelled at each other after Johnson brought up old, unrelated Democratic claims that he spread disinformation earlier in the year about work done in Ukraine by Hunter Biden, the president-elect's son. Johnson said Peters had "lied" about the Republican's role. Peters shot back that Johnson was "airing old grievances."

Peters said the hearing "gives a platform to conspiracy theories and lies" and is destructive.

"These claims are false. And giving them more oxygen is a grave threat to the future of our democracy," Peters said.

Johnson said Trump's election claims, which many in the GOP believe, "raised legitimate concerns and they do need to be taken seriously." Jesse Binnall, an attorney for the Trump campaign, testified that "our evidence has never been checked, only ignored."

Voter fraud does happen, but studies have shown it is exceptionally rare. Election officials say that when fraud occurs, it is caught and those responsible are prosecuted and that there are numerous safeguards to ensure that only eligible voters cast a ballot.

The Trump campaign and allies have filed roughly 50 lawsuits alleging some type of voter fraud and nearly all have been dropped or dismissed by both conservative and liberal judges who have said the legal claims lacked evidence. The Supreme Court, which includes three Trump-nominated justices, has also denied requests to hear a pair of cases aimed at invalidating the outcome of the election in key states.

Cassidy reported from Atlanta.

It's not a target: UK rows back on Christmas easing advice

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By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — No need to take it to the max.

That's the new Christmas message that leaders of the U.K.'s four nations were spreading Wednesday, after toughening up their advice over what people should do during the holiday period.

Last month, England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland agreed to permit a maximum of three households to mix between Dec. 23 and Dec. 27, regardless of what local restrictions are in place.

But following a sharp spike in new infections — another 25,161 were recorded Wednesday, the highest since Nov. 14 — families are being urged to consider the rules as the outer limits of what they can do.

"Have yourselves a merry little Christmas and, I'm afraid, this year I do mean little," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said at a press briefing. "I want to stress these are maximums, not targets."

His comments echoed those of other leaders elsewhere, though Wales said it will legislate to limit bubbles to two households.

Johnson said it would be "inhuman" to ban Christmas but that in light of the "worrying" rises in new infections in some parts of the country, people should think hard about what to do. He said anyone planning to meet others during the easing should start limiting contacts from this Friday, for example.

Professor Chris Whitty, the government's chief medical officer, said the advice was akin to driving at the speed limit in icy conditions.

"Just because you can doesn't mean you should," he said.

Concerns over the planned easing have ratcheted higher in recent days. With new infections rising in many places, many fear that the relaxation will only lead to more deaths. On Wednesday, the U.K. recorded another 612 COVID-related fatalities, taking the total to 65,520 — Europe's second-highest behind Italy.

The confusion surrounding the scheduled easing has been exacerbated by the fact that many parts of the country have seen restrictions tightened this week. 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.

Johnson also said the elderly and the most vulnerable should be vaccinated by the early part of 2021. The U.K. is rolling out the vaccine developed by America's Pfizer and the German company BioNTech after becoming on Dec. 8 the first country in the world to authorize it.

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.

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

The government, which is providing the vaccine free of charge mainly at hospitals so far, is first targeting nursing home workers and 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 the original expectation.

"With the vaccine, and all the other measures we are taking, we do know that things will be better in this country by Easter," Johnson said. "And, I'm sure that next year Christmas will be as normal as usual for every family in the country."

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

IS widow convicted in Charlie Hebdo, kosher market attacks

By LORI HINNANT Associated Press

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PARIS (AP) — The fugitive widow of an Islamic State gunman and a man described as his logistician were convicted Wednesday of terrorism charges and sentenced to 30 years in prison in the trial of 14 people linked to the January 2015 Paris attacks against the satirical Charlie Hebdo newspaper and a kosher supermarket.

The verdict ends the three-month trial linked to the three days of killings across Paris claimed jointly by the Islamic State group and al-Qaida. During the proceedings, France was struck by new attacks, a wave of coronavirus infections among the defendants, and devastating testimony bearing witness to bloodshed that continues to shake France.

Patrick Klugman, a lawyer for the survivors of the market attack, said the verdict sent a message to sympathizers. "We accuse the executioner but ultimately it is worse to be his valet," he said.

All three attackers died in police raids. The widow, Hayat Boumeddiene, fled to Syria and is believed to still be alive. The two men who spirited her out of France are thought to be dead, although one received a sentence of life in prison just in case and the other was convicted separately.

Eleven others were present and all were convicted of the crime, with sentences ranging from 30 years for Boumeddiene and Ali Riza Polat, described as the lieutenant of the virulently anti-Semitic market attacker, Amédry Coulibaly, to four years with a simple criminal conviction.

The Jan. 7-9, 2015, attacks in Paris left 17 dead along with the three gunmen. The 11 men standing trial formed a loose circle of friends and criminal acquaintances who claimed any facilitating they may have done was unwitting.

One gambled day and night during the three-day period, learning what had 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 over a debt.

It was the coronavirus infection of Polat that forced the suspension of the trial for a month.

Polat's lawyer, Isabelle Coutant-Peyre, described him as a scapegoat who knew nothing about Coulibaly's plans. She said he would appeal.

"He knew from the beginning it was a fictional trial," she said afterward.

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 dozens of texts or calls with Coulibaly in the days leading up to the attack.

Also 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. The offices had been firebombed before and were unmarked, and editors had round-the-clock protection. But it wasn't enough.

In all, 12 people died that day. 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.

"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.

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 Kouachis 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.

The first victim, Yohan Cohen, lay dying on the ground and Coulibaly turned to some 20 hostages and asked if he should "finish him off." Despite their pleas, Coulibaly fired the killing shot, according to testi-

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mony from cashier Zarie Sibony.

"You are Jews and French, the two things I hate the most," Coulibaly 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.

"This is the end of a trial that's been crazy, illuminating, painful but which has been useful," said Richard Malka, a lawyer for Charlie Hebdo.

Prosecutors said the Kouachis essentially self-financed their attack, while Coulibaly and his wife took out fraudulent loans. Boumeddiene, the only woman on trial, fled to Syria days before the attack and appeared in Islamic State propaganda.

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 and Boumeddiene's foster sisters said they believed she was still alive. Testifying as a free man 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 Charlie Hebdo's vacated offices.

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.

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."

Nigerians anxious after 330 boys kidnapped by extremists

By LEKAN OYEKANMI and HARUNA UMAR Associated Press

KANKARA, Nigeria (AP) — Anger, fear and exhaustion. Anxiety has overwhelmed many parents in Nigeria's northern Kankara village who await word on their sons who are among the more than 330 kidnapped by extremists from a government boys' school last week.

They held onto hope as the Katsina State governor Aminu Bello Masari said that 17 boys have been rescued since the attack, including 15 by the military, another by police and one boy found roaming in the forest who was brought in by residents.

Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist rebels have claimed responsibility for the abduction of the students from the Government Science Secondary School in Kankara. Hundreds of other students managed to escape by jumping the fence during the extremists' attack or by fleeing as they were taken into the nearby forest.

Boko Haram kidnapped the boys from the school because it believes Western education is un-Islamic, the rebels' leader Abubakar Shekau said in a video claiming responsibility for the attack, according to SITE Intelligence Group.

The Nigerian government is in talks with the attackers in an effort to free the boys, government spokesman Garba Shehu said in a statement. He did not, however, identify the attackers who the government earlier described as bandits.

Aminu Ma'le, whose child was among the 17 who regained their freedom, said "I give thanks to God for helping us out in a miraculous way, and I pray for the safety of other children still missing or in captivity." His son was found wandering in the bush by the military, he said.

Parents say they are tired of waiting for the situation in the north, home to President Muhammadu Buhari, to improve.

"There's no way I can measure my anger now," said Marwa Hamza Kankara, camping outside the school Tuesday night for word of her son. "No woman wants to be outside at this hour but we cannot sleep, we cannot eat, because of our missing children."

Hamza says that all those missing belong to Nigeria. "I am not only crying for my child but I am crying for all the children," she said.

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When armed patrols go by, parents outside the school momentarily gain hope that they may have found their sons.

Across Nigeria, people are closely following the fate of the kidnapped boys and many criticize the government for the continuing extremist violence.

"Nobody is happy about the insecurity in the country. Even kids are afraid of being in present Nigeria because of insecurity," said 58-year-old Sylvester Anachike, who sells newspapers in Abuja. "Just imagine, the children been abducted in the president's state! It is unfair. It's not good."

Friday's abduction has become a rallying cry for Nigerians fed up with the ongoing extremist violence. #BringBackOurBoys is trending on Twitter as people express their frustrations and hark back to 2014 when the #BringBackOurGirls campaign became an international rallying cry for girls kidnapped from a government boarding school in Chibok, in northeastern Nigeria.

"One thing that seems obvious about the security challenge is that there is no fair play and transparency from the leadership," said Chiroma Shibu, a member of the National Youth Assembly of Nigeria, a non-profit organization created by students and other young people from around country.

Salisu Masi, who has two sons among those kidnapped, said he is disturbed by claims that Boko Haram is behind the abduction. "It is very worrying," he told The Associated Press.

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.

The mass kidnapping draws attention to Nigeria's persistent problem of the extremist insurgency. For more than 10 years, Boko Haram has engaged in a bloody campaign to introduce strict Islamic rule. Thousands have been killed and more than a million people displaced by the violence. Boko Haram has been mainly active in northeast Nigeria, but with the abductions from the school in Katsina state, they have increased their attacks into the northwest.

The Islamic extremist group has carried out mass abductions of students before. In Chibok, in April 2014, more than 270 schoolgirls were taken from their school in northeastern Borno State. About 100 of the girls are still missing.

In February 2014, 59 boys were killed when Boko Haram attacked the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi in Yobe State.

"Boko Haram is an outcome of the fact that there is a low level of education in Northern Nigeria," said Prof. Sylvester Odion-Akhaine of Lagos State University. He said the ongoing unrest is worsening the region's socio-economic problems.

The kidnappings have highlighted that education is under attack in Nigeria, said Amnesty International.

"Schools should be places of safety, and no child should have to choose between their education and their life," Isa Sanusi of Amnesty International said Wednesday in a statement. "Other children have had to abandon their education after being displaced by frequent violent attacks on their communities, and many teachers have been forced to flee to other states."

Katsina State shut down all its boarding schools after the attack on the secondary school at Kankara. The government of Zamfara State, next to Katsina, has closed 10 schools as a precaution. Jigawa and Kano States have also ordered schools to close, according to Nigeria's Premium Times.

Many Nigerians are blaming President Muhammadu Buhari for the security lapses in the country.

The opposition People's Democratic Party says the abduction of the students in Katsina, the home state of the president, who was on a visit there at the time of the attack, raises serious questions over the government's capacity to fight insurgency.

The opposition party said that the inability of the government to ensure Nigeria's security has opened the country "for terrorists, bandits, vandals, and insurgents."

Umar reported from Maiduguri, Nigeria. Sam Olukoya in Lagos, Nigeria, and Carley Petesch in Dakar, Senegal, contributed to this report.

From restaurants to retailers, virus transformed economies

By PAUL WISEMAN and ALEXANDRA OLSON AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — It would be just a temporary precaution.

When the viral pandemic erupted in March, employees of the small insurance firm Thimble fled their Manhattan offices. CEO Jay Bregman planned to call them back soon — as soon as New York was safe again.

Within weeks, he'd changed his mind. Bregman broke his company's lease and told his two dozen or so staffers they could keep working from home — possibly for good.

The gains were at once unexpected and immediate. Bregman is saving money on rent. He no longer has to persuade recruits to relocate to a crushingly expensive city. He's increased his staff by 20% and for the first time added new hires in Texas and California.

"I was very skeptical at first that we could conduct business this way for a long time," Bregman said. But having employees work from home proved a "huge benefit" for everyone.

Like no other event in memory, the pandemic has upended economies in the United States and across the world — transforming how people work, travel, eat, shop and congregate. It has changed how students are educated, how people communicate, how households are entertained and which industries, geographic areas and categories of people will thrive and which will suffer.

It has widened a gap between educated and affluent people who can work from home and the less fortunate — people in lower-income households without college educations or high skills who depend solely on wages rather than stock or home equity gains — who now stand to be left further behind. And it's forced many working mothers to quit their jobs for lack of child care.

The economy shed a shocking 22 million jobs after the pandemic struck. Many employers have since recalled some of their furloughed workers. Yet the recovery has slowed. Not until the end of 2023 does Moody's Analytics foresee the U.S. economy regaining its pre-pandemic employment level. In the most bruised sectors — hotels, for example, and retail — changing economic habits mean that employers may never need as many workers as they did before the pandemic.

Even after vaccines have conquered the virus, economies have restored their health and jobless people have found work again, the economic landscape will almost surely look different. Among the many life-altering consequences of the year 2020, the coronavirus reshaped how people and businesses engage economically.

At the very least, the crisis accelerated trends that were already well underway: A shift away from physical stores toward e-commerce. The flexibility of working from home. The streaming of movies rather than theater-going. Frequent meal deliveries. Video-conferencing replacing much business travel.

"We're not going back to the same economy," Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell told a European Central Bank forum last month "We're recovering, but to a different economy."

Businesses are rewriting their business plans to keep up. Warner Bros Pictures announced this month that all its 2021 movies, including a new "Matrix" movie and "Godzilla vs. King Kong," will stream on HBO Max at the same time that they appear in theaters — a seismic shift for Hollywood. Restaurants are testing delivery-only "ghost kitchens" to keep serving customers who remain wary of crowded dining rooms.

Even so, economists say it's far from certain which of the myriad changes will prove permanent and which may fade as people who've been holed up at home for months return to their pre-pandemic routines.

Will white-collar workers yearn for their old cubicles and face-to-face contact with friends and colleagues? Will foodies return to fashionable restaurants, young people to the hottest bars? Will audiences once again gather, elbow to elbow, for symphonies, Hollywood blockbusters and Broadway musicals? If attendance doesn't return to normal, can those industries survive?

For the economy's vast retail sector, the urgent question is: Will customers want to shop in physical stores in numbers anywhere near what they used to be?

Retailers like Lisa Shah are holding out hope. Shah has been hurt by a plunge in tourism in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, where her three LIT Boutique stores are located. Before the pandemic, her women's clothing stores combined would see about 600 customers each weekend. Government-mandated restrictions and the anxiety of customers have slashed that figure essentially in half.

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Shah has since built up her online store, changed the brands she offers and dangled discounts. She keeps asking herself what else she can do.

"I don't know where else to pivot," she said. "We've pivoted so much."

Optimistically, some experts detect a collective hunger to return to the old ways, at least for people with the means to do so — to the familiar and comfortable routines of gathering at bars, dining in restaurants, strolling in stores, flying off on vacation.

"I don't think you should overestimate how much will be permanently changed" by the pandemic, said Jacob Kirkegaard, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States. "The idea that COVID will be a fork in the road for a lot of things — I am personally skeptical."

People, Kirkegaard said, "want to go to restaurants. They want their life back, not a new life they haven't tried before."

China, where the virus originated, may provide a hint of what's to come for others. After that nation mostly contained the virus with a draconian lockdown and became the first major economy to emerge from the pandemic, normal life reasserted itself with surprising speed. People returned to restaurants and shops, even though guards still check temperatures at malls and supermarkets. Cinemas are about half-full but have reopened. Chinese are beginning to travel for fun again.

MISSING THE OFFICE, NOT THE COMMUTE

Uncertainty about COVID's lasting impact is evident in how companies and workers have spent months weighing the pros and cons of remote work.

Thimble's head of product, Mitch Kushinsky, enjoys the flexibility of working at home. He has an old dog that needs to go out every hour to relieve himself. If he didn't work at home, Kushinsky would probably have had to put the dog down. He doesn't exactly miss the commute downtown from the Upper West Side.

Then again, Kushinsky has to share the home workspace with his wife, who can be noisy. Then there's the unexpected: When a pipe burst in his building, he found himself working alongside construction workers who had to tear down a wall in his apartment to make the repair.

Sometimes, he just misses being with co-workers.

"You learn a lot just being around people," Kushinsky said. "You lose that working remotely."

For all the attention focused on employees who can work effectively from home, they are hardly a majority. According to a McKinsey Global Institute study of 800 jobs in nine countries, only a fraction of people work in jobs that can effectively be done remotely — fewer than 30% of workers in the United States, for example, and fewer than 12% in India.

Still, a McKinsey survey of 800 corporate executives worldwide found that 38% of them expect their employees who are now working remotely to continue to do so at least two days a week after the pandemic. That compares with 22% in surveys before the pandemic, according to McKinsey.

The shift is big enough to have far-reaching implications — improving the quality of life for some, while deepening inequality and hurting some urban economies. Emptier cities are a grave threat to downtown restaurants and retailers that depend on office workers. Rents in cities like San Francisco and New York are sinking as more people move out. Municipal governments will struggle to collect enough taxes to provide services.

Some employees now working remotely express mixed feelings about the arrangement. A body of studies indicates that most of them oppose giving up the workplace environment entirely.

"I miss Manhattan so much — it feels like a piece of me is missing," said Han Dang, Thimble's 31-year-old chief of staff, who has been working out of her apartment in Queens, where she grew up. "Every time I go back, I remember the places I went to, the coffeehouses, the shops."

Janet Pogue McLaurin, a global research leader for the architecture and planning firm Gensler, expects many companies to eventually adopt a hybrid model, allowing people to work from home once or twice a week. In a survey of about 2,300 U.S. office workers, Gensler found that only 19% wanted to keep working from home full time. More than half said they'd favor going to the office part of the week. One-third said they wanted to be in the office full time.

Verizon is reviewing which of its employees' jobs can be done most effectively from home, said Christy

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Pambianchi, the telecom giant's chief human resource officer. But Verizon has decided that its 20,000 employees who work in customer service centers, answering questions by phone or online, will work from home permanently.

Before COVID, Pambianchi said, "there were a lot of things they thought they couldn't do remotely. Not only have they done it; they have done it successfully for eight or nine months."

Jazmyn Brown worked at Verizon stores for more than six years, rising to manager by the time the pandemic hit. When her store closed, she was transferred to customer service, a job she will do from home permanently.

Brown, 31, is delighted. The move eliminated a long commute that kept her away from home in San Diego until 8 p.m. and gave her less than an hour with her young son. Now, she ends her workday at 4:45 p.m., with just a quick drive to pick up the 2-year-old from his grandmother's house. Last year, she didn't even have time to buy a Christmas tree. This year, it's already up.

"Everything has slowed down, and I have more time than before," Brown said. "I don't miss driving. I don't miss traffic. I don't miss filling my gas tank twice a week. I can cook dinner, and I'm not exhausted so we can spend time together."

THE GHOST IN THE KITCHEN

The pandemic has caused an unimaginable nightmare for the restaurant industry. Some of the scars will likely linger.

In pre-pandemic days, Brenda's French Soul Food was always hopping. A popular restaurant in downtown San Francisco, it drew tourists and locals alike with its beignets and other Southern foods.

Everything slammed to a halt on March 16, when San Francisco banned indoor dining to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Suddenly, 150 employees were jobless. Chef Proprietor Brenda Buenviaje couldn't bear to break the news in person.

It's a story that has happened again and again this year. The National Restaurant Association estimates that one in six U.S. restaurants — more than 100,000 — have closed. Many that stayed open shifted to takeout and delivery, but they need fewer staff. The association estimates that 2.1 million U.S. restaurant workers remained out of work in November. Hudson Riehle, who leads research for the association, predicts that U.S. restaurants will collect \$659 billion in revenue this year — down 27% from the roughly \$900 billion the association had forecast earlier this year.

Independent restaurants were hit hardest, said Rick Camac, a dean at the Institute of Culinary Education in New York. Loans from the government's Payroll Protection Program helped initially. But that money has long run out. After an anemic holiday season, Camac expects another big wave of closures early in 2021.

By contrast, some fast food chains have mainly recovered, thanks to a growing customer use of drive-thru and curbside service. In China, the world's second-largest economy after the U.S., spending at restaurants was up 0.8% in October from a year earlier. But customers are still uneasy. Some bring their own utensils, and restaurants keep jugs of hand sanitizer at the front door.

"Now, I will be more careful," said Chen Luping, a 38-year-old mother of two in Beijing.

The pandemic has accelerated a trend toward takeout and delivery that was already well underway before the virus hit. In February, 63% of U.S. restaurant goers were eating their food elsewhere; by the third quarter of the year, that figure reached 90%, Riehle said.

Even when restaurants eventually reopen at full capacity, in-person dining may never revert to its pre-pandemic levels because so many people now prefer eating at home, says David Portalatin, an analyst with The NPD Group.

Restaurants are rethinking the amount of dining space they need and are adding drive-thru lanes. Starbucks is closing 400 U.S. cafes and speeding up its plans to build more pickup-only locations. Menus have slimmed down to control costs and focus on food that travels well. Ghost kitchens, which prepare food for delivery only, may proliferate. Carrabba's Italian Grill, a 220-restaurant chain, has launched a delivery-only brand called Tender Shack out of its kitchens.

"We fast forwarded about five years into the future in a few months' time," Portalatin said.

Buenviaje kept afloat in several ways. Brenda's French Soul Food reopened for takeout and delivery. And

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she's now shipping meals nationwide through a service called Goldbelly. Buenviaje sold out of Thanksgiving dinner kits and is creating some for Christmas.

Smaller takeout-focused branches elsewhere, including Brenda's in Oakland, which opened just before the pandemic, are thriving. And soon, Buenviaje will start delivery in Silicon Valley through a ghost kitchen. She's been able to rehire 75% of her staff.

"Out of necessity," she said, "we figured out a new path together."

GROUNDED

The pandemic grounded most corporate travelers. And it demonstrated that much of the business that used to be done in-person can be achieved as effectively, or nearly so, via email and Zoom conference calls. Amazon, which told its employees to stop traveling in March, says it's saved nearly \$1 billion in travel expenses so far this year.

Any long-term decline in business travel would have far-reaching consequences — for corporations as well as for the airlines, hotels and restaurants that cater to them. Business travel accounts for more than a fifth of global spending on travel and tourism.

Delta Air Lines CEO Ed Bastian has suggested that business travel could settle into a "new normal," 10% to 20% below where it used to be. Southwest Airlines' CEO Gary Kelly noted that while overall passenger revenue has dropped 70%, business travel — normally more than one-third of Southwest's traffic — has tumbled 90%.

"I think that's going to continue for a long time," Kelly said.

One possibility: Instead of sending executives out on regular trips to check on field operations, major companies could fly key employees to headquarters once a year.

In the meantime, some tourist destinations have so far managed to weather the storm. German restaurants and hotels in top tourist destinations like the seashore or the Alps — especially those with outdoor terraces or beer gardens — enjoyed some respite over the summer as many people vacationed at home rather than flying to Mediterranean destinations. It's unclear, though, whether that trend will continue.

MALL MELTDOWN

The pandemic has also changed — or sped up changes in — how people shop. Worried about venturing out in the pandemic, people shopped much more online. When they had to go out, they favored one-stop shopping at big box stores and discounters. The trend has been devastating for smaller retailers and mall-based stores.

The trend toward online shopping has been growing, of course, for years. But the pandemic accelerated it by perhaps two years. Big box stores like Walmart and Target and other big retailers that are deemed "essential" also benefited from being allowed to stay open when much of the economy was locked down in the spring.

U.S. non-store retail sales (including e-commerce) grew 5.6% faster than store sales from January 2011 through this March. Since then, the gap has ballooned to 24.4%, according to Retail Metrics, LLC. Traditional retailers are retreating in the face of competition: 11,157 U.S. stores have closed this year, far surpassing the previous high for store closures: 8,706 in 2017, according to CoStar Group, a real estate research firm.

Copying discount stores, retailers like Kohl's and Macy's added curbside pickup for the first time this year. Best Buy is reducing the amount of floor space set aside for traditional shopping and devoting more to in-store pickup and to support deliveries of online orders.

In China, too, e-commerce has experienced a huge boost. Housebound families shopped online, paying with internet- and cellphone-based systems. Online merchants posted double-digit sales gains during the pandemic. Traditional retailers, which had to shutter for two months, are struggling to draw back shoppers, even with discounts of up to 70%.

E-commerce accounted for 24.2% of Chinese retail spending in October, versus 14.3% in the United States, the biggest share for any major country.

The decline in traditional retailing, coupled with the rise in people working at home, carries ominous implications for commercial real estate, too. Demand for office and retail space throughout urban downtowns is likely to stay weak, offset only partially by e-retailers' growing need for warehouse space.

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The exodus of downtown workers has been devastating for neighborhood restaurants like Forlini's, a Chintatown fixture since 1956 popular with lawyers and judges who work in lower Manhattan.

Derek Forlini, who inherited the business from his father and now runs it with a cousin, used to relish chatting up customers in the dining room. He was always surprised and delighted when a judge recognized him in the street.

Over the summer, Forlini erected an outdoor dining space and installed plexiglass shields indoors. But the lunchtime crowds never came back. At first, Forlini brought back nearly all his 20 or so employees. Yet within weeks, he had to cut the staff down to about 10. He couldn't bring himself to let go any more staffers; many are longtime friends.

"I couldn't cut any chefs," Forlini said. "I just couldn't pick and choose."

Forlini and his cousin eventually had to forgo their own salaries to keep paying the staff. When New York reinstated a ban on indoor dining this week, Forlini decided to close the restaurant — not forever, he hopes.

"Manhattan is ghost town," Forlini said. "Nobody's working — they all went to Zoom. And then there are people who just won't come to restaurants. I know if we reopen, we'll be working for nothing again."

Wiseman reported from Washington. Dee-Ann Durbin in Detroit; Anne D'Innocenzio, Joyce M. Rosenberg and Jake Coyle in New York; David McHugh in Frankfurt, Germany; Joe McDonald in Beijing; and Cici Chen in Shanghai contributed to this report.

Inmates facing big virus risks not near top of vaccine lists

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — Amber Johnson is terrified her 63-year-old father will get the coronavirus. He has high blood pressure, asthma and is pre-diabetic, and she worries he's especially vulnerable as an inmate in Colorado, where outbreaks in prisons are raging.

Prisons across the U.S. have been hit hard by COVID-19. Social distancing is virtually impossible behind bars: inmates sleep in close quarters and share bathrooms. Masks, hygiene supplies and safety protocols are often lacking, and many inmates have health problems that make them susceptible to the virus.

Johnson believes a vaccine might be the only hope for her father, Ronald Johnson, who is serving time for theft, forgery and drug possession.

But in Colorado and most other states, prisoners aren't near the front of the line for initial doses of COVID-19 vaccine now being distributed. Health care workers and nursing home residents are getting the first wave of shots, and many argue that those who break the law — despite living in conditions that put them at risk — shouldn't be a priority when many others are vulnerable.

"To think about him dying in prison is an awful thought because from what I've heard, if you have a loved one who dies in prison, you just kind of get the remains in a box. They cremate them and send them home," Amber Johnson said. "You don't have the opportunity to sit by them and hold their hand."

Initially, Colorado had inmates in the second phase of vaccine distribution, set for the spring, behind health workers and first responders but ahead of other adults over 65 with health conditions. Prisoners were to be treated like others in group housing, including homeless shelters and college dorms.

But an outcry followed. Suburban Denver prosecutor George Brauchler said the plan would have allowed two men convicted of killing the son of 66-year-old state Sen. Rhonda Fields to be vaccinated before her.

"The people who murdered her son would get it before she would," Brauchler said.

Democratic Gov. Jared Polis bowed to criticism last week, updating the plan to prioritize age and health risks over where people live. Jail staffers will still get the vaccine in the second phase, along with first responders.

"Whether you're in prison or not, if you're 67 years old or at risk, wherever you are, you'll have access to the vaccine when 67-year-olds have access to vaccines," Polis said.

Though Colorado changed course, California, North Carolina, Maryland, Delaware, Utah, New Mexico,

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Nebraska, Montana and Massachusetts have prisoners among the first to get the vaccine this winter. Some states also have taken steps to reduce COVID-19 risks behind bars by releasing nonviolent offenders early.

But even in states with the biggest prison outbreaks, inmates often weren't on early vaccine distribution plans.

The five states with the highest number of coronavirus cases in their prisons, according to data compiled as part of a joint project by The Associated Press and The Marshall Project — Texas, California, Florida, Michigan and Wisconsin — did not include details about how they would prioritize prisoners in their October draft reports to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Michigan has decided to treat prisoners like everyone else, vaccinating them based on their age and health problems and not prioritizing them as a group. Jail and prison workers, however, are set to be vaccinated along with other essential workers before people 65 and older or those 16 and 64 with conditions like heart disease and diabetes that can worsen COVID-19, according to a state plan updated Sunday.

Wisconsin is still deciding which groups should get shots after its first wave of vaccinations. Texas likely will consider prisoners along with other vulnerable populations, but plans are unclear.

Iowa, another state with high prison infection rates, plans to put inmates and those who live in state institutions for the disabled ahead of others but behind health care workers and nursing-home residents and staff.

The federal prison system — one of the first government agencies to receive the vaccine — plans to administer initial vaccines to staff, not inmates, according to documents obtained by the AP.

For families of inmates, the uncertainty is gut-wrenching. They're pleading with state officials to consider the transmission risks behind bars. Medical experts also have suggested that living arrangements in prisons call for higher priority.

"From a public health perspective, it's also really important because what we've seen is they are hot spots," said Maria Morris, senior staff attorney at the American Civil Liberties Union's National Prison Project. "And people are coming and going out of prison. There's no way to avoid that."

That includes officers, administrative staff, lawyers and medical and mental health workers.

More than 249,000 inmates have tested positive and nearly 1,700 have died from COVID-19 nationwide. At a prison in Colorado last week, nearly three-quarters of inmates caught the virus.

Meanwhile, the ACLU of Colorado has been fighting for early release for some prisoners to lower their risk. Ronald Johnson has served 22 years and got his parole moved up to 2027, but his daughter worries that's still too far away.

Amber Johnson said her father is a nonviolent offender who has sobered up, tutors other inmates, helps in the prison church and coordinates mental health courses. She says he deserves a chance to live — and that, for her, means a vaccine.

"The time is now," said Johnson, who lives in Fayetteville, Arkansas. "It needs to be done urgently before somebody else dies — and somebody else will."

Cookies, hot cocoa, pick-me-up notes: 'Sparks' of kindness

By PETER ORSI and EMILY LESHNER Associated Press

A tin of cookies is left on the running board of an ambulance outside a nursing home with a note for the emergency workers who operate it: "You're AMAZING! Yes, you!"

A baggie sits on the edge of a fountain with dozens of copper coins and another message, for anyone who passes by and fancies tossing one in: "Take a penny. Make a wish! Hope your dreams come true."

This is the world of Sparks of Kindness, an online community of people going out of their way to put a smile on the faces of others through small but touching good deeds, especially in tumultuous times of pandemic, protests and political division.

"There's so much bad in the world, and that's kind of what we hear about," said Debbie McFarland, a 53-year-old photographer from Peachtree City, Georgia, who founded the group on Facebook. "But I found that there's so many people that want to do good — they just don't really know how to start."

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That's where Sparks of Kindness comes in. It has lists of ideas for "sparks," or small kindnesses people can do such as thanking a teacher with candy or leaving coloring books in a hospital waiting room.

Users share their ideas and stories in the forum. Among them:

— "Took flowers to the neighbor. She had been caring for a sick friend and thought she could use a little cheer."

— "I gave the guy in front of me \$20 since his debit didn't go through. My emergency \$20 came in handy... he hugged me, so I may get Covid, but he was very appreciative!"

— "Took hot soup and biscuits to a sick mama next door."

McFarland said she encourages people to do "sparks" when they're struggling in their own lives. It helps them cope with their own traumas.

She enjoys leaving notes in stores for others to find — say, "You're beautiful just the way you are" in the cosmetics aisle, or "This too shall pass. Hang in there" amid the cold and flu remedies.

Once, McFarland watched in a grocery store as a weary woman in medical scrubs with three crying young children in tow came across one of those pick-me-ups. She looked around, broke out in a smile and tucked the note into her pocket.

She's also fond of the story of a woman who put her 4-year-old daughter's comforter in the washing machine at a laundromat, only to realize she didn't have money for the dryer. Almost by magic, a bag of quarters left by a member of the group materialized. After the woman went on the Facebook group and posted her thanks, another member bought her a new dryer.

McFarland encourages people to keep their eyes open for random acts of kindness, like helping an older adult struggling to load groceries into the trunk. But she also wants them to do good with planning and intent — "deliberate acts of kindness," as she puts it.

"When you're making your to-do list for the day or the week, you think about where you're going that particular day," she said. "If you're going to the tire shop, maybe swing by and pick up a pack of cookies. ... Or if you know you're going to the school, maybe pick up a hot chocolate for the crossing guard."

Launched several years ago, Sparks of Kindness has grown to some 5,000 members in about 40 countries, according to McFarland. Interest has picked up during the pandemic, with about 500 new people joining since it began.

"During this pandemic, I think people are starting to realize that ... every person you come into contact with is fighting some kind of battle, whether it's appointments or unmet expectations of others or health or bullying or whatever it is," McFarland said. "Everyone's facing a battle, and if you can get one tiny spark to ignite a hope within them, then it does something within them."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

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Minnesota juvenile lifer walks free after 18 years in prison

By ROBIN McDOWELL and MARGIE MASON Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Black man who was sent to prison for life as a teenager took his first steps of freedom 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

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review the case.

Last week, the panel published its findings, saying there was a "failure to investigate that illustrates tunnel vision" and that evidence that could have helped exonerate Burrell was either ignored or minimized.

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 and he will have to spend the next two years under supervised release. 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.

The release was swift. Just hours after receiving the news, 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 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. Some have recanted. One had his 16-year prison sentence cut to three. Another said he had agreed to work with police on 14 other cases.

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

One of them, Isaiah Tyson, has been saying for years that he was the shooter, not Burrell.

"I will always carry the burden of what happened to an innocent child," Tyson said Tuesday during a call from prison, where he's serving a 45-year sentence for Tyesha's killing. "But by him being let go, it's a huge relief for me, because I've been holding that this whole time. ... He was locked up for something he had no idea about"

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

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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.

Those same communities were victims of much of the gun, drug and gang violence.

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.

‘With reservations’: Trump voters grapple with Biden’s win

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.

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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, 61, 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 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

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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.

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.

US brands Vietnam, Switzerland as currency manipulators

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER and PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. Treasury Department has branded Vietnam and Switzerland as currency manipulators while putting China and nine other countries on a watch list in an annual report designed to halt countries from manipulating their currencies to gain unfair trade advantages.

It marked the first time that the United States has labeled another country as a currency manipulator since August 2019 when it called out China at a time when the world's two largest economies were locked in tense trade negotiations.

"The Treasury Department has taken a strong step today to safeguard economic growth and opportunity for American workers and businesses" Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement. "Treasury will follow up on its findings with respect to Vietnam and Switzerland to work toward eliminating practices that create unfair advantages for foreign countries."

The Trump administration removed its currency designation from China in January after the two nations had achieved trade agreements which the Trump administration hoped would lower China's huge trade surplus with the United States.

The Treasury report said that Vietnam and Switzerland were the only two countries that met all three criteria for being named a currency manipulator.

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Those criteria include the number and size of the interventions a country has made in foreign exchange markets to influence the value of its currency. A country intent on gaining trade advantages will sell its currency in an effort to depress its value against other currencies, such as the U.S. dollar.

A weaker currency makes a country's exports cheaper and thus more competitive on foreign markets and makes imports more expensive.

The Treasury report said that in addition to extensive currency interventions, Vietnam and Switzerland also met the other two criteria which are running large trade surpluses with the United States and also large surpluses in its current account with the world, the broadest measure of trade which includes not only goods and services but also investment flows.

The designation of a currency manipulator will trigger special negotiations with Vietnam and Switzerland over the next year. If those negotiations don't alter the two countries' currency practices, the United States can move forward to impose economic sanctions on Vietnam and Switzerland including penalty tariffs.

In addition to China, the other countries put on a monitoring list were Japan, South Korea, Germany, Italy, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand and India. Taiwan, Thailand and India were put on the watch list this year while the other countries were already on the watch list issued with the last report in January.

With regard to Switzerland, the country's central bank has been selling Swiss francs to limit the currency's rise and the currency has also benefited for its reputation as a safe haven for investors during times of economic stress. Independent analysts say that is mainly an attempt to keep consumer prices from falling - which can hurt the economy - rather than to boost exports to the U.S.

But the Treasury report labeled Switzerland a currency manipulator contending that the interventions in currency markets were excessive given the large size of the Swiss trade surpluses.

The United States has only named three countries as currency manipulators. In addition to branding China as a manipulator last year, the U.S. imposed that label on China from 1992 to 1994. Treasury also imposed that label on Japan and Taiwan in the 1980s.

A hallmark of President Donald Trump's presidency has been pursuit of aggressive trade policies and a number of other countries in such areas as steel and aluminum. While the policies have not done much to lower America's overall trade deficit, the deficit with China has shrunk. The gap between what the United States sells to China and what it buys in goods and services fell by 19% last year to \$308 billion, the lowest level since 2013 but still the largest trade deficit with any single country.

America's overall deficit in goods and services fell less than 1% last year to \$577 billion but was still higher than in any year of the Obama administration. The trade gap has gone back up this year, rising by more than 9% from January through March as the pandemic has crushed U.S. exports of services such as tourism and education.

Carlo Piovano in London contributed to this report.

Belarus opposition calls for EU support as it collects prize

By LORNE COOK Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Former Belarus presidential candidate Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya urged the European Union to step up its support for embattled democracy protesters in her country, as she picked up the EU's top human rights prize Wednesday on behalf of a group of opposition leaders.

"Without a free Belarus, Europe is not fully free either. We ask Europe and the whole world to stand with Belarus," Tsikhanouskaya told lawmakers in Brussels as she collected the Sakharov Prize, which was awarded by the European Parliament to the Belarus opposition in October.

Holding aloft photographs of Belarusians who have rallied against authoritarian Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, protesters who often been detained and beaten by security forces, she dedicated the award to them. At the same time, Tsikhanouskaya appealed to the 27-nation bloc to be braver in its actions.

"Standing for democracy and human rights is not interference, but it is duty of each self-respecting country," she told EU lawmakers, speaking in English. "Your solidarity and your voice are important, but

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it is actions that matter.”

Mass protests have gripped Belarus since official results from the Aug. 9 presidential election gave Lukashenko a landslide victory over his popular rival, Tsikhanouskaya, and a sixth term in office. She and her supporters refused to recognize the result, saying the vote was riddled with fraud, and some poll workers came forward to detail how the election was rigged in their areas.

The EU also refuses to recognize the results and has imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and several of his associates.

Belarus authorities have cracked down hard on the largely peaceful demonstrations, the biggest of which attracted up to 200,000 people. Police have used stun grenades, tear gas and truncheons to disperse the rallies. Mass detentions have continued.

According to human rights advocates, more than 30,000 people have been detained since the protests began, and thousands were brutally beaten. Four people are reported to have died.

In a speech punctuated by applause, Tsikhanouskaya thanked EU lawmakers for the recognition implicit in the prize, named after Soviet dissident Andrei Sakharov and created in 1988 to honor individuals or groups who defend human rights and fundamental freedoms.

“What is a better recognition that we are free thinkers? What is a better motivation for us to keep going? We are bound to win, and we will win,” she said.

European Parliament President David Sassoli paid tribute to the Belarus opposition, and said that the assembly wants to send a fact-finding mission to the country in the next few months, along with representatives from other EU institutions.

“We see your courage. We can see the courage of women. We see your suffering. We see the unspeakable abuses. We see the violence. Your aspiration and determination to live in a democratic country inspires us,” Sassoli said.

He told reporters that it’s important for lawmakers to “be present on the ground, to have a better idea of the demands of the Belarus people.”

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, 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.

Hours later, in an overnight tweet that referenced McConnell, Trump wrote: “Too soon to give up. Republican Party must finally learn to fight. People are angry!”

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The growing acknowledgment 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.

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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.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 17, the 352nd day of 2020. There are 14 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 17, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright of Dayton, Ohio, conducted the first successful manned powered-airplane flights near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, using their experimental craft, the Wright Flyer.

On this date:

In 1777, France recognized American independence.

In 1933, in the inaugural NFL championship football game, the Chicago Bears defeated the New York Giants, 23-21, at Wrigley Field.

In 1938, German chemists Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann discovered nuclear fission by splitting the nuclei of uranium into lighter elements.

In 1944, the U.S. War Department announced it was ending its policy of excluding people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast.

In 1975, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme was sentenced in Sacramento, Calif. to life in prison for her attempt on the life of President Gerald R. Ford. (She was paroled in Aug. 2009.)

In 1979, Arthur McDuffie, a Black insurance executive, was fatally injured after leading police on a chase with his motorcycle in Miami. (Four white police officers accused of beating McDuffie were later acquitted, sparking riots.)

In 1989, the animated TV series "The Simpsons" premiered on Fox with a Christmas-themed episode.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (sah-LEE'-nuhs deh gohr-TAHR'-ee) signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in separate ceremonies. (After President Donald Trump demanded a new deal, the three countries signed a replacement agreement in 2018.)

In 2001, Marines raised the Stars and Stripes over the long-abandoned American Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan.

In 2007, Gov. Jon S. Corzine (KOHR'-zyn) signed a measure making New Jersey the first state to abolish the death penalty in more than 40 years.

In 2011, North Korean leader Kim Jong Il died after more than a decade of iron rule; he was 69, according to official records, but some reports indicated he was 70.

In 2014, the United States and Cuba restored diplomatic relations, sweeping away one of the last vestiges of the Cold War.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed into law a huge, holiday-season tax bill extending cuts for all Americans, saluting a new spirit of political compromise as Republicans applauded and liberals seethed. Federal prosecutors reached a settlement with the estate of Florida philanthropist Jeffry Picower in which his widow, Barbara, agreed to return \$7.2 billion that her husband had reaped from Bernard Madoff's giant Ponzi scheme. Don Van Vliet, a musician and artist who'd performed a complex brand of experimental rock under the name Captain Beefheart, died in Arcata, California, at age 69. New Orleans quarterback Drew Brees was voted the 2010 Male Athlete of the Year by members of The Associated Press.

Five years ago: Defense Secretary Ash Carter acknowledged that he sometimes used a personal, unsecured email account to conduct official business after he took office, a practice he called "entirely my mistake." Representatives of Libya's two rival factions signed a U.N.-brokered deal to form a unity government.

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One year ago: Joe Biden released a doctor's report saying that the 77-year-old former vice president was "healthy, vigorous" and "fit to successfully execute the duties of the Presidency." A federal judge in Washington sentenced former Trump campaign official Rick Gates to 45 days in jail despite what she said was "extraordinary" cooperation with special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia probe and other Justice Department investigations; Gates had pleaded guilty to charges related to political consulting work he did in Ukraine.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Armin Mueller-Stahl is 90. Pope Francis is 84. Singer-actor Tommy Steele is 84. Actor Bernard Hill is 76. Actor Ernie Hudson is 75. Political commentator Chris Matthews is 75. Comedian-actor Eugene Levy is 74. Actor Marilyn Hassett is 73. Actor Wes Studi is 73. Pop musician Jim Bonfanti (The Raspberries) is 72. Actor Joel Brooks is 71. Rock singer Paul Rodgers is 71. Rhythm-and-blues singer Wanda Hutchinson Vaughn (The Emotions) is 69. Actor Bill Pullman is 67. Actor Barry Livingston is 67. Country singer Sharon White is 67. Producer-director-writer Peter Farrelly is 64. Rock musician Mike Mills (R.E.M.) is 62. Pop singer Sarah Dallin (Bananarama) is 59. Country singer Tracy Byrd is 54. Country musician Duane Propes is 54. Actor Laurie Holden is 51. DJ Homicide (Sugar Ray) is 50. Actor Sean Patrick Thomas is 50. Actor Claire Forlani is 49. Pop-rock musician Eddie Fisher (OneRepublic) is 47. Actor Sarah Paulson is 46. Actor Marissa Ribisi is 46. Actor Giovanni Ribisi is 46. Actor Milla Jovovich (YO'-vuh-vich) is 45. Singer Bree Sharp is 45. Singer-songwriter Ben Goldwasser (MGMT) is 38. Rock singer Mikky Ekko is 37. Actor Shannon Woodward is 36. Actor Emma Bell is 34. Actor Vanessa Zima is 34. Rock musician Taylor York (Paramore) is 31. Actor Graham Rogers is 30. Actor-singer Nat Wolff is 26.