

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 1 of 90

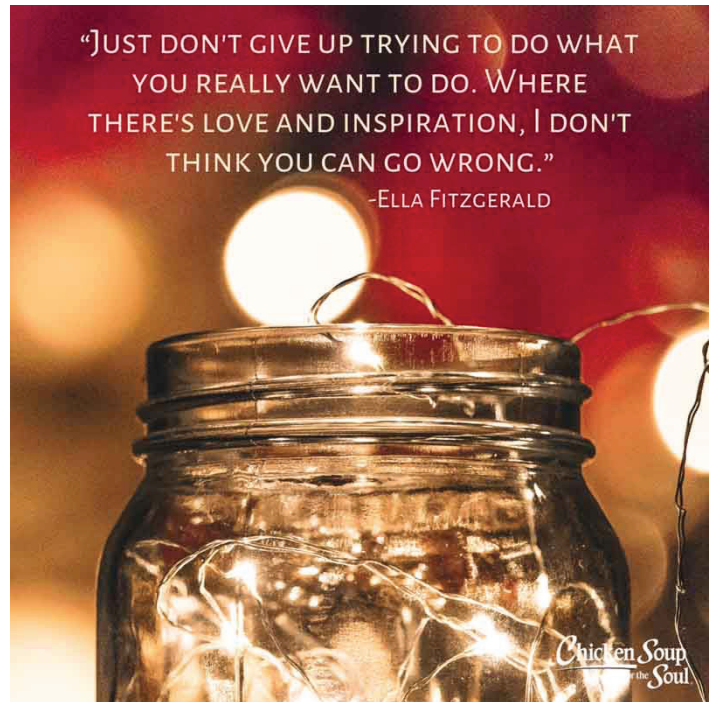
- [2- Coming up on GDILIVE.COM](#)
- [3- Basketball Results from Hamlin](#)
- [4- COVID-19 update by Marie Miller](#)
- [7- S & S Lumber Ad](#)
- [7- Groton City Holiday Lighting Contest](#)
- [8- Obit: Martha Farmen](#)
- [9- December 17th COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [15- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [16- Weather Pages](#)
- [19- Daily Devotional](#)
- [20- News from the Associated Press](#)



Redfield at Groton Area
Friday, Dec. 18, 5:00 p.m.
GDILIVE.COM

7th GBB

The poster features a blue falcon logo on the left, a tiger's face in the center, and a basketball hoop on the right. The text is in white and red on a black background.



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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 2 of 90

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

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
9:30 a.m.

The service of
Martha Farnen
Monday, Dec. 21, 11 a.m.
Emmanuel Lutheran Church



GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM



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



Girls
Redfield at Groton Area
Monday, Dec. 21, 7:30 p.m.
GDILIVE.COM
GDIRADIO Locally 89.3FM



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

Larson propels Tigers in win over Hamlin

It was a full slate of games at Hamlin High School Thursday night with six of the seven games broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM.

The junior high teams won their games. The seventh graders won their game, 44-5, with Locke Electric being the sponsor of that game. The eighth graders won their game, 33-13, with the White House Inn sponsoring that game. The boys C team lost their game, 51-31.

The girls junior varsity team lost, 44-13. That game was sponsored by BK Custom T's and More (through Shane and Laura Clark). Sydney Leight and Carly Guthmiller each had four points while Anna Fjeldheim had three and Lydia Meier two.

The junior varsity boys lost their game, 35-24. That game was sponsored by Weber Landscaping. Hamlin scored the last nine points to pull away for the win. The game was tied four times and there were four lead changes. Jayden Zak led the Tigers with eight points followed by Wyatt Hearnen with six, Logan Ringgenberg four, Cade Larson and Colby Dunker each had two points and Jordan Bjerke had one.

Both varsity games were sponsored by Bierman Farm Service; John Sieh Agency; Milbrandt Enterprises Inc.; Still Massage Therapy & Yoga Studio, Webster, with Mary Johnson; Harr Motors with Bary Keith; Blocker Construction; Groton Vet Clinic; Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls; Northeast Chiropractic with Taylor Anderson.

The Lady Tigers took on third rated Hamlin and nearly pulled off an upset win. The lead changed hands three times in the first quarter before the Chargers took a 9-7 lead at the end of the first quarter. Hamlin charged ahead in the second quarter and led it at half time, 21-10. Hamlin opened up a 14-point lead at the end of the third quarter, 32-19. Hamlin only scored four points in the fourth quarter as Groton Area lit the nets on fire as Brooke Gengerke scored seven points in the fourth quarter followed by Allyssa Locke with four and Alyssa Thaler with three. Groton Area closed to within one, 34-33, with 1:33 left in the game, but could not quite get over the hump as the Chargers hung on to win, 36-33.

Gengerke led the Tigers in scoring with 13 points followed by Thaler with 11, Locke four, Sydney Leight three and Kenzie McInerney two. Thaler and Gengerke each made three three-pointers and Leicht made one.

Kami Wadsworth led Hamlin with 15 points.

Groton Area made six of 12 two-pointers for 50 percent, seven of 27 three-pointers for 26 percent, had only one free throw opportunity and missed that shot, Gracie Traphagen had nine of the team's 23 rebounds, Groton Area had 14 turnovers, Gengerke had one steal and Thaler, Gengerke and McInerney each had two of the team's nine assists. Hamlin made 14 of 37 field goals, three of nine free throws and had five turnovers.

The finale was a Groton Area 58-53 win in the boys varsity game. Hamlin jumped out to a 14-4 first quarter lead. Trailing by as much as 12 points in the second quarter, 24-12, Groton Area would score the next 13 points to take a 25-24 lead at half time. There were three lead changes in the third quarter and the game was tied three times before Hamlin took a 40-34 lead into the fourth quarter. The Tigers made 10 of 14 free throws in the fourth quarter to help them regain the lead. The game was tied at 51 with 1:25 left in the game. The Tigers secured a four-point lead at 55-51 and then hung on to win, 58-53.

Tate Larson was eight of 10 under the basket and scored 11 of his 22 points in the fourth quarter to lead the Tigers. Jayden Zak and Lane Tietz each had 12 points, Tristan Traphagen had eight and Jacob Zak and Wyatt Hearnen each had two points.

Groton Area made 18 of 34 field goals for 53 percent, one of nine three-pointers for 11 percent, was 19 of 30 from the line off of Hamlin's 27 team fouls, Traphagen had nine of the team's 32 rebounds, Tietz and Jacob Zak each had three of the team's nine assists, Jacob Zak, Larson and Hearnen each had two of the team's nine steals and Traphagen, Larson and Hearnen each had one block shot.

Hamlin made 31 of 52 shots, six of 11 three throws off of Groton Area's 12 team fouls, and had 12 turnovers.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 4 of 90

#298 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

This is another not-great day; not so much for records, but bad numbers nonetheless. I keep hoping we'll get past the Thanksgiving surge and avoid a Christmas surge so we can finally start to turn this thing around. I fully recognize that this is probably delusional, but if you can indulge me for a day or two, I'll be most appreciative. I could use the break.

We had 226,500 new cases reported today. This is our 5th-worst day yet. And we managed, sadly, to break the 17-million-case mark today. I know we're all sick of this, but here's the history—again. (This really has to stop. Please note that, at this rate, we'll add six million cases per month.)

April 28 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days

We set a record for hospitalizations again today for the eleventh day running, another thing we're all getting sick of, but nowhere near as sick as the health care workers who've been slammed for weeks. There are 113,090 people in the hospital with Covid-19 in the US. We have set records on 35 of the last 37 days. This is nowhere near funny.

There were 3210 deaths reported today, our third-worst day yet. This is a 1.0% increase from yesterday's total, bringing us to 310,505. This is the situation of greatest concern because infected people can get better and hospitalized people can be discharged, but dead people are dead forever. Lots of holes in families as we approach Christmas. Many of these would be preventable deaths if we just got our act together. But we don't, do we? And so the dying just continues.

California is in real trouble; they reported more than 50,000 new infections today and their test positivity rate is more than double the five percent considered high risk and climbing. Available hospital beds and ICU beds are disappearing; that problem is undoubtedly going to get worse because hospitalizations lag new case reporting by 10 days or so, and the new-case records of this week aren't even going to show up in a hospital surge for over a week. They've reported record numbers of deaths two days running.

The day's big news is, of course, the meeting of the FDA's Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee. As they did on Thursday last week, this group met today to discuss a vaccine candidate, this one the offering from Moderna. They reviewed the data and the FDA experts' analysis of those data and heard from the company, FDA scientists, and the public. They discussed the potential for allergic reactions. I don't have many details, but I'm going to guess this one was easier because they are requesting authorization for adults 18 years and older. A source of disagreement last week with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine was whether to recommend administration to 16- and 17-year-olds because there were so few of those ages in the clinical trials. Moderna did not include any children in its trial, so this would not have been an issue today. I do know that the Committee voted to recommend authorization, which

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 5 of 90

was expected. I'd guess we'll get more information in coming days.

This vaccine has one significant advantage over the one currently in use: It does not require ultra-low temperature storage. It must be frozen while shipping and storing, but this is at normal freezing temperatures. There are a whole lot more freezers capable of storing this one around the country. It also comes in smaller (fewer-dose) packages; when you're packing it up into GPS-equipped and temperature-monitored special packaging as the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine requires, you're going to build fewer, bigger ones to keep costs reasonable; you can afford to use smaller packages for a vaccine that can be handled by the extant cold chain for shipping. For these reasons, it is expected this vaccine will be used more extensively in rural areas and by smaller clinics.

The next step, just as it was last week, is for the FDA director, Stephen Hahn, to decide whether to accept that recommendation and issue the emergency use authorization. In the very likely event he does, the next step is for the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices to issue its recommendations. After that, the vaccine can ship; I've read there are around six million doses waiting to ship right now. I'd guess we'll see vaccine going into arms by Monday.

There have been two allergic reactions in US health care workers receiving the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, both in Alaska. One in a person with no history of allergies was quite severe and required hospitalization and treatment with epinephrine and steroids, although the worker did recover. The other was far milder and was successfully treated with epinephrine, Pepcid, and Benadryl; this person was back to work within an hour. Both workers said they did not want their reactions to scare people away from vaccination.

There was a nicer surprise in store for some folks administering this vaccine; some of the vials contain more vaccine than expected, instead of the advertised five doses, as many as six or even seven. At first, the folks mixing up the stuff thought they'd made an expensive mistake, but no. They'd done everything correctly, and there simply were additional doses in there. After running the situation past the company, they got permission to go ahead and give those doses. So it turns out our supply may be somewhat larger than thought. As long as we can be sure to be able to deliver a second dose to everyone needing one in three weeks, all's good.

Some things have come up in my conversations with people about these vaccines, and I figure if a few people are wondering, probably more are too; so let's clear those up.

(1) How soon after you're vaccinated does it "kick in," that is how soon afterward are you protected? First thing to know is you can't get the shot in the morning and hit the bars that night. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine has two doses, 21 days apart, and the Moderna vaccine has two doses, 28 days apart. In between these doses, you should consider yourself to be not immune, even though, in some people, immunity will be developing. Because people will differ on this and we aren't going to know how fast your particular immune system is working, the smart money's on continuing to be careful. The thinking seems to be that the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine needs about 28 days in all after the first dose; so you're going to need a good week after the second dose. I'm not sure yet what the guideline will be with this second one that has a 28-day delay between doses. We'll have to watch for guidance on that.

(2) So what does this 95 percent thing mean? If I'm 95 percent protected, how does that translate to how many times I go out in public before the risk builds up? That's not what 95 percent effective means. Ninety-five is the percentage of vaccinated people who have 100 percent protection from symptomatic disease. So if it works for you, as is very likely, you're protected. For the other five percent of people, there is not complete protection. But remember, even those in the five percent who might get sick are almost certainly protected from severe disease. These vaccines, in the clinical trials, were pretty darned close to 100% effective when it comes to severe disease. And that's good to know.

We're going to want to remember, too, that we do not know yet whether vaccination stops you from getting infected at all. It is possible (I don't know how probable) that vaccinated people can still become asymptotically infected and go around shedding virus all over other people; so you're going to have to continue with the precautions until we get a reasonable proportion of the population protected so you don't transmit the virus to others. If you have friends and family who are dithering about whether to be vaccinated and whether it's safe and all of that, please do your best to provide those folks with reliable

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 6 of 90

information on the safety and efficacy of these vaccines. And do it kindly: If you want to overcome their hesitancy, hollering at them or telling them they're stupid or "sheeple" or deluded is probably not going to be highly persuasive.

There's another at-home test authorized as of yesterday: the BinaxNOW from Abbott Laboratories. Once again, I'm not selling anything; but I am going to name these tests as they are authorized so you will know for sure which ones are for-real and which might be from some scammer. This one's the cheapest too at \$25. This one does require a prescription and telephone supervision as you run the test (apparently, it's complex to interpret), but it can be performed in your home and gives results in 15 to 20 minutes. We will note this is an antigen test, that is, not as accurate as the RT-PCR which requires sending your specimen off to a lab. The benefit to these quick tests is you find out faster whether you should be isolating so that you don't spread the virus to others while waiting around for results. Depending which study you're looking at, it misses 10 to 15 percent of infected people, so those with symptoms might have to follow up with a more accurate test. Still, this will stretch our resources and give faster answers for a large share of infected people, so it has value.

The WHO has put together a team of emerging diseases specialists to sort through the specimens and data from the early days of the pandemic (when it wasn't actually a pandemic yet) in China. The goal will be to figure out where the virus first jumped to humans and which species was the source. It has long been thought that market in Wuhan is the place and the bat is the species; but we need to nail that down for sure and to identify any species which served as bridge between bat (if that's what it was) and us. The purpose here is in figuring out whether there are countermeasures we can take or at least what we can do to be better prepared next time—because there surely will be a next time.

Have you ever been in a drive-through lane at a restaurant and discovered the person in line ahead of you has paid for your order? That hasn't happened to me, but friends have told me about their experiences with it, and they always report it really gave them a lift. Even if you're not having a bad day, it's cool to encounter some unsolicited good will from someone you're never going to meet, and if you are having a rough day, it can really change things for you. I think that's why we all tend to respond positively to stories about this phenomenon; it's just such a nice thing when it happens.

Well, I have a doozy of a drive-through pay-it-forward story for you. It happened a couple of weeks ago at the Dairy Queen in Brainerd, Minnesota. It started in the usual way during a Thursday lunch rush: A guy says he wants to pay for his order and the car behind him; so then the occupant of the next car is greeted with the news her order's paid for and decides to pass it on to the car behind her. And so on. And so on. And so on.

As this thing wore on and folks discovered they were part of something big, there were people who dropped some extra money in the kitty to cover someone who couldn't afford to pay the entire amount for the car behind them. The last car of the night on that Thursday left \$10 with instructions to pay for the first car Friday morning. And the chain wore on through Friday. And through Saturday. Of course word got out on social media, and it some folks got in their cars and high-tailed it down to the local DQ to get in line at the drive-through so they could take part in what had become an event.

The store manager told the Today Show, "We'd tell them they were the 300th car or something and that's where the excitement really came in. People would get very, very excited." The restaurant received calls from folks who put money on a gift card in case someone couldn't pay it forward. It was Saturday night when, finally, a car came along who couldn't pay for the next patron and the gift card funds had run out.

In the end, there were 900 cars and \$10,000 in drive-up business. Every dollar was spent by someone on behalf of someone else in an unbroken chain that went for two and a half days. That is simply remarkable in this time of division and anger and hostility.

The manager told CNN that times were tough in her business with the lobby closed and business off and hours cut; she said her staff needed a bright spot. "There's all different types of ways to help people. I think this touched a lot of people that we didn't even know it touched, deeper than we know. And you don't know what's going on in a person's life." She's not wrong about that last.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 7 of 90

One customer who was part of that chain on Friday night told CNN, "During times like these it kinds restores your faith in humanity a little. . . . What we witnessed was pure kindness and it was a breath of fresh air really." And then she explained to them that this wasn't even the best part. The best part was telling her family they were part of this extraordinary chain of kindness: "Not that we got free ice cream. The gesture was way more valuable." Got that in one.

Be well. We'll talk again.

S & S Lumber & Hardware Hank

Groton

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

Groton City Holiday Lighting Contest

1. Brett & Anna Schwan
2. Alan & Barb Bell
3. Rick & Sherry Koehler

with a few honorable mentions...

Paul and Tina Kosel & Randy and Sue Stanley

The following prizes will be applied to your utility bill!!!

1st place - \$100

2nd place - \$75

3rd place - \$50

The Life of Martha Farmen

Services for Martha Farmen, 80, of Groton, will be 11:00 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.

Martha Lou was born on June 17, 1940 in Webster to Kenneth and Lillian (Langager) Mortenson. She attended school in Pierpont, graduating in 1958. On June 19, 1960, Martha was united in marriage with Clayton Farmen in Pierpont. The couple lived in Sisseton, Aberdeen and Winner before settling in Groton in 1969. Martha worked in several capacities during her lifetime. She and Clayton were part owners in the Red Owl store in Groton. She worked part time in the Groton Area School and later was the bookkeeper for the Senior Citizens Meals program. She worked alongside her husband, Clayton when they ran Clayton's Meat and Processing. Martha was also a caregiver to many in the community, especially caring for young children and visiting with many in the nursing home.

Martha was a member of Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Groton. In early years, she enjoyed riding horse, dancing, family car rides, and was an avid bowler. She was an excellent baker and will be fondly remembered for her many Norwegian dishes.

Celebrating her life are her children: Lilly Deters of Pierre, Lola (Larry) Bartels of Clark, Clayton "Butch" Farmen of Groton, and LeRoy Farmen of Mobridge. She is also survived by her three grandchildren, Amanda Morehouse, Malory (Kyle) McIntire, Jamie Werner; and their children, Kaelee, Jaeden and Clayton Morehouse; Riley and Hadley McIntire; her siblings, Marj (Jeff) Klebsch of Frankfort, Carlyle Mortenson (Marion) of Rapid City, sister-in-law, Judy Schaunaman, brothers-in-law, Errol Farmen and Keith Farmen, special friend, Gene Prunty and many nieces and nephews.

Preceding her in death were her parents, her husband Clayton in 2003, one brother, Ervin, sisters-in-law, Betty Mortenson, Maureen Holler and Alice Morehouse and brothers-in-law, David Farmen and Calvin Farmen.

Pallbearers will be Shawn Wik, Tyrel Wik, Larry Bartels, Kyle McIntire, Rich Fliehs, Mike Mortenson, and Jim Mortenson.



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 9 of 90

December 17th 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: +594 (93,197 total) Positivity Rate: 10.1%

Total Tests: 5900 (702,590 total)

Hospitalized: +52 (5317 total). 406 currently hospitalized -6)

Avera St. Luke's: 18 (0) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 4 (+2) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 10 (-1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +1 (1301 total)

Females: 1

70s=1,

Counties: Hamlin-1.

Recovered: +2824 (83,140 total)

Active Cases: -2231 (8,756)

Percent Recovered: 89.2%

Beadle (33) +3 positive, +61 recovered (111 active cases)

Brookings (24) +15 positive, +66 recovered (241 active cases)

Brown (47): +39 positive, +128 recovered (345 active cases)

Clark (2): +2 positive, +17 recovered (26 active cases)

Clay (11): +8 positive, +48 recovered (114 active cases)

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

Davison (52): +16 positive, +94 recovered (158 active cases)

Day (15): +2 positive, +26 recovered (76 active cases)

Edmunds (3): +3 positive, +10 recovered (49 active cases)

Faulk (10): +2 positive, +5 recovered (21 active cases)

Grant (20): +4 positive, +31 recovered (99 active cases)

Hanson (3): +2 positive, +15 recovered (23 active cases)

Hughes (25): +12 positive, +48 recovered (173 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +10 positive, +70 recovered (235 active cases)

Lincoln (57): +45 positive, +176 recovered (590

active cases)

Marshall (4): +5 positive, +8 recovered (28 active cases)

McCook (21): +7 positive, +19 recovered (39 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +14 recovery (15 active case)

Minnehaha (237): +163 positive, +642 recovered (2192 active cases)

Pennington (119): +77 positive, +329 recovered (1131 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +8 recovered (17 active cases)

Roberts (26): +8 positive, +33 recovered (119 active cases)

Spink (20): +3 positive, +25 recovered (82 active cases)

Walworth (13): +4 positive, +32 recovered (68 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 17:

- 6.8% rolling 14-day positivity
- 381 new positives
- 6,487 susceptible test encounters
- 148 currently hospitalized (-12)
- 2,984 active cases (+28)
- 1,204 total deaths (+10)

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 10 of 90

County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	392	360	743	8	Substantial	7.89%
Beadle	2441	2297	4962	33	Substantial	9.56%
Bennett	344	316	1068	6	Substantial	4.46%
Bon Homme	1436	1365	1828	21	Substantial	22.50%
Brookings	2784	2519	9538	24	Substantial	11.67%
Brown	4159	3767	10747	47	Substantial	17.62%
Brule	620	581	1649	6	Substantial	26.00%
Buffalo	404	380	839	10	Substantial	26.19%
Butte	821	738	2755	16	Substantial	20.54%
Campbell	109	105	202	1	Minimal	6.67%
Charles Mix	1048	927	3469	10	Substantial	27.42%
Clark	297	269	826	2	Substantial	6.25%
Clay	1535	1410	4368	11	Substantial	17.42%
Codington	3228	2777	8018	64	Substantial	21.28%
Corson	436	407	874	6	Substantial	22.64%
Custer	642	569	2314	8	Substantial	21.66%
Davison	2617	2407	5558	52	Substantial	13.88%
Day	494	403	1474	15	Substantial	17.95%
Deuel	383	321	960	6	Substantial	18.60%
Dewey	1206	1003	3418	7	Substantial	30.23%
Douglas	348	307	798	6	Substantial	18.09%
Edmunds	313	261	867	3	Substantial	16.81%
Fall River	412	367	2217	10	Substantial	17.76%
Faulk	306	275	580	10	Substantial	23.08%
Grant	791	672	1858	20	Substantial	22.16%
Gregory	469	421	1052	24	Substantial	12.50%
Haakon	212	160	458	5	Substantial	21.43%
Hamlin	567	494	1457	30	Substantial	9.26%
Hand	308	289	687	2	Moderate	11.54%
Hanson	298	272	576	3	Substantial	16.28%
Harding	87	75	148	0	Moderate	21.43%
Hughes	1903	1705	5368	25	Substantial	12.33%
Hutchinson	669	585	1951	14	Substantial	23.60%

Groton Daily Independent

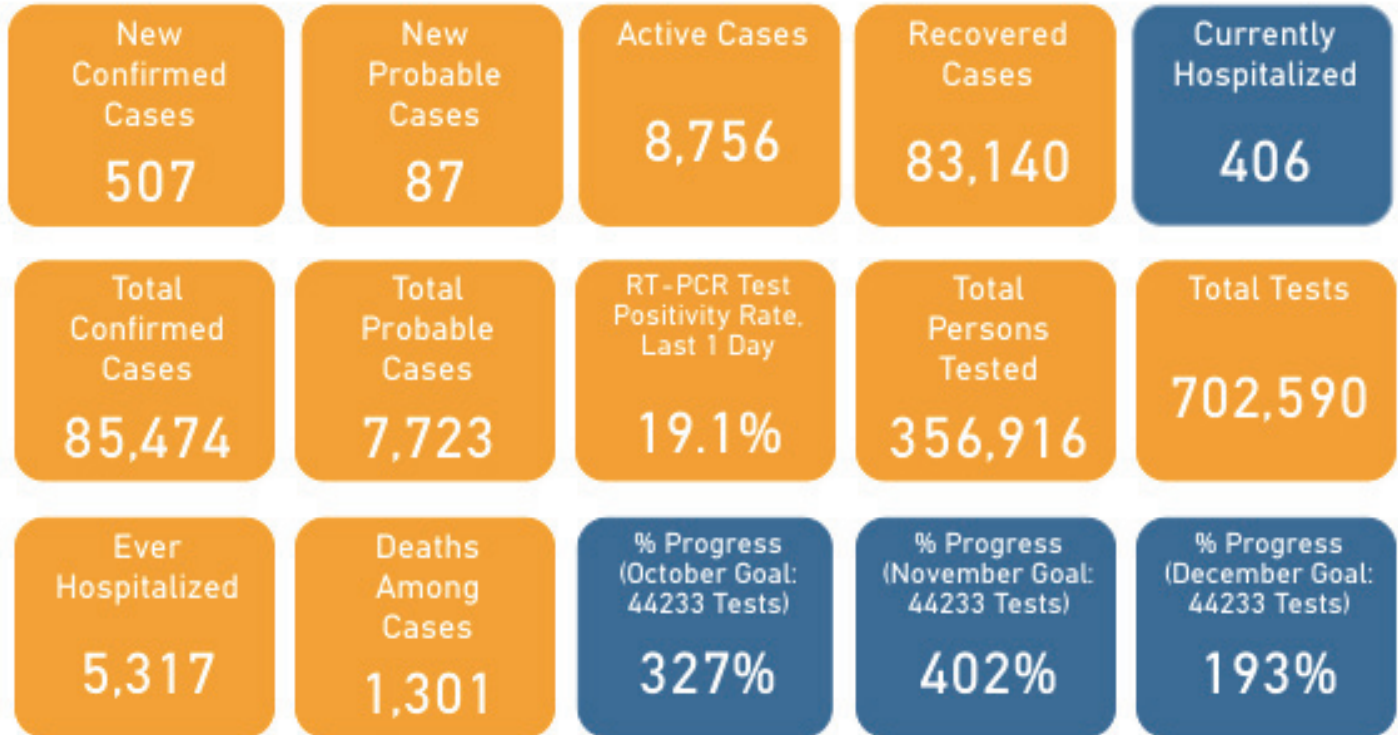
Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 11 of 90

Hyde	130	124	353	0	Minimal	12.50%
Jackson	254	207	846	8	Substantial	44.29%
Jerauld	253	225	482	15	Moderate	23.81%
Jones	63	63	178	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	492	450	1368	13	Substantial	12.66%
Lake	959	878	2673	12	Substantial	18.24%
Lawrence	2378	2127	7383	27	Substantial	17.95%
Lincoln	6265	5618	16628	57	Substantial	22.18%
Lyman	505	468	1663	9	Substantial	10.84%
Marshall	237	205	962	4	Substantial	24.68%
McCook	644	584	1359	21	Substantial	24.29%
McPherson	169	153	487	1	Moderate	3.97%
Meade	2088	1834	6482	20	Substantial	21.25%
Mellette	212	191	639	1	Substantial	21.43%
Miner	216	190	485	6	Substantial	4.35%
Minnehaha	23618	21189	65046	237	Substantial	19.39%
Moody	503	428	1538	14	Substantial	33.73%
Oglala Lakota	1844	1634	6108	33	Substantial	15.11%
Pennington	10295	9045	32532	119	Substantial	23.58%
Perkins	247	210	631	4	Substantial	15.56%
Potter	291	275	693	2	Substantial	13.33%
Roberts	887	742	3656	26	Substantial	25.94%
Sanborn	300	280	586	3	Substantial	12.12%
Spink	666	564	1811	20	Substantial	18.48%
Stanley	258	237	743	2	Moderate	12.20%
Sully	102	92	237	3	Moderate	0.00%
Todd	1111	1008	3731	17	Substantial	17.28%
Tripp	599	536	1293	10	Substantial	15.49%
Turner	907	789	2301	47	Substantial	17.59%
Union	1470	1286	5139	27	Substantial	18.62%
Walworth	584	503	1579	13	Substantial	26.80%
Yankton	2291	1980	7910	18	Substantial	22.83%
Ziebach	280	221	680	7	Substantial	33.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1890	0		

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 12 of 90

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3405	0
10-19 years	10232	0
20-29 years	17180	3
30-39 years	15460	12
40-49 years	13312	21
50-59 years	13256	64
60-69 years	10502	165
70-79 years	5522	272
80+ years	4328	764

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	48737	635
Male	44460	666

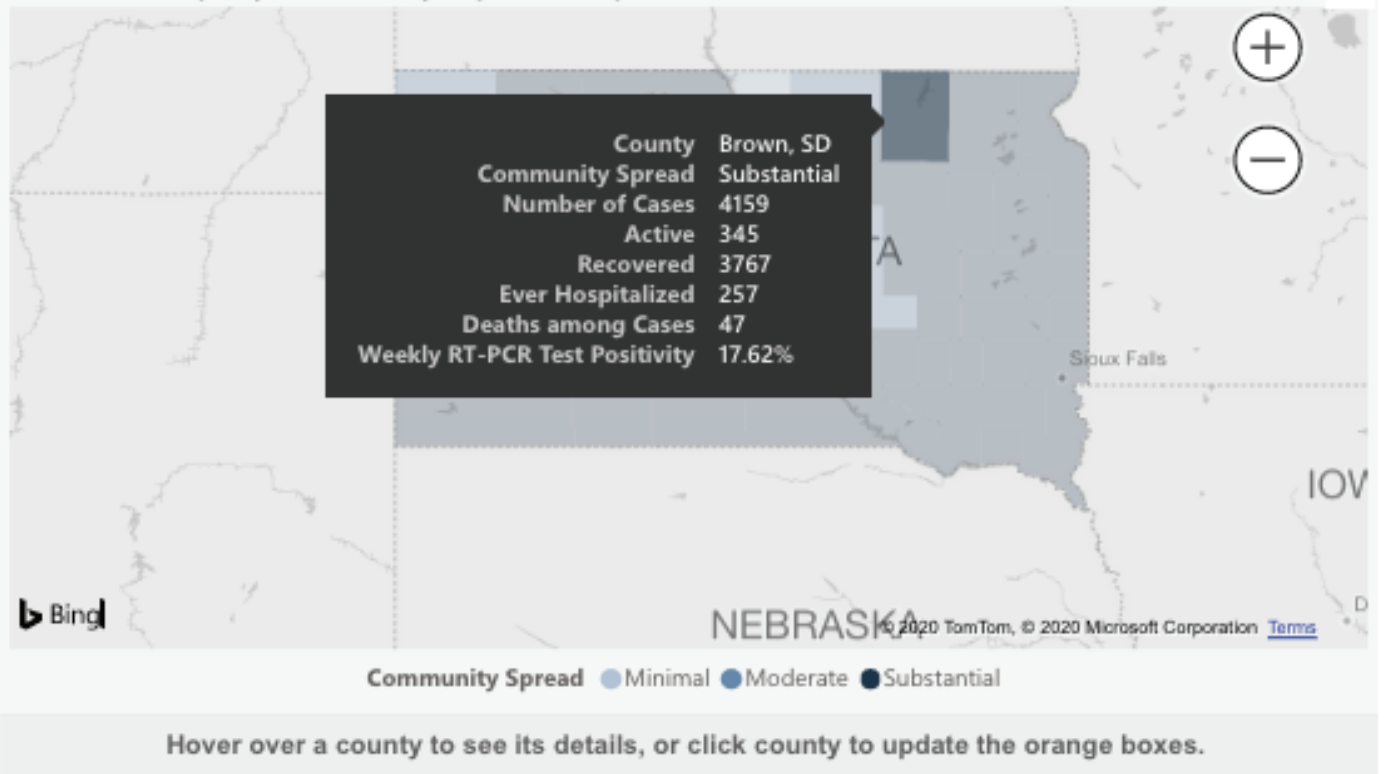
Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 13 of 90

Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



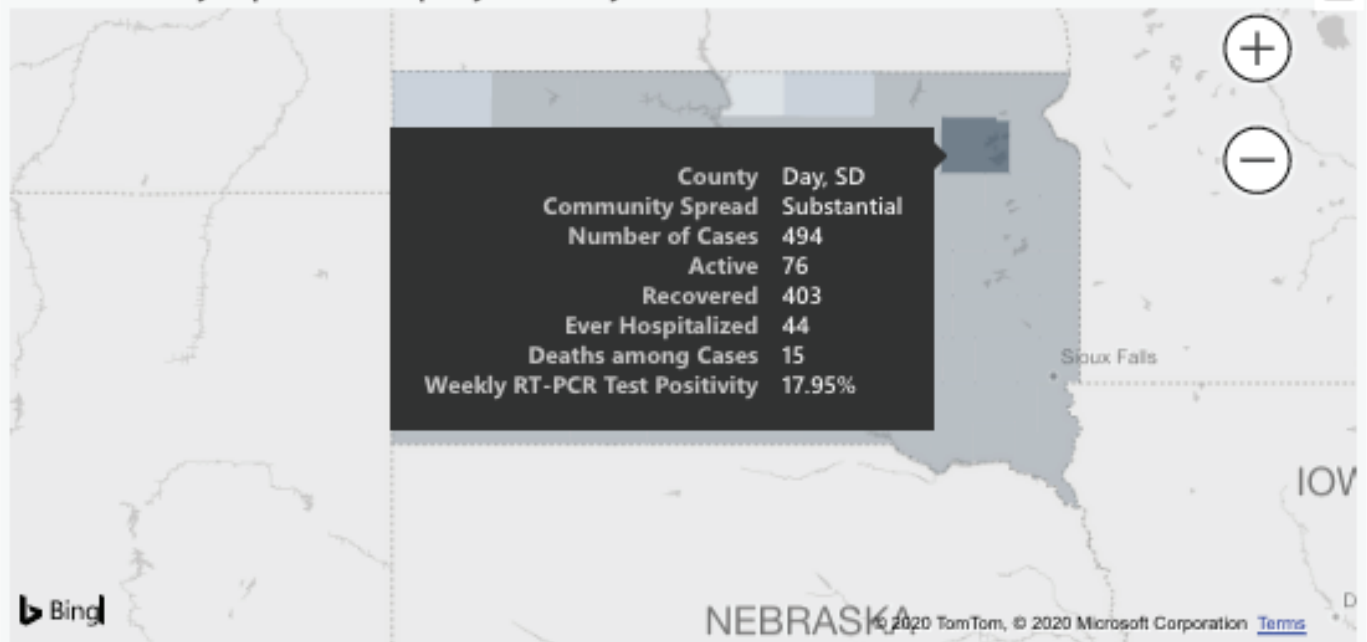
Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 14 of 90

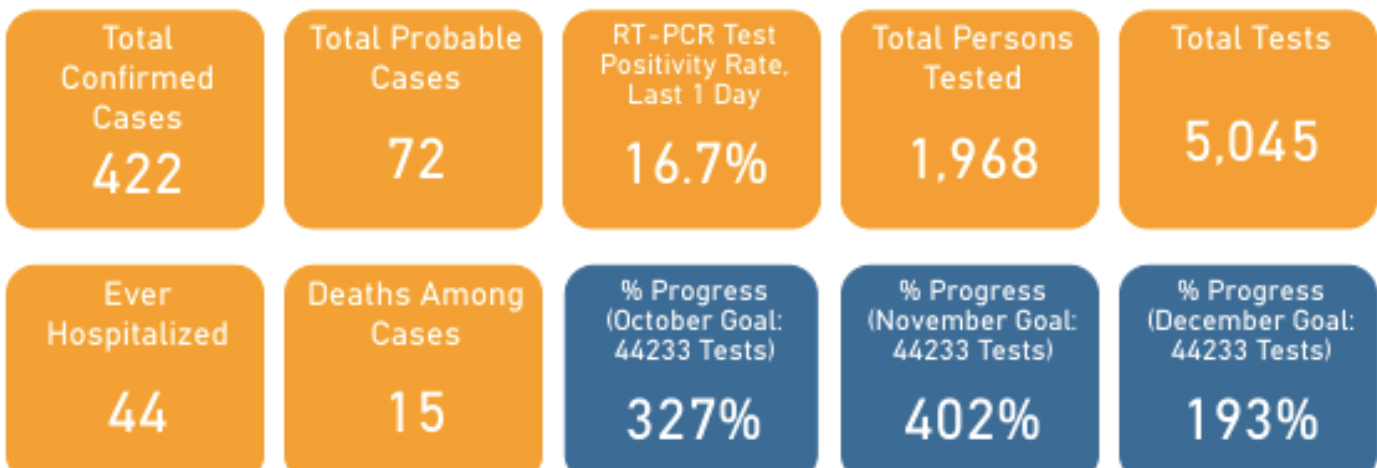
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



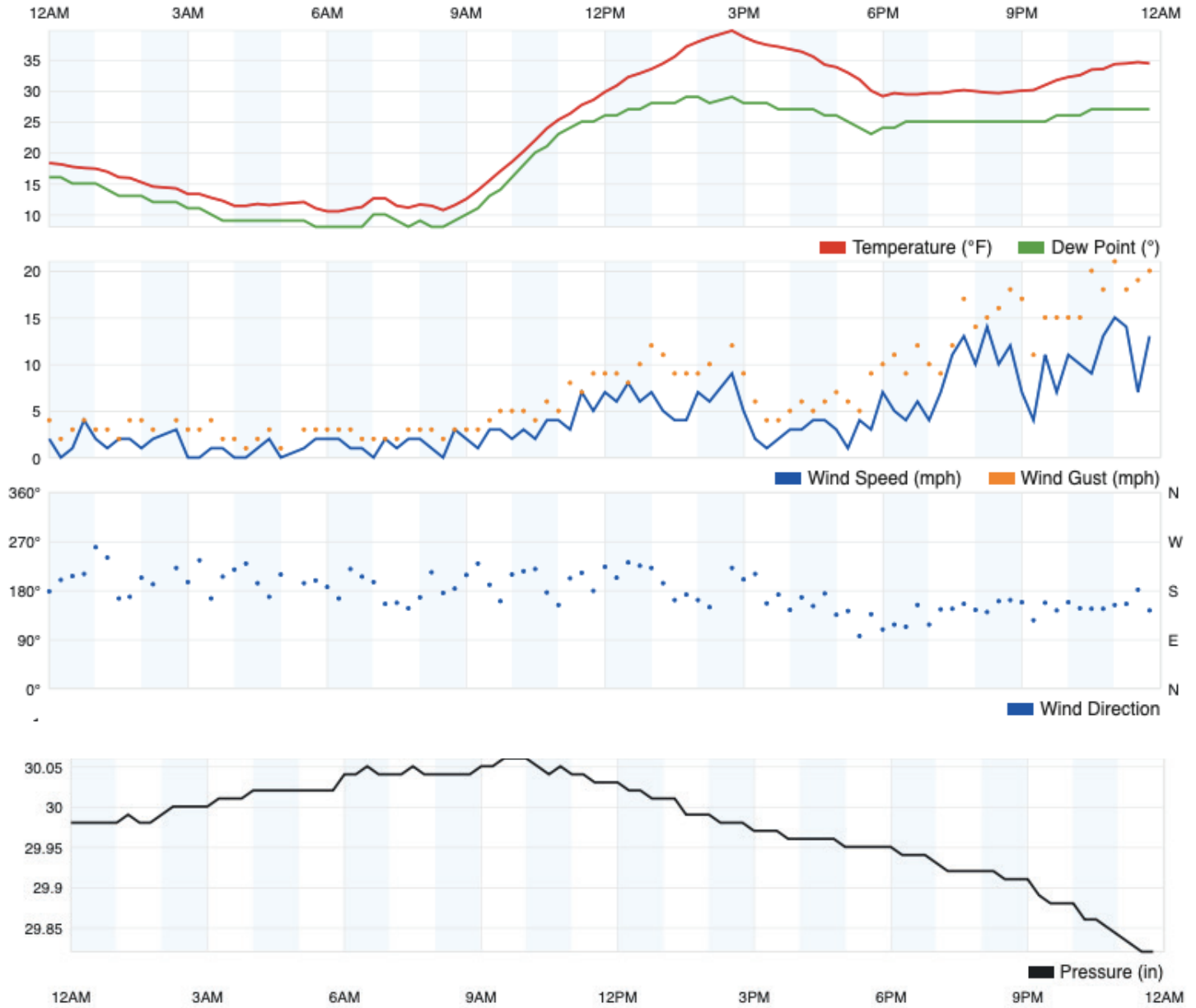
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 15 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 16 of 90

Today



Decreasing
Clouds

High: 39 °F ↓↓

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 9 °F

Saturday



Sunny

High: 37 °F

Saturday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: 21 °F

Sunday



Mostly Sunny

High: 42 °F

Today

- AM Snow Showers
- Highs 34 to 40. Falling temps

Saturday

- Partly Cloudy
- Highs low 30s east to mid 40s west

Sunday

- Mostly Cloudy
- Highs near 40 east to near 50 west

National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD

Graphic Created: 12/18/2020 5:51 AM

After a few snow showers this morning across northeast SD and west central MN, the region will be dry and warmer this weekend. A cold front will push east today, and temperatures will cool behind it late this morning and early this afternoon. A dry front moves through Saturday with southerly breezes helping to bump up highs.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 17 of 90

Today in Weather History

December 18, 1985: Bitter cold impacted most places in South Dakota as low temperatures dropped 20 degrees below zero or lower. The coldest temperature was 30 below zero at Huron in Beadle County and Canton in Lincoln County. Aberdeen dropped to 22 below zero, Highmore and Mobridge fell to 23 below zero; Britton fell to 24 below zero, and Summit bottomed out at 25 below.

December 18, 1996: A powerful Alberta Clipper and a slow-moving deep Arctic high-pressure system brought widespread, prolonged blizzard conditions to the entire region from the 16th to the 19th. The clipper dropped from 1 to 5 inches of snowfall on top of the already extensive snow cover of 1 to almost 4 feet. Across central and north-central South Dakota, northerly winds increased to 25 to 40 mph with gusts to 55 mph late in the morning of the 16th. Temperatures also fell, and widespread blizzard conditions and dangerous wind chills of 40 to 70 below zero developed, prevailing through noon on the 18th. Across northeast South Dakota, conditions changed through late on the day of the 16th, with widespread blowing snow, falling temperatures, and dangerous wind chills. Blizzard conditions developed on the morning of the 17th and continued into the evening of the 18th. Conditions changed throughout the afternoon of the 16th in west-central Minnesota, with a full-fledged blizzard by the morning of the 17th.

North winds of 30 to 40 mph gusting to 50 mph brought visibilities near zero and caused heavy drifting, making travel difficult. Many people had to be rescued from their vehicles after getting stuck in massive snowdrifts or going into ditches because of low visibilities. Some people had to wait to be rescued for many hours, for some over a day. Due to the massive amount of blowing snow, widespread heavy drifting occurred across the entire area, blocking roads, making travel difficult, and leaving some people stranded to wait out the storm. Some snowdrifts from the storm were as high as 15 feet, with a few houses almost buried. A Burlington Northern locomotive became stuck in a 12-foot drift near Hazel and had to be dug out. Due to the weight of the snow, the roof of a hangar at the Gettysburg Airport collapsed on an airplane.

All schools were let out early on the 16th, with some schools not reopening until the 20th. Several school buses went into the ditch or got stuck in drifts and had to be pulled out. There were several accidents, most with minor injuries; however, one accident in Dewey County resulted in serious injury. Most of the roads, state highways and Interstate 90 were closed for a day or two until road crews could get to them. Interstate 29 also received heavy drifting, with parts of it closed for a while during the storm. Most snow plows had to be called back because they could not see the roads or the roads would be drifted over shortly after they were plowed. Some county snow removal budgets were already depleted or were close to being consumed. Emergency personnel and road crews were working extended hours to keep up with the storm. Rescue vehicles had a difficult time responding to emergencies. In one case, a lady from Mobridge had to be brought to Aberdeen. The 100-mile trip took six hours. Also, a rural Westport man died because the rescue units could not get to him in time.

Airports were closed, or flights were canceled or delayed. Mail was delayed for some people up to several days with a massive backup of Christmas packages. Some government offices and many businesses were closed for several days. All sports and other activities were postponed or canceled. Farmers and ranchers had a difficult time getting feed to their livestock. Many cattle were loose and had to be found as they walked on snowdrifts over fences. The storm also killed several animals and a countless number of pheasants with some buried in the snow. Several dairy producers had to dump thousands of pounds of milk because trucks could not get to them in time. Fortunately, there were only spotty power outages throughout the storm. For several hours on the night of the 16th in the extreme cold, 3000 people in Pierre were without power for several hours.

December 18th, 2016 An Arctic airmass over the Northern Plains produced bitterly cold temperatures. In South Dakota, both Aberdeen and Watertown broke their record low by several degrees, with both falling to 37 degrees below zero. The Arctic air combined with 10 to 20 mph winds brought wind chills to 35 to 60 degrees below zero across the region.

Groton Daily Independent

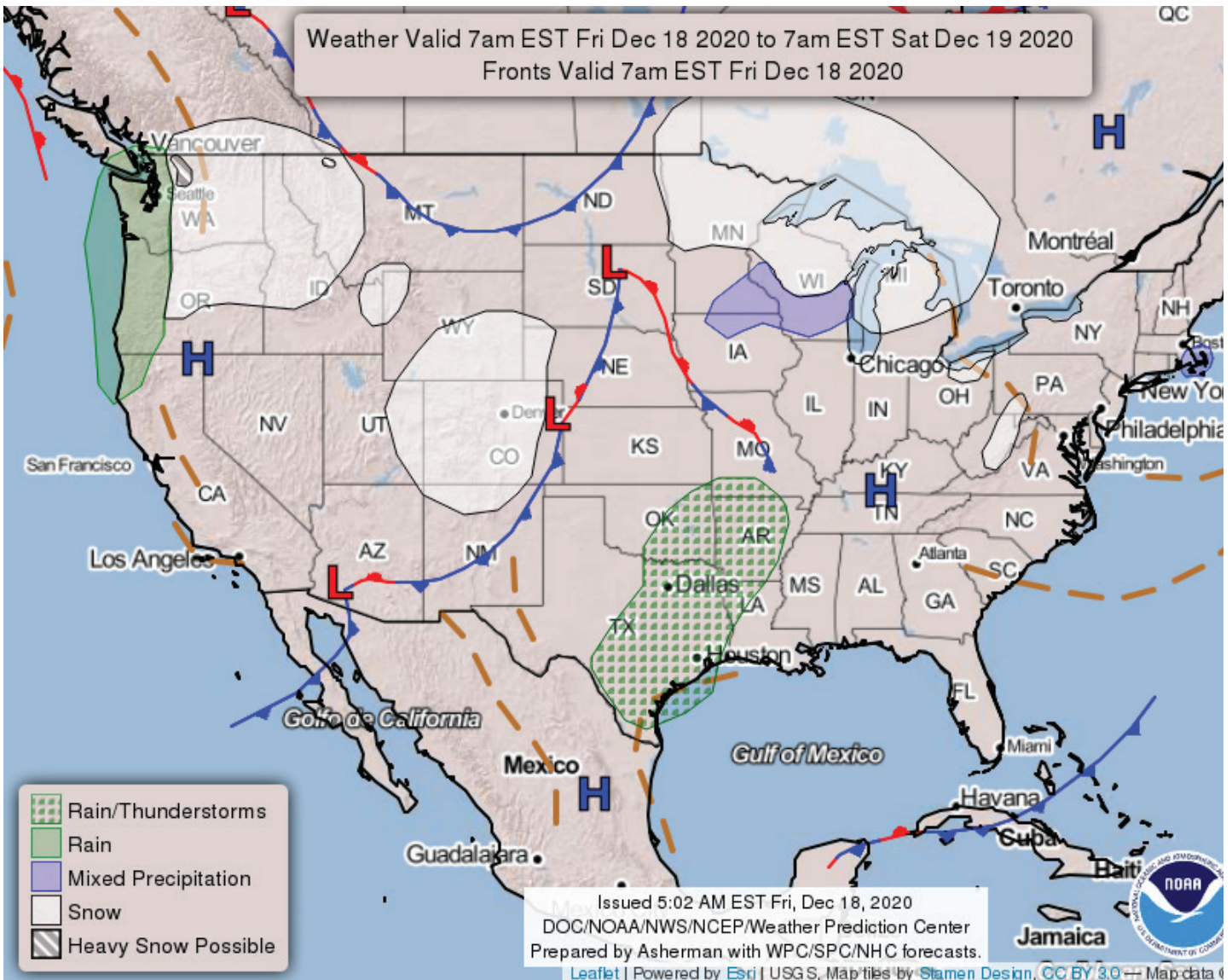
Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 18 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 39.7°F
Low Temp: 10.5 °F
Wind: 21 mph
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 58° in 1979
Record Low: -37° in 2016
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.28
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.48
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:52 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 19 of 90



NO ROOM, BUT...

The annual church Christmas program was rapidly approaching, and Mrs. Adams was assigning roles to the children in her Sunday school class. "Albert," she said, "I'd like you to be the innkeeper this year."

"No way, not me, absolutely not!" said Albert. "I'm not going to be the one who turned Mary and Joseph away from a good night's rest."

"Oh, please," she begged. "I really need you to do this. We won't be able to have the play without you," she pleaded. Finally, he agreed.

On the night of the performance, Joseph went to the door and knocked. "Who's there?" he asked.

"My name's Joseph, and Mary and I need a place to sleep," was the reply.

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "We have no rooms available." And then added kindly, "But if you'd like you can rest awhile, and I'll get you some cookies and milk."

There are many, like Albert, who would gladly give our Lord some "cookies and milk" but would never allow Him to come into their hearts and change their lives. It's enjoyable to visit the manger, sing a few carols, read the story of His birth, and then exchange gifts. But to make Him a permanent resident? Not likely!

See Him now: Patiently standing. Gently knocking. Carefully listening. Waiting hopefully. Wanting desperately to save us and give us eternal life.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for wanting to be our Savior and to fellowship with us. Come, dwell within us and make our hearts Your home. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

News from the Associated Press

Former Standing Rock tribal chairman dies of COVID-19

FORT YATES, N.D. (AP) — The former chairman of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has died after contracting COVID-19, about a month after his wife passed away from the coronavirus, his family said.

Jesse "Jay" Taken Alive, 65, was hospitalized in late October and died Monday, according to his brother, Virgil Taken Alive. His wife, Cheryl Taken Alive, 64, died Nov. 11, according to an obituary.

Jesse Taken Alive taught Lakota culture and language at a school in his hometown of McLaughlin, South Dakota, until he became ill, his brother said. The students called him "Lala Jay." Lala is the Lakota word for grandfather.

"He took a lot of pride in that," Virgil Taken Alive told the Bismarck Tribune.

Jesse Taken Alive won a seat on the tribal council in 1991 and spent 24 years in tribal government, serving as its chairman from 1993 to 1997. He accumulated a lot of documents during that time and stored them in boxes at home, his brother said.

"He liked to hoard all this tribal council stuff," Virgil Taken Alive said, recalling a recent day when the family wanted to clear some space in the basement. "His oldest son said to me, 'I need your help because dad won't let us throw this stuff away.'"

Jesse Taken Alive advocated for tribes as they sought the return of the remains of ancestors, as well as artifacts taken from their graves which sometimes ended up in museums or in the collections of federal agencies after they were excavated.

His advocacy prompted Congress in 1990 to pass the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which spells out the process by which remains and items are to be returned to tribes.

A private funeral service for Taken Alive and his wife will be held Dec. 22 at Kesling Funeral Home in Mobridge, South Dakota, and will be livestreamed on Facebook.

The Standing Rock Sioux Reservation straddles the North Dakota-South Dakota border.

Amazon Announces First Fulfillment Center in South Dakota

SEATTLE--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Dec 18, 2020--

(NASDAQ: AMZN) – Amazon.com, Inc. plans to open its first fulfillment center in the state of South Dakota in Sioux Falls. The site, which is anticipated to launch in 2022, will create 1,000 full-time jobs with industry leading pay and comprehensive benefits starting on day one.

At the new 640,000 square-foot fulfillment center, employees will work alongside Amazon robotics to pick, pack and ship small items to customers such as books, electronics and toys.

Amazon is a great place to work with highly competitive pay, benefits from day one, and training programs for in-demand jobs. On top of Amazon's industry-leading minimum starting wage of \$15 per hour, full-time employees receive comprehensive benefits, including full medical, vision and dental insurance as well as a 401(k) with 50 percent company match, starting on day one. The company also offers up to 20 weeks of maternal and parental paid leave and innovative benefits such as Leave Share and Ramp Back, which give new parents flexibility to support their growing families.

Amazon also offers employees access to innovative programs like Career Choice, where it will pay up to 95 percent of tuition for courses related to in-demand fields, regardless of whether the skills are relevant to a career at Amazon. Since the program's launch, more than 25,000 employees across the globe have pursued degrees in game design and visual communications, nursing, IT programming and radiology, to name a few.

Key Quotes:

Alicia Boler Davis, Amazon's Vice President of Global Customer Fulfillment

"We are thrilled to be opening our first fulfillment center in the great state of South Dakota and bringing 1,000 full-time jobs with industry-leading pay and benefits to Sioux Falls. Amazon leverages its scale for

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 21 of 90

good and makes investments to support communities. We appreciate the strong support from local and state leaders throughout the process, and we look forward to supporting the South Dakota community with great delivery options.”

U.S. Senator John Thune

“Today’s announcement serves as a testament to the success of South Dakota’s business-friendly environment. This distribution facility will bring numerous, high-paying jobs and millions of dollars in investment to the city of Sioux Falls and the rest of the region. I am proud of the state’s economic progress and infrastructure investments that have allowed businesses to thrive.”

Governor of South Dakota Kristi Noem

“South Dakota is open for business, and this commitment has put our state in the position to welcome Amazon to Foundation Park. Amazon is investing in South Dakota with 1,000 jobs, including excellent benefits, which will help fuel our state’s growth for the next generation. So on behalf of the entire state, I want to welcome Amazon to South Dakota.”

Sioux Falls Mayor Paul TenHaken

“We are proud to have been selected by Amazon as their next fulfillment center location. Amazon’s decision to invest in our community reflects the company’s confidence in Sioux Falls’ economic climate and excellent workforce. The team at Amazon has been incredible to work with, and we are excited to welcome them to Sioux Falls and to help make this partnership a win-win for many years to come.”

Todd Ernst, Board Chair for the Sioux Falls Development Foundation

“It is both an honor and a privilege to welcome Amazon to the Sioux Falls business community. Our commitment to business growth in the region is apparent, and Amazon will be a vital player in our continued efforts to build the economy of Sioux Falls and leverage the attractive power of Foundation Park.”

Amazon in South Dakota:

From 2010-2019, Amazon has invested more than \$1 million in South Dakota, including infrastructure and compensation to employees in the state. Amazon’s investments in the state contributed an additional more than \$469,000 into the state’s GDP over that same time period. Amazon’s worldwide fulfillment network supports businesses of all sizes through its Fulfillment by Amazon offering, and many of those local businesses are based in South Dakota. There are more than 3,000 small and medium business sellers and independent authors in the state growing their businesses with Amazon. Additional Resources:

See an Amazon fulfillment center in action [Read the latest Amazon news on the Day One blog](#) [U.S. investment map](#) [About Amazon](#)

Amazon is guided by four principles: customer obsession rather than competitor focus, passion for invention, commitment to operational excellence, and long-term thinking. Customer reviews, 1-Click shopping, personalized recommendations, Prime, Fulfillment by Amazon, AWS, Kindle Direct Publishing, Kindle, Fire tablets, Fire TV, Amazon Echo, and Alexa are some of the products and services pioneered by Amazon. For more information, visit amazon.com/about and follow [@AmazonNews](https://twitter.com/AmazonNews).

1 in 5 prisoners in the US has had COVID-19, 1,700 have died

BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL and KATIE PARK of The Marshall Project and ANDREW DEMILLO of The Associated Press undefined

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — One in every five state and federal prisoners in the United States has tested positive for the coronavirus, a rate more than four times as high as the general population. In some states, more than half of prisoners have been infected, according to data collected by The Associated Press and The Marshall Project.

As the pandemic enters its 10th month — and as the first Americans begin to receive a long-awaited COVID-19 vaccine — at least 275,000 prisoners have been infected, more than 1,700 have died and the spread of the virus behind bars shows no sign of slowing. New cases in prisons this week reached their highest level since testing began in the spring, far outstripping previous peaks in April and August.

“That number is a vast undercount,” said Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer at New York’s

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 22 of 90

Rikers Island jail complex.

Venters has conducted more than a dozen court-ordered COVID-19 prison inspections around the country. "I still encounter prisons and jails where, when people get sick, not only are they not tested but they don't receive care. So they get much sicker than need be," he said.

Now the rollout of vaccines poses difficult decisions for politicians and policymakers. As the virus spreads largely unchecked behind bars, prisoners can't social distance and are dependent on the state for their safety and well-being.

This story is a collaboration between The Associated Press and The Marshall Project exploring the state of the prison system in the coronavirus pandemic.

Donte Westmoreland, 26, was recently released from Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas, where he caught the virus while serving time on a marijuana charge. Some 5,100 prisoners have become infected in Kansas prisons, the third-highest COVID-19 rate in the country, behind only South Dakota and Arkansas.

"It was like I was sentenced to death," Westmoreland said.

Westmoreland lived with more than 100 virus-infected men in an open dorm, where he woke up regularly to find men sick on the floor, unable to get up on their own, he said.

"People are actually dying in front of me off of this virus," he said. "It's the scariest sight." Westmoreland said he sweated it out, shivering in his bunk until, six weeks later, he finally recovered.

Half of the prisoners in Kansas have been infected with COVID-19 — eight times the rate of cases among the state's overall population. Eleven prisoners have died, including five at the prison where Westmoreland was held. Of the three prison employees who have died in Kansas, two worked at Lansing Correctional Facility.

In Arkansas, where more than 9,700 prisoners have tested positive and 50 have died, four of every seven have had the virus, the second-highest prison infection rate in the U.S.

Among the dead was 29-year-old Derick Coley, who was serving a 20-year sentence at the Cummins Unit maximum security prison. Cece Tate, Coley's girlfriend, said she last talked with him on April 10 when he said he was sick and showing symptoms of the virus.

"It took forever for me to get information," she said. The prison finally told her on April 20 that Coley had tested positive for the virus. Less than two weeks later, a prison chaplain called on May 2 to tell her Coley had died.

The couple had a daughter who turned 9 in July. "She cried and was like, 'My daddy can't send me a birthday card,'" Tate said. "She was like, 'Momma, my Christmas ain't going to be the same.'"

Nearly every prison system in the country has seen infection rates significantly higher than the communities around them. In facilities run by the federal Bureau of Prisons, one of every five prisoners has had coronavirus. Twenty-four state prison systems have had even higher rates.

Prison workers have also been disproportionately affected. In North Dakota, four of every five prison staff has gotten coronavirus. Nationwide, it's one in five.

Not all states release how many prisoners they've tested, but states that test prisoners broadly and regularly may appear to have higher case rates than states that don't.

Infection rates as of Tuesday were calculated by the AP and The Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization covering the criminal justice system, based on data collected weekly in prisons since March. Infection and mortality rates may be even higher, since nearly every prison system has significantly fewer prisoners today than when the pandemic began, so rates represent a conservative estimate based on the largest known population.

Yet, as vaccine campaigns get underway, there has been pushback in some states against giving the shots to people in prisons early.

"There's no way it's going to go to prisoners ... before it goes to the people who haven't committed any crime," Colorado Gov. Jared Polis told reporters earlier this month after his state's initial vaccine priority

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 23 of 90

plans put prisoners before the general public.

Like more than a dozen states, Kansas's vaccination plan does not mention prisoners or corrections staff, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a non-partisan prison data think tank. Seven states put prisoners near the front of the line, along with others living in crowded settings like nursing homes and long-term care facilities. An additional 19 states have placed prisoners in the second phase of their vaccine rollouts.

Racial disparities in the nation's criminal justice system compound the disproportionate toll the pandemic has taken on communities of color. Black Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of whites. They are also disproportionately likely to be infected and hospitalized with COVID-19, and are more likely than other races to have a family member or close friend who has died of the virus.

The pandemic "increases risk for those who are already at risk," said David J. Harris, managing director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School.

This week, a Council on Criminal Justice task force headed by former attorneys general Alberto Gonzalez and Loretta Lynch released a report calling for scaling back prison populations, improving communication with public health departments and reporting better data.

Prison facilities are often overcrowded and poorly ventilated. Dormitory-style housing, cafeterias and open-bar cell doors make it nearly impossible to quarantine. Prison populations are sicker, on average, than the general population and health care behind bars is notoriously substandard. Nationwide, the mortality rate for COVID-19 among prisoners is 45% higher than the overall rate.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, public health experts called for widespread prison releases as the best way to curb virus spread behind bars. In October, the National Academies of Science, Medicine, and Engineering released a report urging states to empty their prisons of anyone who was medically vulnerable, nearing the end of their sentence or of low risk to public safety.

But releases have been slow and uneven. In the first three months of the pandemic, more than 10,000 federal prisoners applied for compassionate release. Wardens denied or did not respond to almost all those requests, approving only 156 — less than 2%.

A plan to thin the state prison population in New Jersey, first introduced in June, was held up in the Legislature because of inadequate funding to help those who were released. About 2,200 prisoners with less than a year left to serve were ultimately released in November, eight months after the pandemic began.

California used a similar strategy to release 11,000 people since March. But state prisons stopped accepting new prisoners from county jails at several points during the pandemic, which simply shifted the burden to the jails. According to the state corrections agency, more than 8,000 people are now waiting in California's county jails, which are also coronavirus hot spots.

"We call that 'screwing county,'" said John Wetzel, Pennsylvania's secretary of corrections, whose prison system has one of the lower COVID-19 case rates in the country, with one in every seven prisoners infected. But that's still more than three times the statewide rate.

Prison walls are porous even during a pandemic, with corrections officers and other employees traveling in and out each day.

"The interchange between communities and prisons and jails has always been there, but in the context of COVID-19 it's never been more clear," said Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, a professor of social medicine at UNC-Chapel Hill who studies incarceration and health. "We have to stop thinking about them as a place apart."

Wetzel said Pennsylvania's prisons have kept virus rates relatively low by widely distributing masks in mid-March — weeks before even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began recommending them for everyday use in public — and demanding that staff and prisoners use them properly and consistently. But prisoners and advocates say prevention measures on the ground are uneven, regardless of Wetzel's good intentions.

As the country heads into winter with virus infections on the rise, experts caution that unless COVID-19 is brought under control behind bars, the country will not get it under control in the population at large.

"If we are going to end this pandemic — bring down infection rates, bring down death rates, bring down

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 24 of 90

ICU occupancy rates — we have to address infection rates in correctional facilities,” said Emily Wang, professor at Yale School of Medicine and co-author of the recent National Academies report.

“Infections and deaths are extraordinarily high. These are wards of the state, and we have to contend with it.”

Schwartzapfel reported from Boston and Park from Washington.

This story has been corrected to show that the rate of prisoners who tested positive for the coronavirus was more than four times as high as the general population, not more than four times higher than the general population.

States making bold new legal claims in 2 Google lawsuits

By MARCY GORDON and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As a wave of antitrust actions surges against Google and Facebook, states in two lawsuits are stretching beyond the cases made by federal competition enforcers to level bold new claims. The states are taking new legal approaches as they join the widening siege against the two once seemingly untouchable behemoths.

The latest case came Thursday as dozens of states filed an antitrust lawsuit against Google, alleging that the search giant exercises an illegal monopoly over the online search market, hurting consumers and advertisers.

It was the third antitrust salvo to slam Google in the past two months. The U.S. Justice Department and attorneys general from across the country are weighing in with different visions of how they believe the company is abusing its immense power in ways that harm other businesses, innovation and even consumers who find its services indispensable.

And last week, the Federal Trade Commission and 48 states and districts sued Facebook. They accuse the social media giant of abusing its power in social networking to squash smaller competitors — and seeking remedies that could include a forced spinoff of its prized Instagram and WhatsApp messaging services.

“There’s not been a cluster of cases of this significance since the 1970s,” said William Kovacic, a law professor at George Washington University and a former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, pointing to the recent spate of antitrust actions by the states, the Justice Department and the FTC. “This is a big deal.” The DOJ brought an antitrust suit against AT&T in 1974 that led to its breakup.

The new lawsuit announced by Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser echoes the allegations leveled earlier by the Justice Department against Google’s conduct in the search market. But it goes beyond them and adds important new wrinkles: It also seeks to stop Google from becoming dominant in the latest generation of technology, such as voice-assistant devices and internet-connected cars.

And, it claims, the company discriminates against specialized search providers that offer travel, home repair and entertainment services, and denies access to its search-advertising management tool to competitors like Bing.

The lawsuit was filed in federal court in Washington by the attorneys general of 35 states as well as the District of Columbia and the territories of Guam and Puerto Rico.

“Consumers are denied the benefits of competition, including the possibility of higher quality services and better privacy protections. Advertisers are harmed through lower quality and higher prices that are, in turn, passed along to consumers,” Weiser said in announcing the action.

Google’s director of economic policy, Adam Cohen, said in a blog post that big companies should be scrutinized and Google is prepared to answer questions about how it works.

“But this lawsuit seeks to redesign search in ways that would deprive Americans of helpful information and hurt businesses’ ability to connect directly with customers,” he wrote. “We look forward to making that case in court, while remaining focused on delivering a high-quality search experience for our users.”

Consumer advocates welcomed the suit.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 25 of 90

The attorneys general have worked with the Justice Department as they developed their case and are asking that their case be combined with the Justice Department's lawsuit, allowing their more forward-looking claims to move ahead, Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller said.

On Wednesday, 10 states led by Republican attorneys general accused Google in a separate suit of abusing its power in online advertising to crush competition. They said the company's anti-competitive conduct even included a deal with rival Facebook to manipulate ad sales — a totally new accusation.

"That's an explosive allegation if they can prove it," said George Washington's Kovacic.

The suit alleges that Google signed a pact with Facebook in 2015 that gave Google access to millions of WhatsApp users' encrypted messages, photos and videos.

The suit, led by Texas, 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.

In addition to Colorado, the states bringing the lawsuit Thursday were Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming.

Slevin reported from Denver. AP Technology Writer Michael Liedtke in San Ramon, California, contributed to this report.

Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Arlington 62, Castlewood 61

Bridgewater-Emery 75, Menno 27

Canistota 73, Freeman 17

Corsica/Stickney 63, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 43

Deuel 69, Webster 56

Dupree 64, McIntosh 45

Ethan 63, James Valley Christian 24

Flandreau 46, Beresford 44

Gregory 59, Colome 23

Groton Area 58, Hamlin 53

Langford 35, Ipswich 24

Madison 47, Lennox 36

Mitchell Christian 43, Kimball/White Lake 34

New Underwood 50, Hill City 30

North Central Co-Op 58, South Border, N.D. 46

Parker 77, Elk Point-Jefferson 70

Platte-Geddes 86, Burke 60

Sioux Falls Washington 63, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 62

Sioux Valley 61, Baltic 54

Stanley County 63, Philip 57

Timber Lake 70, Harding County 46

Vermillion 64, Irene-Wakonda 23

Wessington Springs 56, Hitchcock-Tulare 38

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 46, Redfield 21

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 26 of 90

Avon 36, Centerville 34
Brandon Valley 57, Yankton 42
Castlewood 48, Arlington 34
Colman-Egan 50, Dell Rapids St. Mary 43
Corsica/Stickney 54, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 31
DeSmet 48, Estelline/Hendricks 26
Douglas 31, Hot Springs 23
Dupree 50, McIntosh 20
Elk Point-Jefferson 46, Parker 36
Ethan 62, James Valley Christian 28
Flandreau 48, Beresford 42
Hamlin 36, Groton Area 33
Harrisburg 37, Watertown 30
Highmore-Harrold 49, Potter County 31
Hitchcock-Tulare 36, Wessington Springs 24
Kimball/White Lake 54, Mitchell Christian 43
Lennox 39, Madison 35
Philip 36, Stanley County 25
Ponca, Neb. 72, Vermillion 58
Scotland 57, Bon Homme 49
Timber Lake 58, Harding County 44
Warner 52, Northwestern 33
Waverly-South Shore 39, Sisseton 36
Webster 54, Deuel 46
Wilmot 58, Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 53
Winner 65, Burke 32

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

Dozens of states file anti-trust lawsuit against Google

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and MICHAEL LIEDTKE Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Dozens of more states are joining an escalating effort to prove Google has been methodically abusing its power as the internet's main gateway in a way that hurts consumers habitually feeding personal information into its search engine and advertisers pouring billions of dollars into its vast marketing network.

The lawsuit was filed Thursday in federal court in Washington by attorneys general of 35 states as well as the District of Columbia and the territories of Guam and Puerto Rico. It seems likely to be combined with a similar complaint by the the U.S. Department of Justice in late October that is also trying to defuse Google's dominance of online search and digital advertising.

"Consumers are denied the benefits of competition, including the possibility of higher quality services and better privacy protections. Advertisers are harmed through lower quality and higher prices that are, in turn, passed along to consumers," Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser said in announcing the action.

In a blog post, Google's director of economic policy, Adam Cohen, said big companies should be scrutinized, and Google is prepared to answer questions about how it works.

"But this lawsuit seeks to redesign search in ways that would deprive Americans of helpful information and hurt businesses' ability to connect directly with customers. We look forward to making that case in court, while remaining focused on delivering a high-quality search experience for our users," he said.

The case is the third antitrust salvo to slam Google during the past two months as the U.S. Department of Justice and attorneys general from across the U.S. weigh in with their different variations on how they

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 27 of 90

believe the company is abusing its immense power to do bad things that harm other businesses, innovation and even consumers who find its services to be indispensable.

"There's not been a cluster of cases of this significance since the 1970s," said William Kovacic, a law professor at George Washington University and a former chairman of the Federal Trade Commission, pointing to the recent spate of antitrust actions by the states, the Justice Department and the FTC. "This is a big deal."

The DOJ brought an antitrust suit against AT&T in 1974 that led to its breakup.

In many ways, the flurry of U.S. antitrust suits represent an attempt to catch up with European regulators who have spent the past several years trying to crack down on Google, mostly with huge fines, to little noticeable effect so far.

The latest lawsuit echoes the allegations brought by the federal government. But it goes beyond them by seeking to stop Google from becoming dominant in the latest generation of technology, such as voice-assistant devices and internet-connected cars, as well as claiming that the company discriminates against specialized search providers that provide travel, home repair and entertainment services, and denies access to its search-advertising management tool, SA360, to competitors such as Bing.

The lawsuit was joined by the attorneys general of Alaska, Arizona, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia and Wyoming.

The attorneys general have worked with the Justice Department as they developed their case and are asking that their case be combined with the department's lawsuit, allowing those more forward-looking claims to move ahead, Iowa Attorney General Tom Miller said.

"This will be a unified effort," he said.

Public Citizen, a non-profit consumer advocacy organization, welcomed that latest lawsuit.

"Google has built a monopoly in online advertising that is unfair, excludes competitors and drives up prices. And with its control of its search engine, Google has been able to unfairly filter out listings for competitors while promoting its own businesses," said Alex Harman, a competition policy advocate for the group.

On Wednesday, 10 states led by Republican attorneys general filed a lawsuit against Google accusing it of "anti-competitive conduct" in the online advertising industry, including a deal to manipulate sales with rival Facebook. It targeted 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.

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

This story has been updated to reflect the lawsuit is an effort of 35 states as well as the District of Columbia and the territories of Guam and Puerto Rico, not 38 states.

Brothers arrested in connection with fatal stabbing in Kyle

KYLE, S.D. (AP) — Two brothers have been arrested in last month's fatal stabbing of a Kyle man, authorities said Thursday.

Antoine Makes Good and Vinnie Makes Good are charged in federal court with second-degree murder in the death of Henry O'Rourke III, according to documents unsealed Thursday. They are scheduled to appear in court Friday morning.

O'Rourke, 35, was stabbed to death in Kyle on Nov. 1, according to federal investigators. Oglala Sioux Police Chief Bob Ecoffey said he could not yet speak about the circumstances and motive surrounding the stabbing, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Tribal officers and FBI agents made the arrests without incident, Ecoffey said.

Noem will wait to get coronavirus vaccine until next year

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem plans to wait her turn to get a coronavirus vaccine, which will be sometime early next year.

Her spokesman, Ian Fury told the Argus Leader the governor “will get the vaccine when it’s readily available, after those who need it the most have been given an opportunity to take it.”

Noem this week got a first-hand look at how South Dakota’s first round of COVID-19 vaccines are being administered during a trip to Watertown.

South Dakota received 7,800 Pfizer doses with additional vaccines coming from drug manufacturer Moderna next week. The state reported midday Thursday that 1,106 people had been vaccinated.

Front-line healthcare workers and long-term care facility residents are receiving the state’s first doses, while federal officials have said they anticipate vaccines to become available to the general public by April.

State health officials on Thursday reported 594 new positive COVID-19 tests, for a total of 93,197 cases since the start of the pandemic. There was one additional death, lifting the total to 1,301. Hospitalizations dropped from 412 to 406.

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.

Bankers say economy is improving in rural parts of 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy is improving in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states, but the region continues to lag behind where it was before the coronavirus pandemic began, according to a new monthly survey of bankers.

The overall index for the region improved to 51.6 in December from November’s 46.8. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey, said the region still has about 95,000 fewer jobs than it did before the pandemic began, and it will take many months of growth to erase all the job losses. The hiring index slipped to a neutral 50 score in December from November’s positive reading of 53.2.

But the bankers are confident the economy will improve over the next six months because crop prices, federal farm aid and exports have all increased recently, Goss said. The confidence index jumped to 62.9 in December from November’s 50.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

2 men sentenced to 65 years in prison for fatal drug robbery

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A judge in Pennington County has sentenced two men to each spend 65 years in prison for killing a teenager during a drug robbery last year.

Andre Martinez and Cole Waters, both 21, had earlier pleaded guilty in a deal with prosecutors to first-degree manslaughter in the death of 17-year-old Emmanuel Hinton.

One man planned an armed robbery and provided the handgun while the other pulled the trigger, but both are equally responsible for killing the Box Elder teen, Judge Robert Gusinsky said Wednesday.

Court testimony said Martinez brought a handgun with him when he went to Waters’ house on Feb. 26, 2019. Martinez told Waters someone was coming over to sell him marijuana and asked Waters for help in robbing him.

Waters agreed and Martinez handed him a gun, according to testimony. Waters said as Hinton and two others pulled up he pointed a gun inside the car, but accidentally pulled the trigger when the vehicle began to drive away. Hinton was shot in the head.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 29 of 90

"One set up the deal and brought the gun and the other one wielded it," said Mark Vargo, Pennington County state's attorney. "However they "acted in concert and are very much joined and similarly involved in the crime."

Judge Robert Gusinsky sentenced both men to 75 years, but suspended 10 years, the Rapid City Journal reported.

AP ROAD TRIP: Amid American rancor, a dash of Utah Nice

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — In one of the most corrosive presidential campaigns in recent American history, amid the political denunciations and slanders of an excruciating year, Utah's top candidates for governor made a television commercial together.

It was not your typical political ad.

On the left side of the screen was Chris Peterson, the Democratic candidate, an affable man in a nondescript suit looking earnestly into the camera. On the right was Spencer Cox, his Republican opponent, with a similar suit and expression.

They cheerfully acknowledged that they disagreed on many things, but added something unusual for American politics in 2020.

"Win or lose, in Utah we work together," said Peterson, who would be crushed in the November elections, a few weeks after the ad was released.

"Let's show the country there's a better way," said Cox, who, a week after his victory, criticized fellow Republicans for attacks on the legitimacy of the elections.

This story was produced with the support of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

When it comes to politics, Utah has long claimed things are different here.

Political viciousness is for other places, many politicians will tell you. Legislators are more polite, more willing to compromise. The deep conservatism, the folklore says, includes a powerful strain of compassion.

It might make you wonder: With U.S. politics so divided that millions of voters are lost in a maze of conspiracy theories and outright lies, could a TV advertisement signal a place where they've figured things out?

Could this idiosyncratic state in the heart of the Rockies show America a better way?

Ehhhhhhh. Sort of.

Salt Lake City turned out to be the end of the AP's road trip, which took us across the country over the course of the summer and fall. Three of us have been trying to make sense of a year wracked by coronavirus, economic devastation, sometimes-violent protests for racial justice and an election campaign that ended with President Donald Trump, the clear loser, insisting that he'd been cheated out of victory.

A couple weeks earlier we'd been covering the presidential election from Wisconsin, bringing along gas masks and protective vests capable of resisting high-caliber handgun fire. There were widespread fears the state could be a flashpoint for political violence.

Just looking at the gear in my suitcase disoriented me. I've covered plenty of political violence: Crimea, Congo, India, Liberia, Nepal, Thailand.

But now tactical vests were standard reporting tools for Wisconsin, the state where I'd gone to summer camp as a homesick kid? It didn't seem possible.

We never needed the protective gear. There were a handful of scuffles in a handful of places, but the U.S. elections and the days that followed were largely peaceful.

Still, it made me want to find some good news. The year had offered so little.

So we came to Utah.

It didn't take much poking around to realize that the state's longtime reputation -- overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly Republican, dominated by a cultural conservatism inherited from the Church of Jesus Christ

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 30 of 90

of Latter-day Saints -- was only part of the story.

The other part is a surprising political complexity and slowly changing demographics. Utah, it turns out, is a place where right-wing Republicans have fought for the rights of undocumented immigrants and deeply religious legislators have enacted some of the nation's strongest protections for gays and lesbians.

It is one of America's most conservative states, both culturally and politically, but has one of its most liberal cities: Salt Lake City, with its throngs of Democrats, array of hipsters and, until she decided not to run again, an openly lesbian mayor.

It's a state where so many people frown on alcohol that there are dozens of soda shops -- Swig, Sodacious, FiiZ, Quench It -- to satisfy the relentless demand for carbonation and sugar (except on Sundays, when many are closed).

But two years ago, Utah also voted to legalize medical marijuana, and today you can pick up an Orange Creamsicle vape cartridge at a cannabis dispensary just a five-minute drive from Temple Square, the geographic heart of Utah's Mormon culture.

What is going on?

"I really do think it's different in Utah," said state Rep. Robert Spendlove, a Republican economist and proud policy wonk who spent years working in Washington and left unimpressed. "In Utah we really do have a sense of wanting to work together, to try to focus on shared interests and our policy objectives."

"There's some sense of working together and cohesiveness that I don't think you find in other places," said state Sen. Luz Escamilla, a Democrat who was raised in Mexico and is one of the state's handful of elected Latinas. "There are levels of civility, of decorum, that are unique to the culture of the state. It can be helpful in terms of running a whole legislative session."

But Utah culture also includes a powerful streak of conformist perfectionism, and generations here have faced the pressure of living up to the state's mythological ideal: the relentlessly happy family with a string of polite, hard-working children.

As a result, at least some of the outward political civility is what people around here call Utah Nice, where viciousness can be hidden behind a fake smile and a batch of fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies. Picture one of those 1950s TV housewives, but with a bloody dagger beneath her apron.

Jim Dabakis, a former Democratic state senator, said he never faced a harsh word from a Republican during his years in office -- but he said they still worked to quash pretty much every progressive bill he backed.

"This is a society of very passively aggressive people," he said. "The levels of hostility and distrust and lack of respect is just as much in Utah as it is in New York."

The legislative civility "is nothing to brag about," said Dabakis.

He argues that the immense power of the Republican party has warped the state's political culture. The party has crushing majorities in both the state House and Senate and has controlled the governor's office for more than 30 years.

"It is simply one party that is in total, complete, absolute control and then saying, 'We all get along so well,'" Dabakis said.

Many politicians acknowledge that Republican control sometimes fosters a phony politeness, but they'll defend it too.

"To me it's still better to have the facade," said Republican Ray Ward. "If you keep the facade long enough then sometimes you can't tell if that's the real thing."

Brian King, the Democratic House minority leader, added, "The Utah Nice thing, it can be superficial, but there can also be substance to it: It's a method of getting from A to Z."

King notes that Mormons are raised to see themselves as "peculiar people," with a deep commitment to principled living.

"The downside is you can very easily and quickly fool yourself and rationalize poor behavior," said King, who is a member of the faith. "I think that happens quite a lot here honestly."

Off the record, some politicians acknowledge that politeness can mask political bullying. They'll talk about

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 31 of 90

the powerful legislative leader who stopped speaking to a colleague after a vaguely critical comment, and how the legislature took control of about 16,000 acres on the outer edges of Salt Lake City to create a trade zone. They'll talk about how aggressive Republican gerrymandering has sliced and diced the state so that Democrats have no chance for victory in many legislative districts.

In many ways, the state legislature, which remains overwhelmingly white, male and Mormon, doesn't reflect the changing state it represents. Beyond the capital building, Utah is no longer a cliché of homogeneity. It has an increasingly large Latino population and growing numbers of other racial minorities, as well as ever more non-church members who come for Salt Lake City's liberal vibe or, in a mountain-filled state, a flourishing outdoor culture.

Utah is no multi-ethnic, multi-religious melting pot -- the state is still roughly 81% white and 62% Latter-day Saints -- but those numbers are down considerably from a couple decades ago.

Often, though, that's not how it feels.

"Utah feels so homogenous that if you're an ounce of different -- at all -- whether it's racially, politically, maybe you are a progressive feminist, whatever it is, you feel SO different," said Sheryl Ellsworth, a Black woman who said people are regularly surprised to discover that she's a Mormon.

Utah has become harder to pigeonhole, a state known both for its vegan restaurants and its hardline anti-government activists.

While Utah is more conservative than much of the U.S. on social issues like pre-marital sex and abortion, it has become a surprising defender of LGBTQ rights, with worker and housing protections, trans protections and a ban on so-called conversion therapy, discredited programs that claim to change sexual orientation. Polls show that Utah has some of the highest public support for LGBTQ-protection laws in the country -- including among Mormons.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which did much to mold the state's ethos, also has become harder to pigeonhole.

While the church has traditionally been overwhelmingly conservative and Republican, today there's also an increasingly large strain of liberal members. The church has also begun to directly address its history of racism, including a ban on Black priests that it lifted four decades ago.

The church's history as a persecuted minority -- believers arrived here in the 1800s fleeing bloody religious persecution from Ohio to Illinois to Missouri -- also helps explain why many conservative Utahns are staunch defenders of immigrants and refugee rights.

This year, as the political atmosphere around the presidential elections grew ever more virulent, the church also urged its followers to avoid partisan rancor, and to accept the results no matter who won.

"We live in a time of anger and hatred in political relationships and policies," President Dallin Oaks, one of the church's most powerful leaders, said in an October speech. "As followers of Christ, we must forgo the anger and hatred."

Rancor was what we expected to see when we set out across America, and there was no lack of it. We found abiding racial tensions in an Illinois "sundown town" where for years Black people were welcome only by daylight, and in rural Mississippi, where they still face obstacles to voting; we found distrust and discontent in Appalachian Ohio.

We also found Americans who struggled valiantly -- two women building a family amid poverty; a Black man willing his wife from her COVID-induced coma; an immigrant who lost her job at a Las Vegas hotel due to the pandemic.

In Utah, we found something else: A place that seems to work -- but maybe only because it's Utah.

Founded by believers in what was then a small, fringe religion, Utah was then lost in the desolation of mountains and deserts, and viewed with suspicion by much of America.

The insularity that resulted has been fading over the past few decades, but it's still a place marked by its distinctiveness.

Sometimes that distinctiveness means politicians more willing to get along. And sometimes it means

the platitudes of Utah Nice.

So King, the House minority leader, can celebrate legislators finding common ground even as he grumbles about political superficiality.

That's Utah, he said: "It's not black and white."

Follow Tim Sullivan on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/ByTimSullivan>

Freed Nigerian schoolboys welcomed; calls for more security

By CARLEY PETESCH and LEKAN OYEKANMI Associated Press

KATSINA, Nigeria (AP) — Bleary, barefoot, apparently numbed by a week of captivity, more than 300 Nigerian schoolboys, freed after being kidnapped in an attack on their school, were welcomed by the governor of Katsina state Friday.

Reunions that are more celebratory and emotional likely will come when the boys are finally reunited with their families, after being examined for any injuries.

The relatively quick release of the more than 330 boys took place after a prompt response by the government, which appears to have learned from earlier mass school abductions, especially of the Chibok schoolgirls, that did not have such a happy result.

The students' nightmare began on the night of Dec. 11 when they were seized by men armed with AK-47 rifles from the all-boys Government Science Secondary School in Kankara village in Katsina state in northwestern Nigeria. They were marched through a forest and forced to lie in the dirt amid gun battles between their captors and the troops pursuing them.

Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist rebels claimed responsibility for the abduction, saying they attacked the school because they believe Western education is un-Islamic.

As the boys' parents anxiously awaited any news, many in Nigeria and around the world were bracing for a long, drawn-out hostage situation. Many feared the boys would be forced to become child soldiers for Boko Haram.

But the kidnapping reached an unexpectedly satisfactory climax when Katsina Governor Aminu Bella Masari announced the release of 344 boys late Thursday night.

"I think we can say ... we have recovered most of the boys, if not all of them," he said.

Masari told The Associated Press that no ransom was paid to secure the boys' freedom. It's not known if other concessions were made.

Masari said the government will work with the police to increase security at the Kankara school and other schools. Only one policeman was working at the school when it was attacked, according to the students.

The schoolboys' abduction was a chilling reminder of Boko Haram's previous attacks on schools, especially the April 2014 mass kidnapping by Boko Haram of more than 270 schoolgirls from a government boarding school in Chibok in northeastern Borno State. About 100 of those girls are still missing.

"The difference, we know in this case, is that the government moved faster," said Bulama Bukarti, an analyst on sub-Saharan Africa at the Tony Blair Institute.

In Chibok, it took weeks of advocacy and outcry from Nigerians, celebrities and the international community before the government acknowledged that the girls had been kidnapped and took action. During that time, Boko Haram had the opportunity to put the girls into smaller groups and move them far away so it would be difficult to find them.

This time, the government deployed forces quickly after the boys' kidnapping and the abductors rapidly found themselves surrounded, Bukarti said.

Their release is "a fantastic story at the end of an awful week," he said. "Parents will be reunited with their loved ones ... all of Nigeria will breathe a sigh of relief for a good ending."

UNICEF Nigeria Representative Peter Hawkins called on the attackers to release any other children that may be held from this or other attacks.

"Schools should be safe. Children should never be the target of attack and yet, far too often in Nigeria,

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 33 of 90

they are precisely that – victims of attacks on their schools,” he said.

He called on Nigeria’s government to put better interventions in place “to ensure that schools are safe and that all Nigerian children can learn without fear.”

President Muhamadu Buhari issued welcomed the boys’ release and stated that his government needs to do more to make schools secure from such attacks.

However, many thorny problems remain.

The kidnapping shows that Boko Haram has been able to recruit armed gangs in Nigeria’s northwest, a worrying sign as the criminal gangs have increased attacks in the region this year, killing more than 1,100. While the bandits don’t have ideological motivations, Bukarti said, it has become clear that Boko Haram’s leader, Abubakar Shekau, has been able to make alliances with some of them.

“Shekau started courting some of the bandits,” back in January, Bukarti said, referencing a video launched by the Boko Haram leader explaining his ideology and in which the last 15 minutes he spoke in Fulani, the language of most of the bandits in the northwest, including the ones who spoke in the video released by Boko Haram this week. Later, Boko Haram made claims that they had penetrated parts of the northwest.

While that future may not be clear, the boarding school kidnapping shows that there was clear recruitment and Bukarti says that he would go as far as calling some of these local gangs Boko Haram associates now.

Boko Haram may well extend their reach into the northwest, he said, adding that they also got publicity.

“This was a major propaganda point and that’s what Boko Haram and terrorist groups survive on,” he said.

Though the government reaction to this kidnapping was fast — they had a rescue mission by the next day — criticism remains over the government’s handling of violence and how it will continue to grow in the West African nation.

Many Nigerians blame Buhari for the security lapses in the country and the opposition People’s Democratic Party, (PDP) says the abduction of the students in Katsina, the home state of the president while he was on a visit there, raises further serious questions over the government’s capacity to fight insurgency.

The PDP said President Buhari’s inability to manage Nigeria’s security has opened the country “for terrorists, bandits, vandals, and insurgents.”

The attack at the Kankara school highlights the weakness of Nigeria’s security institutions, said Prof. Odion-Akhaine. He fears the country is drifting towards anarchy as a result of the growing insecurity.

“If there is anarchy in Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country, it will have a serious effect on the sub-region,” he said.

Petesch reported from Dakar, Senegal. AP reporter Haruna Umar in Maiduguri, Nigeria contributed.

Virus outlier Sweden adopts more restrictions as cases rise

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Sweden is tightening nationwide coronavirus restrictions by requiring many people to work from home and reducing the number who can gather in restaurants, shops and gyms starting next week, but the government decided against ordering the country’s first full lockdown to control a recent spike in virus cases, the prime minister said Friday.

Sweden has stood out among European nations for its comparatively hands-off response to the pandemic. The Scandinavian country has not gone into lockdowns or closed businesses, relying instead on citizens’ sense of civic duty to control infections.

However, the country has seen a rapid increase in confirmed cases that is straining the health care system. Prime Minister Stefan Lofven said, “The situation continues to be very serious,” which is why the government is introducing new limits on public activities.

“We believe that a lockdown is a burden for the population,” Lofven said. “We are following our strategy.”

The new restrictions taking effect on Dec. 24 include making face masks mandatory on public transportation and pushing back a nationwide cutoff time for bars and restaurants to sell alcohol to 8 p.m. instead of 10 p.m..

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 34 of 90

Lofven said people with non-essential jobs will be required to work from home, and Education Minister Anna Ekstrom said schools should continue to plan for distance education.

"It is not possible to return to a normal everyday life. The pandemic is about life and death," deputy Prime Minister Isabella Lovin said at a news conference with Lofven.

Sweden, which has a population of 10 million, has reported 367,120 confirmed virus cases and 7,993 deaths since the start of the pandemic, according to the latest figures.

Since recording the country's first COVID-19 cases, Swedish authorities have advised people to practice social distancing, but schools, bars and restaurants have remained open.

The government and Sweden's chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell, repeatedly defended the country's coronavirus strategy while reporting one of the world's highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rates. Tegnell said earlier this week that the death toll "is likely to continue to rise in the coming weeks."

In discussing the new face mask requirement, the head of Sweden's Public Health Agency, Johan Carlson, said Friday that authorities "have never been against" making masks mandatory.

"We do not believe that it will have a very decisive effect, but it can have a positive effect on public transport during certain times," Carlson said.

He added that they "can be useful in certain environments where you cannot keep your distance."

Shutdown deadline looms over COVID-19 relief talks

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Bearing down on a midnight shutdown deadline, top negotiators on a must-pass, almost \$1 trillion COVID-19 economic relief package are committed to sealing an agreement Friday as they resolve remaining differences in hopes of passing the legislation this weekend.

The pressure is on. Government funding lapses at midnight Friday and a partial, low-impact shutdown would ensue if Congress fails to pass a stopgap spending bill before then. That's not guaranteed, said Senate GOP Whip John Thune, who said some Republicans might block the stopgap measure to keep the pressure on if the talks haven't borne fruit.

Democrats came out swinging at a key obstacle: A provision by conservative Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., that would close down more than \$400 billion in potential Federal Reserve lending powers established under a relief bill in March. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin is shutting down the program at the end of December but Toomey's language goes further, and Democrats say the provision would tie President-elect Joe Biden's hands and put the economy at risk.

"If ever there is a time to put politics aside and do the right thing, it should be in the middle of a pandemic and corresponding economic crisis," said Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo. "President Trump had these authorities available to him. President-elect Biden should too."

After being bogged down for much of Thursday, negotiators turned more optimistic, though the complexity of finalizing the remaining issues and drafting agreements in precise legislative form was proving daunting.

But the central elements of a hard-fought compromise appeared in place: more than \$300 billion in aid to businesses; a \$300-per-week bonus federal jobless benefit and renewal of soon-to-expire state benefits; \$600 direct payments to individuals; vaccine distribution funds and money for renters, schools, the Postal Service and people needing food aid.

Lawmakers were told to expect to be in session and voting this weekend.

"The new deadline is Friday," said House Rules Committee Chairman James McGovern, D-Mass., who hoped for a House vote by Saturday.

The hangups involved an effort by Senate conservative Pat Toomey, R-Pa., to curb emergency lending programs by the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve, a Democratic demand to eliminate local government matching requirements for COVID-19-related disaster grants and myriad smaller disagreements over non-pandemic add-ons, lawmakers and aides said.

The delays weren't unusual for legislation of this size and importance, but lawmakers are eager to leave

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 35 of 90

Washington for the holidays and are getting antsy.

The pending bill is the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the landmark CARES Act passed virtually unanimously in March, delivering \$1.8 trillion in aid and more generous \$600 per week bonus jobless benefits and \$1,200 direct payments to individuals.

The CARES legislation passed at a moment of great uncertainty and unprecedented shutdowns in a failed attempt to stymie the coronavirus, but after that, many Republicans focused more on loosening social and economic restrictions as the key to recovery instead of more taxpayer-funded aid.

Now, Republicans are motivated chiefly to extend business subsidies and some jobless benefits, and provide money for schools and vaccines. Democrats have focused on bigger economic stimulus measures and more help for those struggling economically during the pandemic. The urgency was underscored Thursday by the weekly unemployment numbers, which revealed that 885,000 people applied for jobless benefits last week, the highest weekly total since September.

The emerging package falls well short of the \$2 trillion-plus Democrats were demanding this fall before the election, but President-elect Joe Biden is eager for an aid package to prop up the economy and help the jobless and hungry. While Biden says more economic stimulus will be needed early next year, some Republicans say the current package may be the last.

"If we address the critical needs right now, and things improve next year as the vaccine gets out there and the economy starts to pick up again, you know, there may be less of a need," Thune said.

The details were still being worked out, but the measure includes a second round of "paycheck protection" payments to especially hard-hit businesses, \$25 billion to help struggling renters with their payments, \$45 billion for airlines and transit systems, a temporary 15% or so increase in food stamp benefits, additional farm subsidies, and a \$10 billion bailout for the Postal Service.

The emerging package would combine the \$900 billion in COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion government-wide funding bill. Then there are numerous unrelated add-ons that are catching a ride, known as "ash and trash" in appropriations panel shorthand.

One leading candidate is an almost 400-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 a batch of soon-to-expire tax breaks, including one for craft brewers, wineries and distillers.

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.

A key breakthrough occurred earlier this week when Democrats agreed to drop their much-sought \$160 billion state and local government aid package in exchange for McConnell abandoning a key priority of his own — a liability shield for businesses and other institutions like universities fearing COVID-19 lawsuits.

The addition of the \$600 direct payments came after recent endorsements from both President Donald Trump and progressives like Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., along with ambitious GOP Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri. The idea isn't very popular in other corners since it's extremely costly and would give money to millions of people who may not need it, but it has enormous political appeal and proved difficult to stop.

Jupiter, Saturn merging in night sky, closest in centuries

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Jupiter and Saturn will merge in the night sky Monday, appearing closer to one another than they have since Galileo's time in the 17th century.

Astronomers say so-called conjunctions between the two largest planets in our solar system aren't particularly rare. Jupiter passes its neighbor Saturn in their respective laps around the sun every 20 years.

But the one coming up is especially close: Jupiter and Saturn will be just one-tenth of a degree apart from our perspective or about one-fifth the width of a full moon. They should be easily visible around the world a little after sunset, weather permitting.

Toss in the winter solstice in the Northern Hemisphere, the longest night of the year — and the summer

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 36 of 90

solstice in the Southern Hemisphere — and this just-in-time-for-Christmas spectacle promises to be one of the greatest of Great Conjunctions.

“What is most rare is a close conjunction that occurs in our nighttime sky,” said Vanderbilt University’s David Weintraub, an astronomy professor. “I think it’s fair to say that such an event typically may occur just once in any one person’s lifetime, and I think ‘once in my lifetime’ is a pretty good test of whether something merits being labeled as rare or special.”

It will be the closest Jupiter-Saturn pairing since July 1623, when the two planets appeared a little nearer. This conjunction was almost impossible to see, however, because of its closeness to the sun.

Considerably closer and in plain view was the March 1226 conjunction of the two planets — when Genghis Khan was conquering Asia. Monday’s conjunction will be the closest pairing that is visible since way back then.

Saturn and Jupiter have been drawing closer in the south-southwest sky for weeks. Jupiter — bigger and closer to Earth — is vastly brighter.

“I love watching them come closer and closer to each other and the fact that I can see it with my naked eyes from my back porch!” Virginia Tech astronomer Nahum Arav said in an email.

To see it, be ready shortly after sunset Monday, looking to the southwest fairly low on the horizon. Saturn will be the smaller, fainter blob at Jupiter’s upper right. Binoculars will be needed to separate the two planets.

Despite appearances, Jupiter and Saturn will actually be more than 450 million miles (730 million kilometers) apart. Earth, meanwhile, will be 550 million miles (890 million kilometers) from Jupiter.

A telescope will not only capture Jupiter and Saturn in the same field of view, but even some of their brightest moons.

Their next super-close pairing: March 15, 2080.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute’s Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

High court rules challenge to Trump census plan is premature

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court has dismissed as premature a challenge to President Donald Trump’s plan to exclude people living in the country illegally from the population count used to allot states seats in the House of Representatives.

But the court’s decision Friday is not a final ruling on the matter and it’s not clear whether Trump will receive final numbers from the Census Bureau before he leaves office next month.

The high court said it was too soon to rule on the legality of Trump’s plan because it’s not yet clear how many people he would seek to exclude and whether the division of House seats would be affected.

“Consistent with our determination that standing has not been shown and that the case is not ripe, we express no view on the merits of the constitutional and related statutory claims presented. We hold only that they are not suitable for adjudication at this time,” the court said in an unsigned opinion.

The three liberal justices dissented, saying the effort to exclude people in the country from the population for divvying up House seats is unlawful.

“I believe this Court should say so,” Justice Stephen Breyer wrote, joined by Justices Elena Kagan and Sonia Sotomayor.

It’s not clear that Friday’s decision will have much practical effect. Documents leaked to the House committee that oversees the Census Bureau suggest the apportionment numbers won’t be ready until after Jan. 20, when Trump leaves office and Joe Biden becomes president. The Census Bureau has acknowledged the discovery of data irregularities in recent weeks that put the Dec. 31 deadline in jeopardy.

Dale Ho, the American Civil Liberties Union lawyer who argued the case for the challengers, said the decision was about the timing of the case, not whether the plan complies with federal law.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 37 of 90

"This ruling does not authorize President Trump's goal of excluding undocumented immigrants from the census count used to apportion the House of Representatives. The legal mandate is clear — every single person counts in the census, and every single person is represented in Congress. If this policy is ever actually implemented, we'll be right back in court challenging it," Ho said.

No president has tried to do what Trump outlined in a memo in July — remove millions of noncitizens from the once-a-decade head count of the U.S. population that determines how many seats each state gets in the House of Representatives, as well as the allocation of some federal funding.

His administration has defended his authority to exclude at least some people living in the country illegally, including perhaps people who are in immigration detention or those who have been ordered to leave the country.

But during arguments last month, acting Solicitor General Jeffrey Wall, Trump's top Supreme Court lawyer, would not rule out larger categories of immigrants, including those who have protection from deportation under the DACA program.

"We can't be certain at this point, and we don't know what the president will decide to do with respect to that," Wall said.

The census case likely is the last of several major cases involving immigrants during Trump's presidency, which has been notable for its hard line on immigrants.

The president has a mixed record at the high court on immigration. The justices upheld his ban on travel to the U.S. by residents of some largely Muslim countries. But the court shot down his attempt to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programs and blocked his bid to add a citizenship question to the census for the first time in 70 years.

Pence, wife Karen, surgeon general get COVID-19 vaccines

By ZEKE MILLER and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Vice President Mike Pence became the highest ranking U.S. official to receive the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine on Friday in a live-television event aimed at reassuring Americans the shot is safe. He celebrated the milestone as "a medical miracle" that could eventually contain the raging pandemic.

Conspicuously missing from the victory lap: President Donald Trump, who has remained largely out of sight five days into the largest vaccination campaign in the nation's history.

Pence, meanwhile, has taken an increasingly visible role in highlighting the safety and efficacy of the shots, including touring a vaccine production facility this week. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell both said Thursday that they will get vaccinated in the next few days. President-elect Joe Biden expects to receive his shot as soon as next week.

"I didn't feel a thing. Well done," Pence told the technicians from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who administered his Pfizer-BioNTech shot early Friday morning. Pence didn't flinch during the quick prick, nor did his wife, Karen, or Surgeon General Jerome Adams, who also received shots during the televised White House event in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

"Hope is on the way," Pence later said. "The American people can be confident: We have one and perhaps within hours two safe vaccines," he added, referring to the FDA's expected authorization of a second vaccine by Moderna.

He did not respond to shouted questions about why the president wasn't headlining a similar event.

Adams, who is Black, emphasized the "the importance of representation" in outreach to at-risk communities and encouraged Americans to avoid disinformation around the vaccines.

Five days into the largest vaccination campaign in the nation's history, Trump has been largely absent from the effort to sell the American public on what aides hope will be a key part of his legacy. He has held no public events to trumpet the rollout. He hasn't been inoculated himself. And he has tweeted fewer than a handful of times about the shot.

Trump's relative silence comes as he continues to stew about his defeat in the Nov. 3 election and em-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 38 of 90

braces increasingly extreme efforts to overturn the people's will. He's pushed aside the plans of aides who wanted him to be the public face of the vaccination campaign, eschewing visits to labs and production facilities to thank workers, or hosting efforts to build public confidence in the shot, according to people familiar with the conversations.

The sheepish approach has been surprising, especially for a president rarely shy to take credit, said Lawrence Gostin, a professor at Georgetown Law who focuses on public health.

"The president's relatively low profile on the COVID response since the election is curious and counter to Mr. Trump's own interests," he said. Gostin, who has criticized Trump's handling of the pandemic in the past, said that he "deserves a great deal of credit" for Operation Warp Speed and placing a bet on two vaccines that use groundbreaking mRNA technology.

"Having exhibited leadership in the vaccines' development, he should take great pride in publicly demonstrating his trust in COVID vaccines," he said.

Trump did appear at a White House "summit" ahead of the Food and Drug Administration's approval of the Pfizer vaccine last week. That event included an introductory video highlighting the past comments of those — including top government infectious-disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci — who doubted a shot would be ready this year.

Trump "will continue to update the country through a variety of means while giving medical professionals and hardworking staff at OWS the space to do their jobs and save lives," said White House deputy press secretary Brian Morgenstern.

But many Trump aides are puzzled by his low profile now that the vaccine is actually being injected. They see it as a missed opportunity for the president, who leaves office at noon on Jan. 20, to claim credit for helping oversee the speedy development and deployment of the vaccine that is expected to finally contain the virus that has killed more than 310,000 Americans.

Trump himself has tried to minimize any credit that might go to his successor, Biden, who will preside over the bulk of the nationwide injection campaign next year.

"Don't let Joe Biden take credit for the vaccines," Trump has told reporters. "Don't let him take credit for the vaccines because the vaccines were me, and I pushed people harder than they've ever been pushed before."

Despite Trump's claims, FDA scientists were the ones who came up with the idea for Operation Warp Speed, the White House-backed effort through which millions of doses of coronavirus vaccines and treatments are being manufactured even as they are still being evaluated. And much of the groundwork for the shots was laid over the past decade, including through research on messenger RNA, or mRNA, used in the vaccines developed by both Pfizer and Moderna. Pfizer developed its vaccine outside Operation Warp Speed but is partnering with the federal government on manufacturing and distribution.

Trump's low-key approach could have an impact on public health. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, told NBC News this week that 75% to 85% of the nation needs to be vaccinated to achieve "herd immunity," making the public education campaign about the vaccine's safety all the more pressing.

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

Trump, who was hospitalized with COVID-19 in October, has yet to indicate when or if he will receive the shot.

According to guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there is not yet enough information to determine whether those who have had COVID-19, like Trump, should get the vaccine. Still, Fauci recommended that Trump take it publicly without delay.

"Even though the president himself was infected, and he has, likely, antibodies that likely would be protective, we're not sure how long that protection lasts. So, to be doubly sure, I would recommend that he

get vaccinated as well as the vice president," Fauci told ABC News.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany told reporters this week that Trump, who has previously spread misinformation about other vaccines "wants to send a parallel message which is, you know, our long-term care facility residents and our front-line workers are paramount in importance," she said.

Gostin disagreed. "It will be enormously damaging to public trust in the vaccine if President Trump isn't visibly enthusiastic, including getting his shot on national television," he argued. "It simply isn't good enough to have Vice President Pence as a proxy."

Iran builds at underground nuclear facility amid US tensions

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran has begun construction on a site at its underground nuclear facility at Fordo amid tensions with the U.S. over its atomic program, according to satellite photos obtained by The Associated Press on Friday.

Iran has not publicly acknowledged any new construction at Fordo, whose discovery by the West in 2009 came in an earlier round of brinkmanship before world powers struck the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

While the purpose of the building remains unclear, any work at Fordo likely will trigger new concern in the waning days of the Trump administration before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden. Already, Iran is building at its Natanz nuclear facility after a mysterious explosion in July there that Tehran described as a sabotage attack.

"Any changes at this site will be carefully watched as a sign of where Iran's nuclear program is headed," said Jeffrey Lewis, an expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies who studies Iran.

Asked for comment, Iran's mission to the United Nations told the AP that "none of Iran's nuclear activities are secret," given the ongoing inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"We have always maintained that our current activities, which are in line with (the nuclear deal), can and will be immediately reversed once the other parties, including the U.S., come into full compliance with what was agreed upon, in particular on removing sanctions," mission spokesman Alireza Miryousefi said. He did not elaborate.

The Vienna-based IAEA, whose inspectors are in Iran as part of the nuclear deal, declined to comment. The agency as of yet has not publicly disclosed if Iran informed it of any construction at Fordo.

Construction on the Fordo site began in late September. Satellite images obtained from Maxar Technologies by the AP show the construction taking place at a northwest corner of the site, near the holy Shiite city of Qom, some 90 kilometers (55 miles) southwest of Tehran.

A Dec. 11 satellite photo shows what appears to be a dug foundation for a building with dozens of pillars. Such pillars can be used in construction to support buildings in earthquake zones.

The construction site sits northwest of Fordo's underground facility, built deep inside a mountain to protect it from potential airstrikes. The site is near other above-ground support and research-and-development buildings at Fordo.

Among those buildings is Iran's National Vacuum Technology Center. Vacuum technology is a crucial component of Iran's uranium-gas centrifuges, which enrich uranium.

A Twitter account called Observer IL earlier this week published an image of Fordo showing the construction, citing it as coming from South Korea's Korea Aerospace Research Institute.

The AP later reached the Twitter user, who identified himself as a retired Israeli Defense Forces soldier with a civil engineering background. He asked that his name not be published over previous threats he received online. The Korea Aerospace Research Institute acknowledged taking the satellite photo.

President Donald Trump in 2018 unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from Iran's nuclear deal, in which Tehran had agreed to limit its uranium enrichment in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. Trump cited Iran's ballistic missile program, its regional policies and other issues in withdrawing from the accord, though the deal focused entirely on Tehran's atomic program.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 40 of 90

When the U.S. ramped up sanctions, Iran gradually and publicly abandoned the deal's limits as a series of escalating incidents pushed the two countries to the brink of war at the beginning of the year. Tensions still remain high.

Under the 2015 nuclear deal, Iran agreed to stop enriching uranium at Fordo and instead make it "a nuclear, physics and technology center."

"This location was a major sticking point in negotiations leading to the Iran nuclear deal," Lewis said. "The U.S. insisted Iran close it while Iran's supreme leader said keeping it was a red line."

Since the deal's collapse, Iran has resumed enrichment there.

Shielded by the mountains, the facility also is ringed by anti-aircraft guns and other fortifications. It is about the size of a football field, large enough to house 3,000 centrifuges, but small and hardened enough to lead U.S. officials to suspect it had a military purpose when they exposed the site publicly in 2009.

As of now, Iran is enriching uranium up to 4.5%, in violation of the accord's limit of 3.67%. Iran's parliament has passed a bill that requires Tehran to enrich up to 20%, a short technical step away from weapons-grade levels of 90%. The bill also would throw out IAEA inspectors.

Experts say Iran now has enough low-enriched uranium stockpiled for at least two nuclear weapons, if it chose to pursue them. Iran long has maintained its nuclear program is peaceful.

While Iranian President Hassan Rouhani opposed the bill, the country's Guardian Council later tweaked and approved it. The bill seeks to pressure European nations to provide relief from crippling U.S. sanctions.

Meanwhile, an Iranian scientist who created its military nuclear program two decades ago recently was killed in a shooting outside of Tehran. Iran has blamed Israel, which has long been suspected of killing Iranian nuclear scientists over the last decade, for the attack. Israel has not commented on the attack.

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

France's Macron rides out virus, fever at Versailles retreat

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — As French President Emmanuel Macron rides out the coronavirus in a presidential retreat at Versailles, critics on Friday called out slip-ups in his virus-prevention behavior, from a close-quarters handshake to repeated big-group meals over the past week.

A fellow European leader who spent time with Macron at an EU summit last week, Slovak Prime Minister Igor Matovic, tested positive for the virus Friday. Some other leaders present at the summit reported testing negative, while some were not getting tested and others haven't yet announced results from their tests.

In France, Macron faced criticism for actions that were seen as setting a bad example as the country sees a new uptick in confirmed cases and doctors warn families to take precautions this holiday season — especially at the dinner table.

While Macron usually wears a mask and adheres to social distancing rules, and has insisted that his virus strategy is driven by science, the 42-year-old president has been captured on camera in recent days violating France's own guidelines.

He shook hands and half-embraced the head of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Angel Gurría, at a meeting Monday. Both were masked, but Macron's office acknowledged Friday the move was a "mistake."

Last week, Macron spent two days in intense negotiations at an EU summit in Brussels with the leaders of the other 26 EU countries. Video excerpts released by the EU showed the leaders spread out in a circle in a huge meeting room — Macron, and most of the other leaders, were not masked.

Macron also hosted or took part in multiple large-group meals in the days before testing positive Thursday, including with members of his centrist party and rival politicians, while French people are currently advised to avoid gatherings larger than six people. His office has been contacting those present for the meals, but told some people sitting far from the president that they are not considered at risk.

Macron is suffering from fever, cough and fatigue, officials with the presidency said Friday. They wouldn't

provide details of his treatment. He is staying at the presidential residence of La Lanterne in the former royal city of Versailles, tucked in a grove tightly guarded by police.

Macron's positive test comes as French health authorities are again seeing a rise in infections and are warning of more as French families prepare to get together for Christmas and New Year festivities. France reported another 18,254 new infections Thursday and its death toll is just under 60,000.

France's Pasteur Institute released a study Friday suggesting that meal times at home and in public are a major source of contamination. Pasteur epidemiologist Arnaud Fontanet said on France-Inter radio Friday that during the holidays, "we can see each other, simply not be too numerous, and at critical moments at meals, not too many people at the same table."

Macron took a test "as soon as the first symptoms appeared" on Thursday morning and will self-isolate for seven days, in line with national health authorities' recommendations, the presidency said. Macron plans to continue working, and went ahead with a planned speech by videoconference Thursday.

The French health minister suggested that Macron might have been infected at the EU summit in Brussels last week, but Macron had multiple meetings in Paris as well.

France had Europe's first virus case in January, but Macron's government came under criticism for not having enough masks or tests and not confining the population quickly enough. A strict two-month lockdown brought infections down, and France sent children back to school and their parents back to work.

But infections surged again this fall so he declared a new, softer lockdown in October aimed at relieving pressure on hospitals. The measures were relaxed slightly this week, though restaurants, tourist sites, gyms and some other facilities remain closed.

Karel Janicek in Prague, Catherine Gaschka in Paris and Raf Casert in Brussels contributed.

1 in 5 prisoners in the US has had COVID-19, 1,700 have died

BETH SCHWARTZAPFEL and KATIE PARK of The Marshall Project and ANDREW DEMILLO of The Associated Press undefined

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — One in every five state and federal prisoners in the United States has tested positive for the coronavirus, a rate more than four times as high as the general population. In some states, more than half of prisoners have been infected, according to data collected by The Associated Press and The Marshall Project.

As the pandemic enters its 10th month — and as the first Americans begin to receive a long-awaited COVID-19 vaccine — at least 275,000 prisoners have been infected, more than 1,700 have died and the spread of the virus behind bars shows no sign of slowing. New cases in prisons this week reached their highest level since testing began in the spring, far outstripping previous peaks in April and August.

"That number is a vast undercount," said Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer at New York's Rikers Island jail complex.

Venters has conducted more than a dozen court-ordered COVID-19 prison inspections around the country. "I still encounter prisons and jails where, when people get sick, not only are they not tested but they don't receive care. So they get much sicker than need be," he said.

Now the rollout of vaccines poses difficult decisions for politicians and policymakers. As the virus spreads largely unchecked behind bars, prisoners can't social distance and are dependent on the state for their safety and well-being.

This story is a collaboration between The Associated Press and The Marshall Project exploring the state of the prison system in the coronavirus pandemic.

Donte Westmoreland, 26, was recently released from Lansing Correctional Facility in Kansas, where he caught the virus while serving time on a marijuana charge. Some 5,100 prisoners have become infected in Kansas prisons, the third-highest COVID-19 rate in the country, behind only South Dakota and Arkansas.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 42 of 90

"It was like I was sentenced to death," Westmoreland said.

Westmoreland lived with more than 100 virus-infected men in an open dorm, where he woke up regularly to find men sick on the floor, unable to get up on their own, he said.

"People are actually dying in front of me off of this virus," he said. "It's the scariest sight." Westmoreland said he sweated it out, shivering in his bunk until, six weeks later, he finally recovered.

Half of the prisoners in Kansas have been infected with COVID-19 — eight times the rate of cases among the state's overall population. Eleven prisoners have died, including five at the prison where Westmoreland was held. Of the three prison employees who have died in Kansas, two worked at Lansing Correctional Facility.

In Arkansas, where more than 9,700 prisoners have tested positive and 50 have died, four of every seven have had the virus, the second-highest prison infection rate in the U.S.

Among the dead was 29-year-old Derick Coley, who was serving a 20-year sentence at the Cummins Unit maximum security prison. Cece Tate, Coley's girlfriend, said she last talked with him on April 10 when he said he was sick and showing symptoms of the virus.

"It took forever for me to get information," she said. The prison finally told her on April 20 that Coley had tested positive for the virus. Less than two weeks later, a prison chaplain called on May 2 to tell her Coley had died.

The couple had a daughter who turned 9 in July. "She cried and was like, 'My daddy can't send me a birthday card,'" Tate said. "She was like, 'Momma, my Christmas ain't going to be the same.'"

Nearly every prison system in the country has seen infection rates significantly higher than the communities around them. In facilities run by the federal Bureau of Prisons, one of every five prisoners has had coronavirus. Twenty-four state prison systems have had even higher rates.

Prison workers have also been disproportionately affected. In North Dakota, four of every five prison staff has gotten coronavirus. Nationwide, it's one in five.

Not all states release how many prisoners they've tested, but states that test prisoners broadly and regularly may appear to have higher case rates than states that don't.

Infection rates as of Tuesday were calculated by the AP and The Marshall Project, a nonprofit news organization covering the criminal justice system, based on data collected weekly in prisons since March. Infection and mortality rates may be even higher, since nearly every prison system has significantly fewer prisoners today than when the pandemic began, so rates represent a conservative estimate based on the largest known population.

Yet, as vaccine campaigns get underway, there has been pushback in some states against giving the shots to people in prisons early.

"There's no way it's going to go to prisoners ... before it goes to the people who haven't committed any crime," Colorado Gov. Jared Polis told reporters earlier this month after his state's initial vaccine priority plans put prisoners before the general public.

Like more than a dozen states, Kansas's vaccination plan does not mention prisoners or corrections staff, according to the Prison Policy Initiative, a non-partisan prison data think tank. Seven states put prisoners near the front of the line, along with others living in crowded settings like nursing homes and long-term care facilities. An additional 19 states have placed prisoners in the second phase of their vaccine rollouts.

Racial disparities in the nation's criminal justice system compound the disproportionate toll the pandemic has taken on communities of color. Black Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of whites. They are also disproportionately likely to be infected and hospitalized with COVID-19, and are more likely than other races to have a family member or close friend who has died of the virus.

The pandemic "increases risk for those who are already at risk," said David J. Harris, managing director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School.

This week, a Council on Criminal Justice task force headed by former attorneys general Alberto Gonzalez and Loretta Lynch released a report calling for scaling back prison populations, improving communication with public health departments and reporting better data.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 43 of 90

Prison facilities are often overcrowded and poorly ventilated. Dormitory-style housing, cafeterias and open-bar cell doors make it nearly impossible to quarantine. Prison populations are sicker, on average, than the general population and health care behind bars is notoriously substandard. Nationwide, the mortality rate for COVID-19 among prisoners is 45% higher than the overall rate.

From the earliest days of the pandemic, public health experts called for widespread prison releases as the best way to curb virus spread behind bars. In October, the National Academies of Science, Medicine, and Engineering released a report urging states to empty their prisons of anyone who was medically vulnerable, nearing the end of their sentence or of low risk to public safety.

But releases have been slow and uneven. In the first three months of the pandemic, more than 10,000 federal prisoners applied for compassionate release. Wardens denied or did not respond to almost all those requests, approving only 156 — less than 2%.

A plan to thin the state prison population in New Jersey, first introduced in June, was held up in the Legislature because of inadequate funding to help those who were released. About 2,200 prisoners with less than a year left to serve were ultimately released in November, eight months after the pandemic began.

California used a similar strategy to release 11,000 people since March. But state prisons stopped accepting new prisoners from county jails at several points during the pandemic, which simply shifted the burden to the jails. According to the state corrections agency, more than 8,000 people are now waiting in California's county jails, which are also coronavirus hot spots.

"We call that 'screwing county,'" said John Wetzel, Pennsylvania's secretary of corrections, whose prison system has one of the lower COVID-19 case rates in the country, with one in every seven prisoners infected. But that's still more than three times the statewide rate.

Prison walls are porous even during a pandemic, with corrections officers and other employees traveling in and out each day.

"The interchange between communities and prisons and jails has always been there, but in the context of COVID-19 it's never been more clear," said Lauren Brinkley-Rubinstein, a professor of social medicine at UNC-Chapel Hill who studies incarceration and health. "We have to stop thinking about them as a place apart."

Wetzel said Pennsylvania's prisons have kept virus rates relatively low by widely distributing masks in mid-March — weeks before even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began recommending them for everyday use in public — and demanding that staff and prisoners use them properly and consistently. But prisoners and advocates say prevention measures on the ground are uneven, regardless of Wetzel's good intentions.

As the country heads into winter with virus infections on the rise, experts caution that unless COVID-19 is brought under control behind bars, the country will not get it under control in the population at large.

"If we are going to end this pandemic — bring down infection rates, bring down death rates, bring down ICU occupancy rates — we have to address infection rates in correctional facilities," said Emily Wang, professor at Yale School of Medicine and co-author of the recent National Academies report.

"Infections and deaths are extraordinarily high. These are wards of the state, and we have to contend with it."

Schwartzapfel reported from Boston and Park from Washington.

This story has been corrected to show that the rate of prisoners who tested positive for the coronavirus was more than four times as high as the general population, not more than four times higher than the general population.

In public housing, a small debt can get poor tenants evicted

By BRYAN GALLION, MAYA POTTIGER, KARA NEWHOUSE, RYAN LITTLE, TRISHA AHMED, JENNA PIERSON, ANASTAZJA KOLODZIEJ and ALLISON MOLLENKAMP / The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism, University of Maryland The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism, University of Maryland

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 44 of 90

CRISFIELD, Md. (AP) — Public housing is supposed to be a solution to homelessness, not a cause of it. But in Crisfield, a city of 2,600 on the Chesapeake Bay, the housing authority is one of the leading eviction filers. It files cases against tenants so often that officials hired a contractor to automate the process. The agency owns just 330 units yet filed 718 times in 2019, all over late rent. In nearly 30% of those cases, records show, tenants owed less than \$100.

What's happening here isn't an anomaly.

The work of the Howard Center for Investigative Journalism is supported by grants from the Scripps Howard Foundation and the Park Foundation. The center, located in the Philip Merrill College of Journalism at the University of Maryland, honors the legacy of journalism pioneer Roy W. Howard.

The Howard Center for Investigative Journalism analyzed four years of eviction data for Crisfield and four other public housing authorities with aggressive filing records — in Minneapolis; Oklahoma City; Charleston, South Carolina; and Richmond, Virginia — to find out why these important anti-poverty agencies are taking so many of their clients to court.

Late rent payments were by far the leading reason they sought to evict tenants. In some cases, the debts were so small that it cost the agency more to file the case than was owed.

Diane Yentel, the president and CEO of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, said public housing is "meant to accommodate people who are having difficulty paying their rent, because they have very limited incomes to begin with."

But the program has been underfunded by Congress for decades, leading some housing authorities to adopt unyielding approaches to rent collection so they can sustain their operations.

"If you owe a dollar, you owe a dollar," said Don Bibb, executive director of Crisfield's housing authority.

Yet for the tenants, many of them single parents with young children, it's not that simple.

In Crisfield, Tawna Thomas, 26, said she cobbled together the cash to stave off court proceedings for her first eviction filing in 2018 — not long after losing a pregnancy and a job. But that didn't solve the bigger problem.

Each month brought fresh worries about how to pay her \$138 rent, she said. Thomas, the mother of a 5-year-old, received five eviction filings in an 18-month period, according to court records. Although she hasn't been served an eviction notice in 2020, she said she worries that day is coming. Especially when the sheriff's vehicle rolls up.

"My heart starts fluttering every time," Thomas said. "What if he has a paper for me? How am I gonna pay this?"

Federal and state restrictions during the pandemic have temporarily slowed but not halted the pace of rent-related eviction filings, records show. They place the onus on tenants, who typically lack legal representation, to prove they can't pay due to COVID-19.

Some housing authorities use the courts like collection agencies, putting pressure on clients to pay up. The Howard Center data analysis found many tenants with multiple eviction filings in the same year.

This practice piles court costs, late fees and interest onto what families already owe in rent.

Maryland Attorney General Brian Frosh assailed such use of eviction court. In a Dec. 11 op-ed in The Baltimore Sun, he said he would ask the state legislature to increase the filing fee from \$15 — one of the lowest in the country — to at least \$120, the national average.

Martin Wegbreit, the director of litigation at the Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, said use of eviction filings "as a collections tool ... against financially struggling tenants simply is indefensible."

FLOOD OF FILINGS

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development doesn't keep national statistics on how often housing authorities evict, but frequent filings are not uncommon.

The Howard Center picked a handful of local agencies to assess where availability of court records made analysis possible. All are located in communities with high homeless rates, high historical eviction rates or high rents compared to average incomes.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 45 of 90

These five, which manage more than 14,500 units, took tenants to eviction court more than 11,400 times from 2017 through 2020, resulting in the courts authorizing removal of at least 2,500 households.

Record-keeping on evictions differed for each housing authority examined. Here is what the Howard Center found:

— The Richmond Redevelopment and Housing Authority, with 3,572 public-housing units, took tenants to court more than 4,100 times. The housing authority won judgments in 2,075 of those cases — one in six of which was over debts of less than \$100. The filings included tenants who had paid their rent in full but owed the agency for other things, such as maintenance, repair and late fees. The authority was using tenants' rent money to pay off those other claims first. That caused them to fall in arrears on their rent. After advocates challenged the practice, officials agreed in November 2019 to halt evictions while they reviewed and changed their policies. The moratorium remains in place.

— The Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, which owns and operates nearly 6,000 low-income housing units, is its county's largest landlord and a leading eviction filer. It initiated 1,087 eviction cases for non-payment of rent, accounting for 87% of its filings. The agency says two-thirds of cases end in payment agreements at court that allow tenants to stay. But legal advocates say the authority is using the court to pressure tenants into boilerplate payment plans they often can't afford.

— The Housing Authority of the City of Charleston manages 1,753 units and averages nearly 1,200 eviction filings each year, making it one of its county's leading eviction filers. It's common for the housing authority to file multiple eviction cases against the same tenant year after year, and at times within months of each other. Three tenants each had 16 cases against them since 2017, with filings every few months.

— The Oklahoma City Housing Authority, with 2,913 public-housing units, filed more than 600 cases, resulting in more than 500 households being forced out. More than half were rent-related. In 2018, the agency started a resident-services division to connect tenants with community resources such as rental assistance. Nonpayment filings dropped by more than 50% from 2017 to 2019.

— The Housing Authority of Crisfield has filed 1,756 eviction cases since 2017, all for failure to pay rent. The annual count more than tripled from 2017 to 2019, after a contractor set up an automated system that files against tenants each time they're late on rent. Although the records are not clear on the outcomes, they indicate that approximately 50 households were forcibly removed. Most settled up or left on their own.

Officials at these agencies echoed Bibb's view that tenants have a duty to pay rent and evictions are a necessary enforcement measure.

"The landlord should expect payment as well as proper care of the premises," said Donald Cameron, president and CEO of the Charleston Housing Authority.

In Minneapolis, "filing for eviction is an extremely costly, distracting, difficult process for the housing authority," said Jeff Horwich, the agency's policy and communications director. But court is the only official place to address nonpayment of properly calculated overdue rent, he said.

Legal advocates say the housing authority should be doing more to avoid the harm that eviction filings can cause tenants. Even a filing that is dropped or resolved creates a record that makes it extremely difficult to rent other housing.

PAPER PROTECTIONS

On paper, local housing agencies have policies to protect tenants when they're in financial distress. Those with little or no income can pay a minimum rent of up to \$50 and, in extreme hardships, can ask to temporarily forgo paying even that.

In practice, however, many tenants don't know that's an option.

That was the case for Margaret Szabo, a 42-year-old mother of two who lives in a Richmond public-housing complex. She said she patches together money through a collection of odd jobs, from babysitting to helping people prepare their taxes. When she moved in, the housing authority set her rent at \$50.

"Fifty dollars a month is great if you have something coming in," she said. "If you don't have anything coming in, food comes first. Clothing for your kids comes first."

Between spring and fall of 2019, Szabo fell about \$300 behind on rent. She said she didn't know she

could apply for a hardship exemption, and eviction papers were posted to her door that October. When she went to court, an aid organization paid her bill, she said.

After lobbying from Wegbreit's group, the Richmond Housing Authority agreed to include information on the hardship exemption in late-rent letters when its eviction moratorium ends.

NO CUSHION FOR COMPASSION

The five local agencies investigated by the Howard Center are part of a national network of 3,300 housing authorities that receive billions in federal aid each year to provide nearly a million low-income units.

Federal regulations cap the monthly rents housing authorities can charge at 30% of tenants' incomes. On average, these households earn about \$15,000 per year, according to HUD data. A quarter of them make between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

The mission of public housing is preventing people with low incomes from falling into homelessness. But financial pressures have made it increasingly difficult for local agencies to carry out this task.

Congress has consistently underfunded public housing in recent decades, resulting in a renovation backlog of \$26 billion.

High rent collection can help fill the gap and let housing authorities earn good reviews, less oversight and potentially more funding from HUD.

That leaves housing authorities with no cushion for compassion, especially when it comes to collecting rent.

"I always tell folks," said Bibb, the Crisfield manager, "housing authorities don't evict residents. The courts do."

But Kandise Norris, a Crisfield mother of three who faces potential eviction, said she wishes officials would do more to understand tenants' struggles.

"It's not fair to come after the low-income (people) that only live off a little bit of money, that are barely bobbing above the water," she said.

Aneurin Canham-Clyne, Clara Longo de Freitas, Brogan Gerhart, Julia Lerner, Nick McMillan, Luciana Perez Uribe Guinassi, Rina Torchinsky and Philip Van Slooten contributed reporting and data analysis for this story.

Demand is low for COVID-19 antibody drugs but shortages loom

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

U.S. health officials are seeing an astonishing lack of demand for COVID-19 medicines that may help keep infected people out of the hospital, drugs they rushed out to states over the past few weeks as deaths set new records.

Red tape, staff shortages, testing delays and strong skepticism are keeping many patients and doctors from these drugs, which supply antibodies to help the immune system fight the coronavirus. Only 5% to 20% of doses the federal government allocated have been used.

Ironically, government advisers met Wednesday and Thursday to plan for the opposite problem: potential future shortages of the drug as COVID-19 cases continue to rise. Many hospitals have set up lottery systems to ration what is expected to be a limited supply, even after taking into account the unused medicines still on hand.

Only 337,000 treatment courses are available and there are 200,000 new COVID-19 cases a day, "so the supply certainly cannot meet the demand," said Dr. Victor Dzau, president of the National Academy of Medicine, whose experts panel met to discuss the drugs.

Antibodies are made by the body's immune system to fight the virus but it can take several weeks after infection for the best ones to form. The drugs aim to help right away, by supplying concentrated doses of one or two antibodies that worked best in lab tests. The government is providing them for free, but there's sometimes a fee for the IV required to administer the drugs.

Eli Lilly and Regeneron Pharmaceuticals have emergency authorization to supply their antibody drugs while studies continue. But the medicines must be used within 10 days of the onset of symptoms to do

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 47 of 90

any good. Confusion over where to find the drugs and delays in coronavirus test results have conspired to keep many away.

"It can take anywhere between two and four days for results to come back and that's absolutely precious time" for the drugs to have a chance to help, Dr. Keith Boell of Geisinger Health System in Pennsylvania told the experts panel.

"Our clinics have everything from a bus stop to a buggy stop," serving big cities and horse-driven Amish communities, he said. "We really want to get these into anybody they can help" but it's hard, he said.

Many states and health centers were not ready for the sudden availability of the drugs, said Dr. Ryan Bariola of the University of Pittsburgh's 30-hospital system. It can be a nightmare for doctors or urgent care centers to figure out if a patient qualifies.

"How do you get it done? Do you call your local hospital? They may not have an infusion center set up. For a lot of independent physicians, this is very hard," he said.

The crunch comes as vaccine efforts begin across the United States, monopolizing attention and staff. States "didn't see this coming ... and have limited bandwidth" to deal with this on top of allocating vaccines, said Connie Sullivan, president of the National Home Infusion Association.

Many hospitals such as the University of Michigan's quickly set up outpatient infusion centers but a shortage of nurses and other staff has been "the biggest problem we've had," said a pharmacy resident, Megan Klatt.

Skepticism also is hurting use. The evidence that the drugs help is thin, several leading medical groups have not endorsed them, and many patients who feel only mildly ill see them as a risk: Half who have been offered them in the Michigan system have declined, Klatt said.

"It doesn't help when physicians themselves are not totally convinced," said Mohammad Kharbat, a pharmacy chief at a hospital system in Madison, Wisconsin, where half of patients also have declined.

At Wake Forest Baptist Health System in North Carolina, "we've had very little activity, very few referrals," and not much interest from patients or doctors, said Dr. John Sanders.

The University of Utah has seen interest from patients and developed a formula to figure out who most needs the drugs, but getting the infusion "requires going to a website, being notified of your test result ... doing some of the legwork yourself" and many people can't manage that, said Dr. Emily Sydnor Spivak.

"We're going to have to go out and find people" who qualify and offer them the drugs, she said.

That's how Lance Harbaugh wound up receiving one. Harbaugh, 58, of Cumberland, Maryland, started feeling ill around Thanksgiving, tested positive for the coronavirus the following Monday and was given Lilly's drug at the University of Pittsburgh's Western Maryland hospital a few days later.

Harbaugh said he was "down and out" with pneumonia, chills, fever and lots of coughing. When the staff suggested the drug, he added, "I was all for it."

Harbaugh avoided hospitalization but said he still has many symptoms.

"I don't think I'll ever be back to the way I once was," he said.

Ohio State University was prepared to quickly administer the drugs because it had helped test one of them, said a pharmacy manager, Trisha Jordan. Within an hour of getting its first dose, the hospital was giving it to a patient, Jordan said. She said the university could use more treatment courses than it's already received.

Dr. John Redd of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said he was glad to hear some hospitals want more. "We have never said 'no' to a requester," Redd told the National Academy of Medicine panel.

Toward the end of the panel meeting, a Lilly official, Andrew Adams, lamented the hurdles that have prevented medical professionals from getting the drugs to the people who need them. He said Lilly overcame serious obstacles, including a loss of power due to a hurricane in the Northeast, to develop the medicines quickly.

"It just highlights the extreme lengths we've gone to ... to make this happen," Adams said. "It's important to us that all of those efforts weren't in vain."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 48 of 90

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

With Trump silent, reprisals for hacks may fall to Biden

By ERIC TUCKER, FRANK BAJAK and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — All fingers are pointing to Russia as the source of the worst-ever hack of U.S. government agencies. But President Donald Trump, long wary of blaming Moscow for cyberattacks, has been silent.

The lack of any statement seeking to hold Russia responsible casts doubt on the likelihood of a swift response and suggests any retaliation — whether through sanctions, criminal charges or cyber actions — will be left in the hands of President-elect Joe Biden's incoming administration.

"I would imagine that the incoming administration wants a menu of what the options are and then is going to choose," said Sarah Mendelson, a Carnegie Mellon University public policy professor and former U.S. ambassador to the U.N.'s Economic and Social Council. "Is there a graduated assault? Is there an all-out assault? How much out of the gate do you want to do?"

To be sure, it's not uncommon for administrations to refrain from leveling public accusations of blame for hacks until they've accumulated enough evidence. Here, U.S. officials say they only recently became aware of devastating breaches at multiple government agencies in which foreign intelligence agents rooted around undetected for as much as nine months. But Trump's response, or lack thereof, is being closely watched because of his preoccupation with a fruitless effort to overturn the results of last month's election and because of his reluctance to consistently acknowledge that Russian hackers interfered in the 2016 presidential election in his favor.

Exactly what action Biden might take is unclear, or how his response might be shaped by criticism that the Obama administration did not act aggressively enough to thwart interference in 2016. He offered clues in a statement Thursday, saying his administration would be proactive in preventing cyberattacks and impose costs on any adversaries behind them.

U.S. government statements so far have not mentioned Russia. Asked about Russian involvement in a radio interview Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo acknowledged that Russia consistently tries to penetrate American servers, but quickly pivoted to threats from China and North Korea.

Democratic Sens. Dick Durbin and Richard Blumenthal, who were briefed Tuesday on the hacking campaign in a classified Armed Services Committee session, were unequivocal in blaming Russia.

There are other signs within the administration of a clear-eyed recognition of the severity of the attack, which happened after elite cyber spies injected malicious code into the software of a company that provides network services. For instance, the civilian cybersecurity agency warned in an advisory Thursday that the hack posed a "grave risk" to government and private networks.

A response could start with a public declaration that Russia is believed responsible, already a widely shared assessment in the U.S. government and cybersecurity community. Such statements often aren't immediate.

It took weeks after the incidents became public for the Obama administration to blame North Korea in the Sony Pictures Entertainment hack in 2014 and for then-national intelligence director James Clapper to confirm China as the "leading suspect" in hacks of the Office of Personnel Management.

Public naming-and-shaming is always part of the playbook. Trump's former homeland security adviser Thomas Bossert wrote this week in a New York Times opinion piece that "the United States, and ideally its allies, must publicly and formally attribute responsibility for these hacks." Republican Sen. Mitt Romney said in a SiriusXM interview that it was "extraordinary" the White House has not spoken out.

Another possibility is a federal indictment, assuming investigators can accumulate enough evidence to implicate individual hackers. Such cases are labor-intensive and often take years, and though they may carry slim chances of courtroom prosecution, the Justice Department regards them as having powerful

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 49 of 90

deterrent effects.

Sanctions, a time-honored punishment, can have even more bite and will almost certainly be weighed by Biden. President Barack Obama sanctioned Russian intelligence services after the 2016 election interference and expelled Russian diplomats. The Trump administration and Western allies similarly expelled diplomats over Moscow's alleged poisoning of an ex-intelligence officer in Britain.

Exposing Kremlin corruption, including how Russian President Vladimir Putin accrues and hides his wealth, may amount to even more formidable retaliation.

"This isn't just a tit-for-tat or hacking back into their systems," Mendelson said. "It's, 'We're going to go for what you really care about, and what you really care about is the funds that are stashed, and revealing the larger network and how it's connected to the Kremlin.'"

The U.S. can also retaliate in cyberspace, a path made easier by a Trump administration authorization that has already resulted in some operations.

Former national security adviser John Bolton told reporters at a 2018 briefing that offensive cyber operations against foreign rivals would now be part of the U.S. arsenal and that the U.S. response would no longer be primarily defensive.

"We can totally melt down their home networks," said Jason Healey, a Columbia University cyberconflict scholar. "And any time we see their operators popping up they know that we are going to go after them, wherever they are."

U.S. Cyber Command has also taken more proactive measures, engaging in what officials describe as "hunt forward" operations designed to detect cyber threats in other countries before they reach their intended target.

Military cyber fighters, for instance, partnered with Estonia in the weeks before the U.S. presidential election in a joint operation aimed at identifying and defending against threats from Russia.

While the U.S. is also prolific in its offensive cyberintelligence-gathering — tapping allied foreign leaders' phones and inserting spyware into commercial routers, for instance — such efforts are measured compared to the infection of 18,000 government and private-sector organizations in the SolarWinds hack, Healey said.

The better response — since espionage itself is not a crime — is to triple down on defensive cybersecurity, Healey said.

David Simon, a cybersecurity expert and former Defense Department special counsel, said there must be consequences for those who responsible for attacks — and the Trump administration "has fallen far short in holding the Kremlin accountable."

"Until it's clear the U.S. will impose meaningful costs on adversaries," he said in an email, "a material change in the Kremlin's behavior is not likely to be seen."

Winter travel raises more fears of viral spread

By DAVID KOENIG and DEE-ANN DURBIN AP Business Writers

Tens of millions of people are expected to travel to family gatherings or winter vacations over Christmas, despite pleas by public health experts who fear the result could be another surge in COVID-19 cases.

In the U.S., AAA predicts that about 85 million people will travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 3, most of them by car. If true, that would be a drop of nearly one-third from a year ago, but still a massive movement of people in the middle of a pandemic.

Jordan Ford, 24, who was laid off as a guest-relations worker at Disneyland in March, said he plans to visit both his and his boyfriend's families in Virginia and Arkansas over Christmas.

"It is pretty safe — everyone is wearing a mask, they clean the cabin thoroughly," said Ford, who has traveled almost weekly in recent months from his home in Anaheim, California, and gets tested frequently. "After you get over that first trip since the pandemic started, I think you'll feel comfortable no matter what."

Experts worry that Christmas and New Year's will turn into super-spreader events because many people are letting down their guard — either out of pandemic fatigue or the hopeful news that vaccines are starting to be distributed.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 50 of 90

"Early on in the pandemic, people didn't travel because they didn't know what was to come," said Dr. Peter Chin-Hong, an infectious-disease expert at the University of California, San Francisco, "but there is a feeling now that, 'If I get it, it will be mild, it's like a cold.'"

The seven-day rolling average of newly reported infections in the U.S. has risen from about 176,000 a day just before Thanksgiving to more than 215,000 a day. It's too early to calculate how much of that increase is due to travel and gatherings over Thanksgiving, but experts believe they are a factor.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says "postponing travel and staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19." People who insist on travel should consider getting tested for the virus before and after their trip and to limit non-essential activities for seven days after travel with a negative test result and 10 days if they don't get tested.

Other countries have imposed restrictions ahead of the holidays. 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.

In Latin America, a few countries have imposed some restrictions to try to keep people from traveling or meeting during the holidays, but others advised people only to practice social distancing and skip parties.

Panama has some of the strictest measures, including a curfew through Jan. 4 and a prohibition on leaving home at all from Dec. 25 to 28 and Jan. 1 to 4 unless it's for essential activities such as buying food or medicine. Peru, one of the region's hardest-hit countries, has banned the use of private cars on Christmas Eve and Day and New Year's Eve and Day in hopes of discouraging people from traveling.

In the U.S., Rachel Watterson delayed her New Year's Eve wedding because her fiancé's family can't travel to the United States from their home in Germany. Instead, the couple plans to elope and will fly from their home in Chicago to Hawaii with her parents, her brother and a friend. They picked Hawaii because of requirements that include coronavirus testing before arrival and a rapid test at the airport.

"We felt this was one of the very few safe choices we can make if we are going to travel," Watterson said.

Tim Brooks, a 37-year-old engineer in Long Beach, California, canceled a trip to Grand Cayman because of a ban on international visitors, then scrapped a Christmas visit to his parents in North Carolina as infections spiked in California and around the country.

"If it were just us, it wouldn't be so bad, but we have older parents and we are trying to keep them safe," Brooks said.

Airports and planes will be far less crowded this year in what is normally a high travel season. So far in December, air travel in the United States is down 67% from last year. If Thanksgiving is any indication, the number of travelers will rise the rest of the month, but airlines are warning that bookings have slowed down since the latest surge in COVID-19 cases.

The nation's top four airlines now show December and January schedules that are anywhere from 33% to 46% smaller than a year earlier, according to figures from Airline Data Inc.

Last week, the average flight within the U.S. was only 49% full compared with more than 80% full a year ago, according to the trade group Airlines for America.

The short-term outlook remains grim for other travel-related businesses, including those that rely on winter tourism.

In Vermont ski country, the Trapp Family Lodge in Stowe is usually sold out during Christmas week, but only half the 96 rooms were booked by last week. It was a similar story at the nearby Lodge at Spruce Peak. Operators of both lodges blamed travel restrictions, especially quarantine requirements that are triggered by crossing state lines.

"It is frustrating as a business to basically be forbidden to do your job and to not be able to support your employees or your community," said Sam von Trapp, executive vice president of the family's lodge. "At the same time we understand that there is very good intention behind all these restrictions."

Cruise ships often command their highest prices at Christmas and other holidays when kids are off school, but few ships are sailing this season. Carnival, Royal Caribbean, Norwegian and Disney have all cancelled U.S. sailings through Feb. 28. Voyages in other parts of the world have mostly been delayed.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 51 of 90

Florida, which relies heavily on winter tourism, is also taking a big hit. The two-week period around Christmas is normally the busiest time of year for Walt Disney World in Orlando, says Len Testa, the president of TouringPlans.com, which forecasts park attendance. But this year, the Magic Kingdom has capped park attendance at 35%, so Testa only expects around 32,000 people on those days.

Testa also expects crowd levels to be lower than usual from January through March, with many visitors rescheduling their trips to May or later.

"Many families will put off their Spring Break trips until they're vaccinated," he said.

Tara Kelley had planned to drive seven hours from her home in Milligan, Florida, to Orange City, Florida, to visit her mother and stepfather for Christmas. But Kelley's wife recently had surgery and spent a day at a hospital where there was a risk of exposure to the coronavirus, so they called off the trip.

"We had literally been planning this since February," Kelley said. "It's a blow."

Theresa Medina, a 55-year-old retiree from South Boston, is still deciding whether she and her husband will visit his mother in the Dominican Republic this winter. She's 80% sure they will, and she's already packing a box to ship ahead of their arrival. But the couple plans to discuss it with her husband's doctor in January.

If they go, Medina said they will get coronavirus tests and wear protective gear, including face shields and masks.

"We may look silly on the plane, but precautions are precautions," she said.

Lisa Rathke in Montpelier, Vermont and Wilson Ring in Stowe, Vermont contributed to this report.

David Koenig can be reached at www.twitter.com/airlinewriter

Dee-Ann Durbin can be reached at www.twitter.com/deeanndurbin_ap

Shut down by corona, Berlin restaurant opens for homeless

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic hasn't made life on the streets of Berlin any easier for Kaspars Breidaks.

For three months, the 43-year-old Latvian has faced homeless shelters operating at reduced capacity so that people can be kept at a safe distance from one another. And with fewer Berliners going outdoors, it's much harder to raise money by panhandling or collecting bottles to sell for recycling.

But on a chilly winter morning this week Breidaks found himself with a free hot meal and a place to warm up, after the German capital's biggest restaurant, the Hofbraeu Berlin — itself closed down due to coronavirus lockdown restrictions — shifted gears to help the homeless.

"Other homeless people at the train station told me about this place," Breidaks said, removing a furry black hat with long ear flaps as he sat on a bench in the warm, spacious beer hall near Berlin's landmark Alexanderplatz square. "I came here for hot soup."

It was a restaurant employee who volunteers at a shelter who proposed opening up the shuttered Bavarian-style beer hall — patterned after the famous Munich establishment of the same name — to the homeless.

It was a clear win-win proposition, said Hofbraeu manager Bjoern Schwarz. As well as helping out the homeless during tough times the city-funded project also gives needed work to employees — and provides the restaurant with welcome income.

In cooperation with the city and two welfare organizations, the restaurant quickly developed a concept to take in up to 150 homeless people in two shifts every day until the end of the winter, and started serving meals on Tuesday.

It's only a small number compared with the 3,000 restaurant guests, primarily tourists, who would pack the establishment during good times. But the spacious halls have proved perfectly suited to bring in the homeless and give them each plenty of space to avoid infections.

"Normally, during Christmas time, we would have many groups here for Christmas parties and then we'd

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 52 of 90

serve pork knuckles, half a duck or goose ... but not at the moment," said Schwarz. "We're still doing delivery, but obviously that's only a drop in the bucket."

In addition to serving food and non-alcoholic drinks and offering the warmth of indoors, the restaurant provides its bathrooms for the homeless to wash up, and the GEBEWO and Berlin Kaeltehilfe relief groups have workers on hand to provide counseling and new clothes, if needed.

For its new clientele, the restaurant opened a second-floor, wooden-decorated hall, and put up 40 long tables.

"We'll offer them something different from the regular soup kitchen food — real dishes on porcelain plates, with different sides, we'll try to offer Christmas-style dishes with lot of flavors," Schwarz said.

Breidaks came to Germany three months ago looking for work. But he says a promised meat factory job never materialized and he ended up on the streets of Berlin begging for the money needed to replace a stolen passport and buy a bus ticket back home.

He's one of an estimated 2,000 to 12,000 people who remain homeless in this city of 3.6 million, even after another 34,000 were put up in community shelters, hostels and apartments by social services and private welfare groups.

"The corona pandemic has seriously worsened the situation for homeless people, they live in very precarious conditions," said Elke Breitenbach, the Berlin state government's senator for social issues, whose department supports the restaurant-turned-shelter financially.

"They don't have enough to eat and when it's cold they must have places to warm up," Breitenbach added.

On Thursday, the first shivering group that entered the Hofbraeu along with Breidaks were served either Thuringia-style bratwurst with mashed potatoes, sauerkraut and onion sauce, or a vegetarian stew with potatoes, zucchini, bell pepper and carrots. For dessert there was apple strudel with vanilla sauce.

For Breidaks, that was more than he had expected after spending a night with sub-zero temperatures huddled up next to the walls of a big department store on Alexanderplatz.

"All I need is hot soup," he said. "And, God willing, I will go back home in January."

COVID-19 models plot dire scenarios for California hospitals

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — When Gov. Gavin Newsom provided a dire view of California's out-of-control surge of coronavirus cases and hospitalizations this week, he referred to projection models of future death and misery that he said were becoming "alarmingly" more accurate.

If true, then over the next four weeks the state's hospitals could be overflowing with 75,000 patients — about five times the current level — and an average of 400 people will die every day.

Hospitals were on the brink of being overrun with nearly 15,000 patients with COVID-19 when Newsom made the announcement Tuesday. The hospitalization projection is based on cases continuing to increase at the current rate of infection without people taking additional precautions to prevent spreading the virus.

At that trajectory, it doesn't take long before the state is in a very bad place, said Marm Kilpatrick, an infectious disease expert at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

"One thing that's worrisome is that for quite a while in California we've had exponential hospitalizations and cases," Kilpatrick said. "That's kind of terrifying."

The models posted online by the California Department of Public Health largely show one key indicator — the transmission rate — improving in recent days. But that number still remains at a point where each person with the virus infects more than one other person, leading to out-of-control spread.

The state uses multiple models to try to predict hospitalizations. When they are combined into an "ensemble" projection, the total is less dire but still shockingly high by mid-January: more than 33,000. That would still create an overwhelming load for hospitals.

The model for the increase in deaths does not include an estimate based on the current rate of infection. But an average of dozens of different models shows deaths increasing by about 25% from the current figure to nearly 27,000 by Jan. 9.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 53 of 90

Other models on the graph predict a range of deaths as low as 22,000, which the state will probably surpass Friday, to a high of 43,000 in about three weeks.

The nation's most populous state, which for months maintained a very low per capita number of infections while other states were slammed, is coping with its own crisis as it records daily record numbers of cases and deaths.

On Thursday, a record 379 deaths were recorded. There were more than 1,000 deaths in the past five days and more than 100,000 newly confirmed cases in the past two days.

Most of the models posted on the state's website show the situation getting worse before an improvement as repercussions of Thanksgiving gatherings and travel are borne by hospitals that have already begun to run out of beds.

"Our modeling is becoming more and more accurate, alarmingly so," Newsom said Tuesday, when he also announced 5,000 additional body bags have been ordered and more than 50 refrigerated trucks are ready to serve as temporary morgues.

Early on in the pandemic, some modeling was wildly wrong. In March, Newsom said the state of nearly 40 million was on pace to record 25 million cases of COVID-19 within two months. Nine months later, the state has had more than 1.7 million cases, the highest in the nation but a small fraction of the earlier prediction.

The wide variation in some models is due to using different data and mathematical formulas and weighting some data more heavily.

Bradley Pollock, an epidemiologist at the University of California, Davis, said recent models have been more accurate. He said the value of the models is that they help guide public policy, showing trends that are likely unless action is taken.

"What we're seeing right now is exactly what we predicted," Pollock said. "The major use of models is to tell you what could happen not what is going to happen."

As cases have exploded since November, Newsom has taken action that has rankled businesses and frustrated some residents. He placed most of the state under a new stay-at-home order that halted dining at restaurants and put a stop to hair cuts and manicures and shuttered many other types of businesses. Capacity at retailers has been slashed.

If those orders have an impact, it will likely take weeks to show up in case counts and even longer in hospitalizations because there are lags from infection to detection to the point when an illness is serious enough to lead to a stay in the hospital and typically even longer for a death to occur.

While models have been helpful to public health authorities, they could be more accurate and useful to the public if they compiled a wider group of available data, said Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute in San Diego.

Topol has been critical of not having a national approach to tackling the virus in the U.S. and said that extends to not taking a multi-layered approach of data collection for modeling. He referred to the various efforts as "solo acts."

He said there's so much available data that could be used to create better models — from mobility data from phones that shows if stay-at-home orders are being followed to data taken from smart thermometers to see where fevers are being recorded to even sampling wastewater where spikes in the virus can be detected several days before cases are reported.

"The modeling is based on so many assumptions without complete data," Topol said. "You have some crude data to see that people are in big trouble."

US experts debate: Who should be next in line for vaccine?

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. COVID-19 vaccination campaign has begun, and the few available doses are mostly going into the arms of health-care workers and nursing home residents.

But what about in January, February and March, when more shots are expected to become available?

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 54 of 90

Who should get those doses?

A federal panel of vaccination experts takes up that question at an emergency meeting this weekend. No matter what the committee decides, there will be differences from state to state.

The panelists are leaning toward putting "essential workers" first because bus drivers, grocery store clerks and similar employees can't work from home. They are the people getting infected most often, and where concerns about racial inequities in risk are most apparent.

But other experts say people age 65 and older should be next, along with people with certain medical conditions. Those are the people who are dying at the highest rates, they say.

The group is scheduled to vote on the proposal Sunday, one day after it discusses a vaccine made by Moderna.

"I think we know this isn't going to be perfect. We don't have vaccine for everyone right away, so we're going to have to make difficult decisions," said Claire Hannan, executive director of an organization that represents the managers of state vaccination programs.

If essential workers are indeed next up, states already have different ideas about who among them should be closer to the front of the line.

In Nevada, for example, teachers and child care staff will be ahead of public transport workers, according to the state's current vaccination plan. Then come agriculture and food workers, and then retail and utility employees.

In South Dakota, teachers could get access before those working in food and transportation. In Arkansas, the essential workers list includes teachers, prison guards, cops, meatpacking plant workers and mayors.

The advice of the expert panel — the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices — is almost always endorsed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That's what happened earlier this month, when the group said top priority should be given to health care workers and residents of long-term care homes for the 20 million initial vaccination this month.

But it's not clear things will go the same way in the next phase. The CDC's director, Dr. Robert Redfield, has said he believes priority should be given to people age 70 and older who live with children or grandchildren.

The advisory panel's chairman, Dr. Jose Romero, told The Associated Press he was aware of Redfield's earlier comments but had not spoken directly with him about it.

Redfield declined to say if he would prioritize seniors over essential workers, even if the panel recommends the reverse. "I look forward to listening to the advisory group's discussion, and to receiving its recommendation for consideration," he said in an emailed statement to the AP.

States don't have to follow the guidance.

After the CDC panel said health care workers and nursing home residents should get the very first doses, most states followed those recommendations. But there have been a few exceptions. Utah said long-term care residents should be in line behind health-care workers, instead of sharing the front with them. Massachusetts included prisoners and homeless people in the first tier while Nevada, New Hampshire and Wyoming did the same for police officers.

State-to-state variations are likely increase in the next priority groups, said the Kaiser Family Foundation's Jennifer Kates, who has been analyzing state vaccination plans.

"I think we're going to see states falling out in different ways," with some prioritizing seniors over essential workers, Kates said.

Things could get messy. For example, some experts said it's possible that if one state prioritizes certain essential workers and a neighboring state decides to give primacy to seniors, people could try crossing state lines in hopes of getting vaccinated.

"That's one of the issues of not having a fully national plan of immunization," said Romero, who also is the head of the Arkansas state health department.

The proposal before the advisory committee relies on a broad definition of essential workers set in August by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. It counts hundreds of different kinds of jobs as

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 55 of 90

critical infrastructure workforce, including first responders, teachers, communications technicians, weather forecasters, sewage treatment plant employees and people who work in animal shelters.

According to estimates presented to the advisory committee, as many as 87 million people can be counted as essential employees who don't work in health care.

The government expects to be able to start vaccinating only 80 million new people in the first three months of 2021.

It's possible the committee might consider giving essential workers and seniors equal status, similar to how it said that both health-care workers and nursing home residents should be together at the very front of the line. But that would create a priority group that is far, far larger than the number that can be vaccinated before spring.

The nation has more than 53 million seniors. The CDC also counts more than 100 million Americans as having underlying medical conditions that put them at higher risk for severe COVID-related illness, though there is overlap between the two groups.

Meanwhile, different trade associations and worker groups have been sending emails and other communications to the committee, arguing that they should be given priority.

Julie Russell, representing the Coronado Unified School District in California, urged that teachers and other school workers be prioritized. "We ask that you recognize the importance of the safety of our staff and how many young lives each of us touch," she said at a meeting last weekend of the same CDC panel.

Dr. Charles Lee of the American College of Correctional Physicians, advocated for those who work in jails and prisons, plus inmates. "There are a lot of essential workers in correctional facilities. Please, do not leave them out," he said at the same meeting.

Romero said the advisory committee is likely to discuss ways to help states narrow down which essential workers should go first. For example, people who are considered essential but can work from home might be placed further down the list than people who can't stay six feet away from others while on the job.

What about the staff of the Atlanta-based CDC? In a memo to employees that was obtained by the AP, Redfield said the agency will not get a direct allotment of vaccine. However, Georgia's plan allows for certain public health and lab workers to be in the state's highest priority group. Some CDC staff also work at hospitals and clinics, and may be prioritized with staff at those places.

Of course, when more vaccine comes out, "the issue of priority becomes less important," said Dr. Eric Toner, a Johns Hopkins University scientist who has written about possible vaccination prioritization frameworks.

"The bottom line is we just need to get as many people vaccinated as quickly as we can," he said.

AP writers Candice Choi and Jason Dearen in New York City and Jonathan Poet in Philadelphia contributed to this report.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Asia Today: Beds in short supply as SKorea sees another jump

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea has reported 1,062 new cases of the coronavirus, its third straight day of over 1,000, as authorities in Seoul warn that hospital beds are in short supply.

Seoul City said a COVID-19 patient in his 60s died at his home on Tuesday after officials failed to find him a hospital bed for days. The city said an "explosive growth" in patients this month has resulted in an "overload in administrative and medical systems."

The figures released by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Friday brought the national caseload to 47,515.

The death toll rose to 645 after 11 more patients died overnight. Among 12,888 active patients, at least 246 were in serious or critical condition, the largest number since the emergence of the pandemic.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 56 of 90

Son Young-rae, a senior Health Ministry official, said there were only 49 intensive care beds left for COVID-19 patients nationwide, with just four of them in the capital area. He said health authorities are planning to secure around 170 more ICU beds by early January by designating more hospitals for COVID-19 treatment.

Health authorities are also expanding a massive testing program to find and isolate virus carriers more quickly. Son said the country tested more than 80,000 people alone on Thursday and plans to test patients and workers at long-term care facilities once every week or two.

South Korea is planning to secure more than 84 million doses of coronavirus vaccines. That would be enough to cover 44 million people in a population of about 51 million.

Yang Dong-gyo, a senior KDCA official, said they hope to vaccinate 60% to 70% of the population by around November 2021, ahead of the start of the new influenza season.

More than 760 of the new cases came from the densely populated Seoul metropolitan area, where health workers are struggling to stem transmissions tied to various places, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, restaurants, churches, schools, and army units.

The viral resurgence has put pressure on the government to raise social distancing restrictions to maximum levels, something policymakers have resisted for weeks out of economic concerns. Such measures would possibly ban gatherings of more than 10 people, shutter hundreds of thousands of non-essential businesses, and require companies to have more employees work from home.

Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region:

— The number of COVID-19 infections from a cluster in Sydney's northern coastal suburbs continued to grow on Friday and the strain appeared to have originated in the United States, authorities said. Testing on Thursday and early Friday found 28 new infections. Several had attended the Avalon Beach R.S.L. Club on Dec. 11 and a nearby lawn bowling club called Avalon Bowlo on Dec. 13, New South Wales state Chief Health Officer Kerry Chant said. More than 250,000 residents of Sydney's Northern Beaches Local Government Area were advised on Thursday to work from home and remain at home as much as possible for three days. Others were advised to avoid traveling to the area. Authorities have yet to identify the source of the cluster, but New South Wales will next week tighten hotel quarantine rules for international air crews flying between Sydney and the United States. 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. His strain was also from the United States. Australian states have responded to the Sydney cluster by introducing various travel restrictions. Western Australia state, which has not had a case of community transmission since April 11, requires all travelers from New South Wales to quarantine in hotels for 14 days.

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

Federal lawsuit: Kansas deputy purposely ran over Black man

By ROXANA HEGEMAN Associated Press

BELLE PLAINE, Kan. (AP) — The dashcam video captured a horrific scene: a Kansas sheriff's deputy in a patrol truck mowing down a Black man who was running, shirtless, across a field in the summer darkness after fleeing a traffic stop.

Lionel Womack — a 35-year-old former police detective from Kansas City, Kansas — alleges in a excessive force lawsuit filed Thursday that he sustained serious injuries when Kiowa County Sheriff's Deputy Jeremy Rodriguez intentionally drove over him during the Aug. 15 encounter.

Womack said in a statement that he hadn't been speeding nor was he under the influence of anything when he was initially pulled over. His driver's license, insurance and registration were up to date.

"When the first officer turned his lights on, I pulled over and complied ... exactly as you're supposed to. But when three additional vehicles pulled up quickly and started to surround my car, I freaked out. That's when I took off, it was a 'fight or flight' moment and I was going to live," he said. "I felt like I was

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 57 of 90

in danger. This was out in the country, late at night, and it was dark. So I ran for my life. That's what you see in the dashcam video. I'm running in an open field, and I'm scared."

The graphic video is at the crux of the federal civil rights case filed by attorney Michael Kuckelman against the deputy in U.S. District Court in Kansas. The lawsuit argues that Rodriguez used excessive force and was "callously indifferent" to Womack's civil rights.

Womack had left the police department earlier in August with hopes of growing his own security business. He was on his way back home from a business trip to California when a Kansas Highway Patrol officer in western Kansas initiated a chase over "an alleged traffic violation," according to the lawsuit. Sheriff's deputies from Pratt County and Kiowa County joined in the chase.

The car chase ended on a dirt road, and Womack took off on foot across a nearby field.

The dashcam footage from a Pratt County sheriff's deputy's vehicle shows Rodriguez using his patrol truck to catch up to Womack, who was unarmed.

Rodriguez swerves his truck to hit Womack, knocking him to the ground and running over him. Womack rolls out from under the truck, his arms and legs flailing as someone on the video shouts, "lie down, lie down." A deputy in the second patrol truck can be heard uttering an expletive as he watches.

Womack says he sustained serious injuries to his back, pelvis and thigh as well as to his right knee, ankle and foot.

"The dashcam video is disturbing," Kuckelman said. "It is impossible to watch a video of a deputy driving his truck over Mr. Womack without feeling sick. There was nowhere for Mr. Womack to go. It was an open field, and he was trapped, yet the deputy drove his truck over him anyway."

Neither Kiowa County Sheriff Chris Tedder nor his attorney has responded to Associated Press requests for comment. No one has explained why Rodriguez chose to run Womack down. The deputy's race is unclear.

Kuckelman urged Tedder in person and in letters to fire Rodriguez, and the sheriff has refused. Rodriguez remains on patrol. Kuckelman also wants Rodriguez charged criminally and has accused the sheriff of engaging in a coverup of the deputy's conduct.

The Kansas Bureau of Investigation said it didn't learn of the incident until September, at which point it offered to help the Kiowa County Attorney's Office in an investigation. The office declined that offer.

The KBI viewed the dashcam video for the first time on Thursday and again reached out to prosecutors. They will now be providing investigative support to the Kansas Attorney General's Office in a review of the incident, KBI spokeswoman Melissa Underwood said in an email.

A spokesman for the state's attorney general's office said he would respond to AP's questions on the issue later.

Womack remains jailed, four months later, on felony charges of attempting to elude a law enforcement officer by engaging in reckless driving and interference with a law enforcement officer. Court records show he is also charged with several misdemeanor traffic citations, including failure to drive in the right lane on a four-lane highway, improper signal and driving without headlights.

Kuckelman said Womack had remained in jail because of an outstanding arrest warrant out of Oklahoma. The attorney added that authorities there said they needed a governor's warrant to extradite Womack. They received it and extradited him Thursday to Guymon, Oklahoma. According to Kuckelman, Oklahoma officials believe Womack was speeding as he drove through the Guymon area, but could not catch him.

Online court records show Womack was charged Aug. 12 in Texas County, Oklahoma, with endangering others while eluding or attempting to elude police.

Womack comes from a law enforcement family. His wife and his mother are officers with the Kansas City, Kansas Police Department. His stepfather retired from police work as a sergeant there. Two aunts are police dispatchers.

Zee Womack watched the video of her husband being run over for the first time on Wednesday, replaying it four times as she struggled to understand why the deputy felt justified in using such force. Her husband is lucky to be alive, she said.

"I am a police officer as well, and I feel like especially right now it is a really difficult time to be a police

officer. We don't always get the support, I guess, that would be helpful in this occupation," she said. "And this makes it a lot more difficult to be an officer."

An officer who is able to make decisions like that should not have a badge, she said.

"To me it showed a blatant disregard for human life," she said.

Lionel Womack said he believes in the "blue brotherhood" and that most police officers are good.

"But we have to hold law enforcement accountable when they cross the line," he said "These rogue law enforcement officers give a bad name to the good officers, and we have to stop them. I never imagined that I would someday be the victim of excessive force by a fellow law enforcement officer. He could have easily killed me."

Hack against US is 'grave' threat, cybersecurity agency says

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal authorities expressed increased alarm Thursday about a long-undetected intrusion into U.S. and other computer systems around the globe that officials suspect was carried out by Russian hackers. The nation's cybersecurity agency warned of a "grave" risk to government and private networks.

The hack compromised federal agencies and "critical infrastructure" in a sophisticated attack that was hard to detect and will be difficult to undo, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency said in an unusual warning message. The Department of Energy acknowledged it was among those that had been hacked.

The attack, if authorities can prove it was carried out by Russia as experts believe, creates a fresh foreign policy problem for President Donald Trump in his final days in office.

Trump, whose administration has been criticized for eliminating a White House cybersecurity adviser and downplaying Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, has made no public statements about the breach.

President-elect Joe Biden, who inherits a thorny U.S.-Russia relationship, spoke forcefully about the hack, declaring that he and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris "will make dealing with this breach a top priority from the moment we take office."

"We need to disrupt and deter our adversaries from undertaking significant cyberattacks in the first place," he said. "We will do that by, among other things, imposing substantial costs on those responsible for such malicious attacks, including in coordination with our allies and partners."

"There's a lot we don't yet know, but what we do know is a matter of great concern," Biden said.

CISA officials did not respond to questions and so it was unclear what the agency meant by a "grave threat" or by "critical infrastructure" possibly targeted in the attack that the agency says appeared to have begun last March. Homeland Security, the agency's parent department, defines such infrastructure as any "vital" assets to the U.S. or its economy, a broad category that could include power plants and financial institutions.

The agency previously said the perpetrators had used network management software from Texas-based SolarWinds to infiltrate computer networks. Its new alert said the attackers may have used other methods, as well.

Tech giant Microsoft, which has helped respond to the breach, revealed late Thursday that it had identified more than 40 government agencies, think tanks, non-governmental organizations and IT companies infiltrated by the hackers. It said four in five were in the United States — nearly half of them tech companies — with victims also in Canada, Mexico, Belgium, Spain, the United Kingdom, Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

"This is not 'espionage as usual,' even in the digital age. Instead, it represents an act of recklessness that created a serious technological vulnerability for the United States and the world," Microsoft said in a blog post.

Over the weekend, amid reports that the Treasury and Commerce departments were breached, CISA

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 59 of 90

directed all civilian agencies of the federal government to remove SolarWinds from their servers. The cybersecurity agencies of Britain and Ireland issued similar alerts.

A U.S. official previously told The Associated Press that Russia-based hackers were suspected, but neither CISA nor the FBI has publicly said who is believed to be responsible. Asked whether Russia was behind the attack, the official said: "We believe so. We haven't said that publicly yet because it isn't 100% confirmed."

Another U.S. official, speaking Thursday on condition of anonymity to discuss a matter that is under investigation, said the hack was severe and extremely damaging although the administration was not yet ready to publicly blame anyone for it.

"This is looking like it's the worst hacking case in the history of America," the official said. "They got into everything."

At the Department of Energy, the initial investigation revealed that malware injected into its networks via a SolarWinds update has been found only on its business networks and has not affected national security operations, including the agency that manages the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile, according to its statement. It said vulnerable software was disconnected from the DOE network to reduce any risk.

The intentions of the perpetrators appear to be espionage and gathering information rather than destruction, according to security experts and former government officials. If so, they are now remarkably well situated.

Thomas Bossert, a former Trump Homeland Security adviser, said in an opinion article in The New York Times that the U.S. should now act as if the Russian government had gained control of the networks it has penetrated. "The actual and perceived control of so many important networks could easily be used to undermine public and consumer trust in data, written communications and services," he wrote.

Members of Congress said they feared that taxpayers' personal information could have been exposed because the IRS is part of Treasury, which used SolarWinds software. Experts involved in the hack response say the intruders are not likely interested in such data because they are intelligence agents narrowly focused on sensitive national security data — and trying to steal taxpayer info would likely set off alarms.

Tom Kellermann, cybersecurity strategy chief of the software company VMware, said the hackers are now "omniscient to the operations" of federal agencies they've infiltrated "and there is viable concern that they might leverage destructive attacks within these agencies" now that they've been discovered.

Among the business sectors scrambling to protect their systems and assess potential theft of information are defense contractors, technology companies and providers of telecommunications and the electric grid.

A group led by CEOs in the electric power industry said it held a "situational awareness call" earlier this week to help electric companies and public power utilities identify whether the compromise posed a threat to their networks.

And dozens of smaller institutions that seemed to have little data of interest to foreign spies were nonetheless forced to respond to the hack.

The Helix Water District, which provides drinking water to the suburbs of San Diego, California, said it provided a patch to its SolarWinds software after it got an advisory the IT company sent out about the hack to about 33,000 customers Sunday.

"While we do utilize SolarWinds, we are not aware of any district impacts from the security breach," said Michelle Curtis, a spokesperson for the water district.

With contributions from Associated Press writers Matthew Lee in Washington, Matt O'Brien in Providence, Rhode Island, and Frank Bajak in Boston.

Nigerian official: More than 300 abducted schoolboys freed

By CARLEY PETESCH and HARUNA UMAR Associated Press
MAIDUGURI, Nigeria (AP) — More than 300 schoolboys abducted last week by armed men in northwest Nigeria have been released, a government official said Thursday.

In an announcement on Nigerian state TV, NTA, Katsina State Gov. Aminu Bello Masari said the 344

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 60 of 90

boarding school students were turned over to security officials and were being brought to the state capital, where they will get physical examinations before being reunited with their families.

"I think we can say ... we have recovered most of the boys, if not all of them," Masari said. He did not disclose if the government paid any ransom.

President Muhammadu Buhari welcomed their release, calling it "a big relief to their families, the entire country and to the international community," according to a statement from his office. Amid an outcry in the West African nation over insecurity in the north, Buhari noted his administration's successful efforts to secure the release of previously abducted students. He added that the government "is acutely aware of its responsibility to protect the life and property of the Nigerians."

"We have a lot of work to do, especially now that we have reopened the borders," Buhari said, acknowledging that the Northwest region "presents a problem" the administration "is determined to deal with."

Boko Haram claimed responsibility for last Friday's abduction of the students from the all-boys Government Science Secondary School in the Katsina State village of Kankara. The jihadist group carried out the attack because it believes Western education is un-Islamic, factional leader Abubakar Shekau said in a video earlier this week. More than 800 students were in attendance at the time of the attack. Hundreds escaped, but it was believed that more than 330 were taken.

For more than 10 years, Boko Haram has engaged in a bloody campaign to introduce strict Islamic rule in Nigeria's north. Thousands have been killed and more than 1 million have been displaced by the violence. The group has been mainly active in northeast Nigeria, but with the abductions from the school in Kankara, there is worry the insurgency is expanding to the northwest.

The government had said it was negotiating with the school attackers, originally described as bandits. Experts say the attack was likely carried out by local gangs, who have staged increasingly deadly assaults in northwest Nigeria this year, and could possibly have been collaborating with Boko Haram. Armed bandits have killed more than 1,100 people since the beginning of the year in the region, according to Amnesty International.

Parents of the missing students have been gathering daily at the school in Kankara. News of the students' release came shortly after the release of a video Thursday by Boko Haram that purportedly showed the abducted boys.

In the more than six-minute video seen by Associated Press journalists, the apparent captors tell one boy to repeat their demands that the government call off its search for them by troops and aircraft.

The video circulated widely on WhatsApp and first appeared on a Nigerian news site, HumAngle, that often reports on Boko Haram.

Usama Aminu, a 17-year-old kidnapped student who was eventually able to escape, told the AP that his captors wore military uniforms. He said he also saw gun-toting teens, some younger than him, aiding the attackers.

He said the kidnapped boys tried to help each other as bandits flogged them from behind to get them to move faster and forced them to lie down under large trees when helicopters were heard above.

Aminu escaped at night. He was able to return home after being found by a resident in a mosque who gave him a change of clothes and money.

Government officials said earlier this week that police, the air force and the army tracked the kidnapers to a hideout in the Zango/Paula forest.

Katsina state shut down all its boarding schools to prevent other abductions. The nearby states of Zamfara, Jigawa and Kano also have closed schools as a precaution.

Masari said the government will work with the police to increase private security at the Kankara school "to make sure that we don't experience what we have experienced in the last six days."

Only one policeman was working at the school when it was attacked.

Friday's abduction was a chilling reminder of Boko Haram's previous attacks on schools. In February 2014, 59 boys were killed when the jihadists attacked the Federal Government College Buni Yadi in Yobe state.

In April 2014, Boko Haram kidnapped more than 270 schoolgirls from a government boarding school in

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 61 of 90

Chibok in northeastern Borno state. About 100 of those girls are still missing.

In 2018, Boko Haram Islamic extremists brought back nearly all of the 110 girls they had kidnapped from a boarding school in Dapchi and warned: "Don't ever put your daughters in school again."

Petesch reported from Dakar, Senegal. Associated Press reporters Lekan Oyekanmi in Katsina, Nigeria; and Bashir Adigun in Abuja, Nigeria, contributed.

Snags on COVID-19 relief may force weekend sessions

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It's a hurry up and wait moment on Capitol Hill as congressional negotiators on a must-pass, almost \$1 trillion COVID-19 economic relief package struggled through a handful of remaining snags Thursday. The holdups mean a weekend session now appears virtually certain, and a top lawmaker warned that a government shutdown this weekend can't be ruled out.

All sides appeared hopeful that the wrangling wouldn't derail the legislation, even as the chances for announcing a deal Thursday slipped away. After being bogged down for much of the day, negotiators reported behind-the-scenes progress Thursday night.

The central elements of a hard-fought compromise appeared in place: more than \$300 billion in aid to businesses; a \$300-per-week bonus federal jobless benefit and renewal of soon-to-expire state benefits; \$600 direct payments to individuals; vaccine distribution funds and money for renters, schools, the Postal Service and people needing food aid.

But a temporary funding bill runs out Friday at midnight and the Senate's No. 2 Republican, Sen. John Thune, said if there isn't a deal by then, some Republicans might block a temporary funding bill — causing a low-impact partial weekend shutdown — as a means to keep the pressure on.

Lawmakers were told to expect to be in session and voting this weekend.

"We must not slide into treating these talks like routine negotiations to be conducted at Congress' routine pace," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said. "The Senate is not going anywhere until we have COVID relief out the door."

The hangups involved an effort by GOP conservatives to curb emergency lending programs by the Treasury Department and Federal Reserve, a Democratic demand to eliminate local government matching requirements for COVID-related disaster grants, and myriad smaller disagreements over non-pandemic add-ons, lawmakers and aides said.

The delays weren't unusual for legislation of this size and importance, but lawmakers are eager to leave Washington for the holidays and are getting antsy.

The pending bill is the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the landmark CARES Act passed virtually unanimously in March, delivering \$1.8 trillion in aid and more generous \$600 per week bonus jobless benefits and \$1,200 direct payments to individuals.

The CARES legislation passed at a moment of great uncertainty and unprecedented shutdowns in a failed attempt to stymie the coronavirus, but after that many Republicans focused more on loosening social and economic restrictions as the key to recovery instead of more taxpayer-funded aid.

Now, Republicans are motivated chiefly to extend business subsidies and some jobless benefits, and provide money for schools and vaccines. Democrats have focused on bigger economic stimulus measures and more help for those struggling economically during the pandemic. The urgency was underscored Thursday by the weekly unemployment numbers, which revealed that 885,000 people applied for jobless benefits last week, the highest weekly total since September.

The emerging package falls well short of the \$2 trillion-plus Democrats were demanding this fall before the election, but President-elect Joe Biden is eager for an aid package to prop up the economy and help the jobless and hungry. While Biden says more economic stimulus will be needed early next year, some Republicans say the current package may be the last.

"If we address the critical needs right now, and things improve next year as the vaccine gets out there

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 62 of 90

and the economy starts to pick up again, you know, there may be less of a need," Thune said.

The details were still being worked out, but the measure includes a second round of "paycheck protection" payments to especially hard-hit businesses, \$25 billion to help struggling renters with their payments, \$45 billion for airlines and transit systems, a temporary 15% or so increase in food stamp benefits, additional farm subsidies, and a \$10 billion bailout for the Postal Service.

Some Democrats also mourned the exclusion of a \$500 million aid package to help states run their elections. The money was seen as urgent this summer to help states more safely administer their elections in the middle of the pandemic. But with the election over, momentum for the money has gone away.

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. That was likely to pass easily, though possibly not until the last minute.

The emerging package would combine the \$900 billion in COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion government-wide funding bill. Then there are numerous unrelated add-ons that are catching a ride, known as "ash and trash" in appropriations panel shorthand.

One leading candidate is an almost 400-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 a batch of soon-to-expire tax breaks, including one for craft brewers, wineries and distillers.

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.

"It's been very thoroughly vetted," said retiring Sen. Lamar Alexander, R-Tenn., of the surprise medical billing measure. That measure, combined with an assortment of other health policy provisions, generates savings for federal funding for community health centers.

A key breakthrough occurred earlier this week when Democrats agreed to drop their much-sought \$160 billion state and local government aid package in exchange for McConnell abandoning a key priority of his own — a liability shield for businesses and other institutions like universities fearing COVID-19 lawsuits.

The addition of the \$600 direct payments came after recent endorsements from both President Donald Trump and progressives like Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., along with ambitious GOP Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri. The idea isn't very popular in other corners since it's extremely costly and would give money to millions of people who may not need it, but it has enormous political appeal and proved difficult to stop.

FDA plans to OK 2nd COVID-19 vaccine after panel endorsement

By MATTHEW PERRONE and LAURAN NEERGAARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The head of the Food and Drug Administration said late Thursday that his agency will move to quickly authorize the second COVID-19 vaccine to fight the pandemic, hours after the shot won the key endorsement of a government advisory panel.

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn said in a statement that regulators have communicated their plans to drugmaker Moderna, which co-developed the vaccine with the National Institutes of Health. The announcement came after a panel of FDA advisers, in a 20-0 vote, ruled that the benefits of the vaccine outweighed the risks for those 18 years old and up.

Once FDA's emergency use authorization is granted, Moderna will begin shipping millions of doses, earmarked for health workers and nursing home residents, to boost the largest vaccination effort in U.S. history.

The campaign kicked off earlier this week with the first vaccine OK'd in the U.S., developed by Pfizer and BioNTech. Moderna's shot showed similarly strong effectiveness, providing 94% protection against COVID-19 in the company's ongoing study of 30,000 people.

After eight hours of discussion over technical details of the company's study and follow-up plans, nearly all panelists backed making the vaccine available to help fight the pandemic. One panel member abstained.

"The evidence that has been studied in great detail on this vaccine highly outweighs any of the issues

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 63 of 90

we've seen," said Dr. Hayley Gans of Stanford University Medical Center.

A second vaccine is urgently needed as coronavirus infections, hospitalizations and deaths climb to new highs ahead of the holidays. The U.S. leads the world in virus totals, with more than 1.6 million confirmed cases and more than 310,000 reported deaths.

Moderna's vaccine uses the same groundbreaking technology as Pfizer-BioNTech's shot. Most traditional vaccines use dead or weakened virus, but both of the new vaccines use snippets of COVID-19's genetic code to train the immune system to detect and fight the virus. Both require two doses; Moderna's is four weeks apart.

The two new vaccines will hopefully help "break the back of the pandemic," said Dr. Arnold Monto of the University of Michigan, who chaired the panel.

Thursday's review came days after reports of apparent allergic reactions to the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine in two Alaska health workers. One person had a severe reaction, including shortness of breath, the other had less serious side effects, including lightheadedness.

While the two vaccines use the same technology, they're not identical, cautioned Moderna chief medical officer Dr. Tal Zaks. In particular, some of the lipids, or fats, used to coat the two vaccines are different.

"I would not necessarily assume" that any reactions would be the same, he said.

The FDA found no severe allergic reactions in Moderna's data but flagged a slightly higher rate of less serious side effects — rash, hives, itching — among participants who got the vaccine, compared with those receiving a dummy shot.

There were also three cases of Bell's palsy, which temporarily paralyzes facial muscles, among vaccine recipients, compared with just one among those getting a dummy shot. The FDA review said the role of the shot in the vaccine group "cannot be ruled out."

An unanswered question is whether the vaccine also prevents people from symptomless infection — but Moderna found a hint that it may. Study participants had their noses swabbed prior to the second dose of either vaccine or placebo. At that one timepoint, swabs from 14 vaccine recipients and 38 placebo recipients showed evidence of asymptomatic infection, said Moderna's Dr. Jacqueline Miller.

Moderna is just starting to study its vaccine in children ages 12 to 17. Testing in younger children is expected to start early next year.

After the FDA acts, U.S. officials plan to move out an initial shipment of nearly 6 million Moderna doses. The vaccine needs to be stored at regular freezer temperatures, but not the ultra-cold required for Pfizer-BioNTech's shot.

With the addition of Moderna's vaccine, government officials project that 20 million Americans will be able to get their first shots by the end of December and 30 million more in January.

Hundreds of millions of additional shots will be needed to eventually vaccinate the general public, which isn't expected until the spring or summer. The government's Operation Warp Speed program has orders for 200 million doses of Moderna's vaccine. That's on top of 100 million doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Officials are negotiating to purchase more doses of that vaccine and there are more vaccines in the pipeline.

Like the first vaccine, Moderna's will remain experimental as the company continues a two-year study needed to answer key questions, including how long protection lasts.

One of the trickiest issues panelists debated was how to keep study volunteers who received a dummy shot from dropping out to get the real shot. Their participation is critical in order to have a comparison for long-term safety and effectiveness.

Moderna proposed immediately alerting all those volunteers of their status and offering them the vaccine. The company said more than 25% of its participants are health workers and some are already leaving to get the Pfizer vaccine.

But Dr. Steven Goodman, an invited expert from Stanford University, suggested Moderna adopt Pfizer's approach. That company plans to gradually vaccinate people in its placebo group based on when they would have normally had access to the vaccine, as priority groups are established.

But most panelists acknowledged it will be hard to keep volunteers from leaving the Moderna study if

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 64 of 90

they have to wait to get a shot.

"The reality may make that too difficult to do," said Dr. Steven Pergam of the Seattle Cancer Care Alliance. Exactly how to treat the trial participants who got dummy shots is important beyond the ethics: Moderna noted that the only COVID-19 death among the 30,000 volunteers was in a placebo recipient, a 54-year-old man whose only risk factor was diabetes.

Knowing there could be more severe coronavirus in placebo recipients as the pandemic continues "weighs heavily on me," said Moderna's Miller.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

In historic pick, Biden taps Haaland as interior secretary

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

President-elect Joe Biden selected New Mexico Rep. Deb Haaland as his nominee for interior secretary on Thursday, a historic pick that would make her the first Native American to lead the powerful federal agency that has wielded influence over the nation's tribes for generations.

Tribal leaders and activists around the country, along with many Democratic figures, cheered Haaland's selection after urging Biden for weeks to choose her to lead the Department of Interior. They stood behind her candidacy even when concerns that Democrats might risk their majority in the House if Haaland yielded her seat in Congress appeared to threaten her nomination.

With Haaland's nomination, Indigenous people will for the first time in their lifetimes see a Native American at the table where the highest decisions are made — and so will everyone else, said OJ Semans, a Rosebud Sioux vote activist who was in Georgia on Thursday helping get out the Native vote for two Senate runoffs. "It's made people aware that Indians still exist," he said.

Haaland, 60, is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna and, as she likes to say, a 35th-generation resident of New Mexico. The role of interior secretary would put her in charge of an agency that has tremendous sway not only over the nearly 600 federally recognized tribes, but also over much of the nation's vast public lands, waterways, wildlife, national parks and mineral wealth.

Haaland tweeted after the news was made public that "growing up in my mother's Pueblo household made me fierce.

"I'll be fierce for all of us, our planet, and all of our protected land," she pledged.

Biden plans to introduce Haaland — and other picks for his Cabinet — at an event Saturday in Wilmington, Delaware.

Her selection breaks a 245-year record of non-Native officials, mostly male, serving as the top federal official over American Indian affairs. The federal government often worked to dispossess Native Americans of their land and, until recently, to assimilate them into white culture.

"You've got to understand — you're taking Interior full circle," said Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, chair of the House Natural Resources Committee and a champion of Haaland for the job. "For years, its legacy was the disenfranchisement of the Native people of this country, of displacement, of cultural genocide."

With Haaland's nomination, "that in itself is a huge message," Grijalva said.

Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez called it "truly a historic and unprecedented day for all Indigenous people."

"I am SO ELATED," the head of progressive Democrats' Sunrise Movement, Varshini Prakash, tweeted. "This will be the first time an Indigenous person - and a badass climate champion woman at that - will hold any presidential cabinet position. Congratulations to @JoeBiden for making history."

Get-out-the-vote activists believe their efforts, and the Native vote, helped flip Arizona in particular for Biden and secure the presidency.

"There's a feeling something is changing," said Ashley Nicole McCray, a member of the Absentee Kiowa tribe of Oklahoma and of an indigenous environmental coalition. "Finally, we've come to this point where Indigenous sentiment is no longer being silenced."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 65 of 90

But Biden's pick could further deplete, at least temporarily, the narrow majority Democrats maintain in the House. Biden has already selected several lawmakers from the chamber, including Louisiana Rep. Cedric Richmond and Ohio Rep. Marcia Fudge, to serve in his administration.

Some on Biden's transition team had expressed concerns about dipping further into the already thinned Democratic House majority for another senior administration posting. But Biden decided that the barrier-breaking aspect of her nomination and her experience as vice chair of the House Committee on Natural Resources made her the right pick for the moment.

The president-elect has been methodically filling the posts in his Cabinet, adding North Carolina environmental official Michael Regan as his nominee to lead the Environmental Protection Agency. Biden introduced former South Bend, Indiana, mayor Pete Buttigieg earlier this week as his transportation secretary and announced Thursday that former Michigan Gov. Jennifer Granholm was his nominee for energy secretary.

In a statement Thursday night, Biden said he had assembled a "brilliant, tested, trailblazing team" that "will be ready on day one to confront the existential threat of climate change."

"They share my belief that we have no time to waste to confront the climate crisis, protect our air and drinking water, and deliver justice to communities that have long shouldered the burdens of environmental harms," the president-elect said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi made it clear Wednesday that Biden had her blessing to choose Haaland, saying she would make an "excellent choice" as interior secretary. South Carolina Rep. James Clyburn, the No. 3 Democrat in the House and a close Biden ally, also supported Haaland for the job.

Haaland is one of the first two Native American women in the House. She told The Associated Press before her nomination that she sees the difference her position in Congress made for ordinary Native Americans who came to her with business before the federal government.

"They felt comfortable just launching into the issues they wanted," Haaland told the AP in an interview before her appointment. They would say, for example, "Oh, we don't have to explain tribal sovereignty to you," meaning tribes' constitutionally guaranteed status as independent nations.

Haaland previously worked as head of New Mexico's Democratic Party, as tribal administrator and as an administrator for an organization providing services for adults with developmental disabilities.

Born to a Marine veteran father and a Navy veteran mother, Haaland describes herself as a single mother who sometimes had to rely on food stamps. She says she is still paying off student loans after college and law school for herself and college for her daughter.

New Mexico Sen. Tom Udall, who is retiring after 22 years in Congress and was initially considered the front-runner for interior secretary, congratulated Haaland on her selection, calling it "momentous and well-earned."

Previously, the highest-ranking administration official known to have Native American heritage was Charles Curtis, who served as Herbert Hoover's vice president and whose mother was one-quarter Kaw tribe.

Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani in Wilmington, Del., and Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

8 nuns die of COVID-19 in last week at Wisconsin convent

By AMY FORLITI, MORRY GASH and TERESA CRAWFORD Associated Press

ELM GROVE, Wis. (AP) — Eight nuns living at a retirement home for sisters in suburban Milwaukee died of COVID-19 complications in the last week — including four who passed away on the same day — a grim reminder of how quickly the virus can spread in congregate living situations, even when precautions are taken.

Notre Dame of Elm Grove had been free of the virus for the last nine months, but the congregation that runs the home found out on Thanksgiving Day that one of the roughly 100 sisters who live there had tested positive. Despite social distancing and other mitigation efforts that were already in place, several more positive tests followed, said Sister Debra Marie Sciano, the provincial leader for School Sisters of

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 66 of 90

Notre Dame Central Pacific Province.

The first death happened last week, and the death announcements kept coming. Four of the eight nuns died on Monday alone, a difficult situation for other sisters in the home and members of the broader congregation, who consider each other family.

"Even though they're older and most of the sisters that did go to God are in their late 80s, 90s ... we didn't expect them to go so, so quickly," Sciano said. "So it was just very difficult for us."

Sciano said the congregation isolated sisters who tested positive into the same area so they would have no contact with others. They are advised to stay in their rooms, where meals are brought to them. Funerals and memorial services are being broadcast on closed-circuit TV. Sciano declined to say how many other sisters have tested positive, citing the residents' privacy.

The outbreak comes months after similar homes had reported multiple deaths from the coronavirus. In July, 13 nuns died at a convent near Detroit and seven died at a center for Maryknoll sisters in New York. At least six nuns also died at Our Lady of the Angels convent in Greenfield, Wisconsin — a home that provides memory care for nuns of the School Sisters of St. Francis and the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

Earlier this month, church authorities said 76 Catholic nuns tested positive for COVID-19 after an outbreak at a Franciscan convent in northwestern Germany, forcing health authorities to put the entire monastery under quarantine.

Sciano said that Our Lady of the Angels in Greenfield has had no additional positive cases for many months, and the facility is still not allowing visitors.

Deena Swank, communications director for the Felecian Sisters of North America, which lost 13 sisters — about a fifth of the population at the Livonia, Michigan, convent — said they have not had additional deaths there and they are eager to get sisters vaccinated when possible.

Sciano said she's not aware of anyone at the Notre Dame of Elm Grove home being on a priority list for vaccines, but administrators are contacting local pharmacies to try to get vaccines lined up for the future.

Convents share some of the same issues as nursing homes, which are the hardest-hit sector in the U.S. in terms of COVID-19 deaths. In many cases, their populations are elderly and live in close quarters with one another.

Linda Wickstrom, spokeswoman for the Waukesha County Department of Health & Human Services said county disease investigators have been working with the facility since School Sisters of Notre Dame contacted them in November.

"Given the extreme contagiousness of this virus, it is exceedingly important for congregate settings to practice basic protocols to stop the spread of the disease," Wickstrom said. She said the School Sisters of Notre Dame have been disinfecting high-touch surfaces, washing hands frequently, social distancing and wearing appropriate face coverings. Sciano said all residents with the virus have been isolated, and visitors are not allowed.

The School Sisters of Notre Dame established the Notre Dame of Elm Grove home in 1859 to provide an orphanage for children in the area. It later became a home for elderly and ill sisters, according to its website.

The facility's first COVID-19 death happened Dec. 9, when Sisters Rose M. Feess and Mary Elva Wiesner died. Sister Dorothy MacIntyre died Dec. 11 and Sister Mary Alexius Portz died Sunday, according to the congregation's website. Sisters Cynthia Borman, Joan Emily Kaul, Lillia Langreck and Michael Marie Laux all died on Monday.

Sciano said all of the women worked as educators. Some were missionaries. Some were musicians. Some worked on peace and justice issues. One was a published poet. According to the congregation's website, one was a teacher and principal who loved working in the summers on an American Indian reservation in South Dakota. Another taught in Catholic elementary schools for more than 40 years and worked part-time as a gift shop coordinator at the Elm Grove home.

"We believe that each of these sisters, and all the sisters, really, they've made a difference in this world," Sciano said, adding, "I just think it's important that people know that, and that they were committed up until the end of their lives."

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 67 of 90

She said she hopes others can learn from the sisters' lives and continue their mission to "maybe make this world just a little bit better place because of them."

Forliti reported from Minneapolis; Crawford reported from Chicago.

Biden picks Regan for EPA nominee, Haaland for interior head

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and GARY D. ROBERTSON Associated Press

President-elect Joe Biden announced Thursday that he had chosen North Carolina regulator Michael S. Regan as his nominee to lead the Environmental Protection Agency and New Mexico Rep. Deb Haaland as his pick for interior secretary.

Biden said the selections round out what he said would be an experienced climate team ready from their first day in office to tackle the "undeniable, accelerating, punishing reality of climate change." Biden is proposing a sweeping overhaul of the nation's transportation and electrical systems to cut the oil, gas and coal emissions behind worsening global warming.

The picks also help Biden fulfill his promise to put together a Cabinet that reflects the diversity of America. Regan is Black, while Haaland would be the first Native American Cabinet member in U.S. history. Biden will introduce Regan, Haaland and other newly named nominees at an event Saturday.

Regan became environmental chief in North Carolina in 2017 and made a name for himself by pursuing cleanups of industrial toxins and helping the low-income and minority communities hit hardest by pollution. North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, who hired Regan, told The Associated Press this week that Regan was "a consensus builder and a fierce protector of the environment."

If confirmed by the Senate, Regan would take over the EPA after four years that have seen the Trump administration weaken or eliminate key public health and environmental protections. President Donald Trump had made the agency a special target for his drive to cut regulation, saying early on that he would leave only "bits" of the environmental agency behind.

Trump rollbacks and proposed rollbacks include weakening air pollution rules for industries, slashing protection for wetlands and waterways and eliminating Obama-era efforts to halt climate change by curbing exhaust and smokestack emissions from autos and factories. Opponents say some of many other rollbacks in the agency will make it harder for regulators to adopt new limits based on threats highlighted in public health studies.

In North Carolina, Regan led the negotiations that resulted in the cleanup of the Cape Fear River, which has been dangerously contaminated by PFAS industrial compounds from a chemical plant. PFAS have been associated with increased risk of cancer and other health problems. With Duke Energy, he negotiated what North Carolina says was the largest cleanup agreement for toxic coal ash.

Regan also created North Carolina's Environmental Justice and Equity Advisory Board to help low-income and minority communities that suffer disproportionate exposure to harmful pollutants from refineries, factories and freeways.

Regan previously spent almost a decade at the federal EPA, including managing a national program for air pollution issues.

Other past work included serving as an associate vice president for climate and energy issues at the Environmental Defense Fund advocacy group and as head of his own environmental and energy consulting firm.

For her part, Haaland would be the first Native American to lead the Interior Department, the powerful federal agency that has wielded influence over the nation's tribes for generations.

Haaland, a member of the Pueblo of Laguna, would be in charge of an agency that has tremendous sway over the nearly 600 federally recognized tribes as well as over much of the nation's vast public lands, waterways, wildlife, national parks and mineral wealth.

She tweeted Thursday, "In 4 years, Trump failed Indian Country & only broke more promises. It was exacerbated by the Administration's failure to take this #pandemic seriously. Looking forward to turning

the page on this dark chapter.”

Haaland’s historic selection was praised by tribal leaders, progressive activists and Democratic figures alike. Some on Biden’s transition team had expressed concerns about further thinning a narrow Democratic House majority by picking Haaland for a Cabinet position. But the president-elect decided that the barrier-breaking aspect of her nomination and her experience as vice chair of the House Committee on Natural Resources made her the right pick for the moment.

Regan was praised for his success even during challenging political circumstances. Republicans controlling North Carolina’s Legislature during the 2010s had eliminated dozens of department regulatory jobs and pushed business-friendly laws.

Regan “restored morale in the agency,” said Bill Holman, who led North Carolina’s environmental department. “He renewed the mission of the agency. ... He did the missionary work of going to the General Assembly and listening to a lot of critics of environmental legislation, addressing their concerns and finding common ground.”

Holman said North Carolina has struggled with how to regulate PFAS industrial compounds, but so has every other state. Part of that has to do with a lack of national leadership on the issue, Holman said, something that he believes Regan is poised to correct by returning to Washington.

Holman said, “Regan believes in science, and I think he will put science and public health at the forefront at EPA.”

California clean-air regulator Mary Nichols, who earlier had been considered the front-runner for the EPA job in the Biden administration, had faced increasing objections from progressive groups. They said Nichols had not done enough to address the disproportionate harm low-income and minority communities face from living next to oil and gas installations, factories and freeways.

VIRUS TODAY: 2nd vaccine draws closer to FDA approval

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— A second COVID-19 vaccine moved closer to joining the U.S. fight against the pandemic with the endorsement of a panel of experts. The move paves the way for a final decision by the Food and Drug Administration on emergency use. In a 20-0 vote, FDA advisers agreed that the vaccine’s benefits outweighed the risks for those 18 and older. Moderna’s shot provides 94% protection against COVID-19 — similar to the first vaccine approved in the U.S., developed by Pfizer and BioNTech.

— An overwhelming amount of false information clung to COVID-19 as it circled the globe in 2020, from speculation that the coronavirus was created in a lab to hoax cures.

— The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose again last week to 885,000, the highest weekly total since September, as a resurgence of coronavirus cases threatens the economy’s recovery from its springtime collapse.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. increased over the past two weeks from 1,606 on Dec. 2 to 2,570 on Wednesday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll stands at 309,334 people, or about the population of St. Paul, Minnesota.

QUOTABLE: “This is coming much faster than what anybody thought. Something that might have otherwise taken several years — to take this new vaccine technology and test it and approve it — was compressed into within a year.” — Dr. Jesse Goodman of Georgetown University, former chief of the FDA’s vaccine division.

ICYMI: The Associated Press’ pandemic atlas offers a look at the coronavirus in the U.S. by the numbers.

ON THE HORIZON: The FDA’s green light for emergency use of the Moderna vaccine is expected quickly. Moderna would then begin shipping millions of doses, earmarked for health workers and nursing home residents, to boost the largest vaccination effort in U.S. history.

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

Jeremy Bulloch, Boba Fett in first 'Star Wars' trilogy, dies

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Jeremy Bulloch, the English actor who first donned a helmet, cape and jetpack to play Boba Fett in the original "Star Wars" trilogy, died Thursday.

Bulloch died at a London hospital from health complications after years of living with Parkinson's disease, his agents at Brown, Simcocks & Andrews said in a statement. He was 75.

As the Mandalorian bounty hunter Boba Fett, Bulloch made off with a froze-in-carbonite Han Solo in 1980's "The Empire Strikes Back," then zoomed around the desert of Tatooine in a jet pack in 1983's "Return of the Jedi."

"Today we lost the best bounty hunter in the galaxy," Billy Dee Williams, whose Lando Calrissian appeared in key scenes with Bulloch in the films, said on Twitter.

Mark Hamill tweeted that Bulloch was "the quintessential English gentleman."

"A fine actor, delightful company & so kind to everyone lucky enough to meet or work with him," the Luke Skywalker actor said. "I will deeply miss him & am so grateful to have known him. #RIP_DearJeremy."

Boba Fett had just a few minutes of screen time, though important ones, between the two movies, and speaks just four lines of dialogue that were performed by another actor. But Boba Fett quickly became a cult favorite and eventually would emerge as one of the most beloved figures in the "Star Wars" galaxy, inspiring characters and plotlines in other "Star Wars" properties, most notably "The Mandalorian" on Disney+, where Boba Fett has recently reemerged.

The phenomenon made Bulloch a big draw on the convention circuit, where he was a regular in later years.

Born in Leicester, England, Bulloch began acting in commercials as a teenager and would have more than 100 credits in a career spent mostly in British television, with small roles on shows including "Dr. Who," "Crown Court" and "Sloggers."

He also appeared in a pair of James Bond films, 1981's "For Your Eyes Only" and 1983's "Octopussy."

Bulloch also played a pair of tiny "Star Wars" roles without the mask, Lieutenant Sheckil in "The Empire Strikes Back" and Captain Jeremoch Colton in "Revenge of the Sith."

Bulloch was the first of four actors to have taken on the role in some form. Jason Wingreen performed the voice in the original trilogy. Temuera Morrison, who played Boba Fett's father Jango Fett in 2002's "Attack of the Clones," plays an aging, ravaged Boba Fett in season two of "The Mandalorian." And Daniel Logan played Boba Fett as a boy in "Attack of the Clones."

"CONVENTIONS WONT BE THE SAME WITHOUT YOU MAY THE FORCE BE WITH YOU ALWAYS," Logan said on Instagram along with a photo of himself and Bulloch.

When the prequels were still in development in 1999, Bulloch told The Associated Press he would like to return for the role.

"But if he has to show his face, he would be much younger, and I would probably need a good plastic surgeon!" Bulloch said.

He would settle instead for the tiny role of Captain Colton, pilot of Alderaan, and one more flight through the "Star Wars" galaxy, instead.

Bulloch is survived by his wife Maureen and their three sons.

'Unbelievable' snowfall blankets parts of the Northeast

By MARY ESCH Associated Press

GLENVILLE, N.Y. (AP) — The Northeast's first whopper snowstorm of the season buried parts of upstate New York under more than 3 feet (1 meter) of snow, broke records in cities and towns across the region, and left plow drivers struggling to clear the roads as snow piled up at more than 4 inches (10 centimeters) per hour.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 70 of 90

"It was a very difficult, fast storm and it dropped an unbelievable amount of snow," Tom Coppola, highway superintendent in charge of maintaining 100 miles (160 kilometers) of roads in the Albany suburb of Glenville, said Thursday. "It's to the point where we're having trouble pushing it with our plows."

The storm dropped 30 inches (76 centimeters) on Glenville between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. Thursday, leaving a silent scene of snow-clad trees, buried cars and laden roofs when the sun finally peeked through at noon.

"If you do not have to be on the roads, please don't travel," said New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who declared a state of emergency for 18 counties. He said there were more than 9,000 power outages, 600 accidents and two fatalities by midmorning Thursday.

In New Rochelle in Westchester County, where a foot of snow was recorded, the roof of a Mavis Discount Tire store partially caved in but no injuries were reported, according to CBSN New York.

In Broome County, where the regional center of Binghamton got a record 42 inches (107 centimeters) of snow, County Executive Jason Garnar said snow fell at a rate of 4 to 5 inches (10 to 12 centimetres) per hour.

"This is the fastest rate of snowfall I've ever encountered," he said.

In Ithaca, it took Fred Cullin, 23, more than an hour and a half to dig out of his steep, lakeside driveway that was packed with nearly 3 feet of snow piled up by plows.

"It was pretty crazy," Cullin said. "Shoveling uphill, on ice, was definitely interesting."

Much of Pennsylvania saw accumulations in the double digits.

Boston had more than 9 inches (23 centimeters) of snow early Thursday morning, breaking the previous record for the date of 6.4 inches (16.3 centimeters) in 2013. In Boston's Seaport neighborhood, the streets were mostly empty except for an army of workers blowing sidewalks clear in front of luxury apartment buildings, stores and office towers.

"It's been a while since we have had this," said Mark Pusung, a 33-year-old Seaport resident walking his Shar-Pei dog Muffin. "I wanted my dog to experience it because he could run around."

Xicheng Cai, 28, a consultant who lives and works in Seaport, was decked out in what he called his full polar gear including boots, windproof pants and ski goggles.

"Wonderful," he said of the snow. "This is what Christmas should look like."

A few blocks away, Sara Boxell, 33, who lives in South Boston, was in the middle of her 4-mile run.

"I love it," she said. "Luckily, I'm working from home so I don't have to drive anywhere."

Massachusetts' transportation chief said it could take longer than usual to clear snow-clogged highways and streets because the coronavirus pandemic has knocked one in 10 plow drivers out of action.

Parts of northern New England saw as much as 7 inches (18 centimeters) of snow per hour, said Margaret Curtis, meteorologist for the National Weather Service. A rate of 1 inch per hour is typically enough to make it hard for snowplow trucks to keep up.

Snow totals topped 3 feet across a wide swath of New Hampshire, and Maine's southernmost county saw 1 to 2 feet.

Hazardous roads caused dozens of crashes in New Hampshire, Connecticut and eastern New York. New York State Police said a snowmobiler was struck and killed by a tractor-trailer on Interstate 787 in downtown Albany at 2:30 a.m.

In Maine, snowboarder Fletcher Moffett grabbed a few runs at the Sunday River ski resort before reporting to work as a bartender.

"Being outside is keeping me sane" during the pandemic, he said.

The overnight snowfall eclipsed the entire amount recorded for all of last winter in New York City, where 6.5 inches (16.5 centimeters) of snow covered Central Park — much less than the initial predictions of up to 12 inches (30 centimeters). Snowplows were careful to avoid damaging outdoor dining spaces erected for the pandemic at Manhattan restaurants, where dining was to resume Thursday night.

In a lighthearted moment at a daily briefing by Mayor Bill de Blasio, the official in charge of snow removal, Edward Grayson, cautioned: "It's not a night to wear your good shoes."

Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Thalia Beaty and Tom Hays in New York; Sophia Tulp in Atlanta; David Sharp in Portland, Maine; and Bill Kole and Michael Casey in the Boston area.

Family behind OxyContin attests to its role in opioid crisis

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Two owners of the company that makes OxyContin acknowledged to Congress on Thursday that the powerful prescription painkiller played a role in the opioid epidemic but they stopped short of apologizing or admitting wrongdoing.

"I want to express my family's deep sadness about the opioid crisis," David Sackler, whose family owns Purdue Pharma, said at a rare appearance in a public forum. "OxyContin is a medicine that Purdue intended to help people, and it has helped, and continues to help, millions of Americans."

The company's marketing efforts have been blamed for contributing to an addiction and overdose crisis that has been linked to 470,000 deaths in the United States over the past two decades.

Kathe Sackler, David Sackler's cousin, told the House Oversight and Reform Committee that she knows "the loss of any family member or loved one is terribly painful and nothing is more tragic than the loss of a child."

"As a mother," she said, "my heart breaks for the parents who have lost their children. I am so terribly sorry for your pain."

Asked about her role, she said she had done soul-searching. "I have tried to figure out if there's anything I could have done differently knowing what I knew then, not what I know now," she said. "There is nothing I can find that I would have done differently."

Rep. Kelly Armstrong, R-N.D., noted that OxyContin sales revenue increased even after the company pleaded guilty to crimes for improper marketing of the drug. "You want to ask what you could have done differently?" he asked. "Look at your own damn balance sheet."

The two Sacklers, descendants of two of the three brothers who bought Purdue nearly 70 years ago, appeared before the committee in a video hearing held amid coronavirus restrictions.

They took the step after the committee's chairwoman, Democratic Rep. Carolyn Maloney of New York, threatened to issue subpoenas. In contrast to the family members, Purdue CEO Craig Landau testified that the company accepts "full responsibility."

The Sacklers agreed to provide information about "shell companies" that hold family money and to make public documents.

Even before any of the witnesses testified, committee members from both political parties blasted them. Maloney said: "Most despicably, Purdue and the Sacklers worked to deflect the blame for all that suffering away from themselves, and onto the very people struggling with the OxyContin addiction."

GOP Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, a hard-hit state, said, "The Sackler family profited immensely from the deaths of millions of Americans." But Comer worried that holding the hearing now could delay justice for the people harmed by the drug as litigation swirls.

Parents of people who died from using the drug also appeared via video to tell about their children.

The hearing came three weeks after Purdue pleaded guilty to three criminal charges as part of a settlement with the Department of Justice.

The company agreed to pay more than \$8 billion in forfeitures and penalties, while members of the Sackler family would have to pay \$225 million to the government. The deal leaves open the possibility that family members could be criminally prosecuted.

Under questioning, David Sackler said family members and others on Purdue's board of directors were "completely unaware" of criminal conduct at the company, and that some of that behavior was contrary to the board's directions.

The settlement requires the company to hand over just \$225 million of the \$8 billion total to the government as long as Purdue makes good on plans to settle thousands of lawsuits filed by state and local governments, a matter now in bankruptcy court.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 72 of 90

The Stamford, Connecticut-based company and the Sacklers have proposed resolving the suits by transforming Purdue into a public benefit corporation, with its profits used to combat the opioid epidemic.

Some members of Congress and attorneys general for about half the states oppose that idea, which includes a requirement for Sackler family members to pay at least \$3 billion in addition to giving up control of the company. Court documents show the Sacklers have received more than \$12 billion from Purdue since OxyContin was released. A third branch of the family sold its stake in the company before the blockbuster painkiller was developed in the 1990s.

David Sackler told the committee that the value of the company plus the \$3 billion the family would contribute add up to more than the family received from OxyContin. He also noted that about half of what family members took out of the company was paid in taxes. Armstrong sarcastically thanked him for that.

Both Sacklers said that they and others in their family regard addiction as a disease — something that was not always the case, according to emails that have been surfaced in investigations over the years.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, D-Ill., chastised Landau for seeking a \$3 million bonus. Krishnamoorthi said that money should go to people who were hurt by OxyContin instead. "Shame on you, Dr. Landau," he said.

Krishnamoorthi also showed images of luxury homes David Sackler had owned in Manhattan and the Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles. "I would submit that you and your family are addicted to money," he told Sackler.

Rep. Carol Miller, a Republican whose West Virginia district has been devastated by addictions and overdoses implored David Sackler, who said he had vacationed in Appalachia, to visit communities the drugs have harmed.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., compared the Sacklers to drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, and asked Kathe Sackler why the Sacklers should not be made to repay all the money they made from OxyContin. She said that would be up to a legal proceeding.

Committee members were unmoved by the Sacklers' explanations.

"Watching you testify makes my blood boil," said Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn. "I'm not sure that I'm aware of any family in America that's more evil than yours."

This story has been corrected to use the pronoun 'he' when quoting Rep. Kelly Armstrong, R-N.D.

Follow Mulvihill at <http://www.twitter.com/geoffmulvihill>

Hot spot: California hospitals buckle as virus cases surge

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER and JOHN ANTCZAK Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Hospitals across California have all but run out of intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients, ambulances are backing up outside emergency rooms, and tents for triaging the sick are going up as the nation's most populous state emerges as the latest epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

On Thursday, California reported a staggering 52,000 new cases in a single day — equal to what the entire U.S. was averaging in mid-October — and a one-day record of 379 deaths. More than 16,000 people are in the hospital with the coronavirus across the state, more than triple the number a month ago.

"I've seen more deaths in the last nine months in my ICU than I have in my entire 20-year career," said Amy Arlund, a nurse at Kaiser Permanente Fresno Medical Center.

While the surging virus has pushed hospitals elsewhere around the country to the breaking point in recent weeks, the crisis is deepening with alarming speed in California, even as the nationwide rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations this week and the impending release of a second vaccine have boosted hopes of eventually defeating the scourge.

Intensive care unit capacity is at less than 1% in many California counties, and morgue space is also running out, in what is increasingly resembling the disaster last spring in New York City.

Patients are being cared for at several overflow locations, including a former NBA arena in Sacramento, a former prison and a college gymnasium. Standby sites include a vacant Sears building in Riverside County.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 73 of 90

At St. Mary Medical Center in Southern California's Apple Valley, patients are triaged outside in tents, and the hospital put up temporary walls in its lobby to make more room to treat those with COVID-19. Patients are also being treated in the halls on gurneys or chairs, sometimes for days, because there is nowhere else to put them, said Randall Castillo, the hospital's chief executive.

Dr. Nasim Afsar, chief operating officer at UCI Health in Orange County, described an unrelenting churn of patients, many of them left to wait in the ER until a bed elsewhere in the hospital opens up.

"Every day we work through and we discharge the appropriate number of people, and by the next day all of those beds are again filled up," she said.

Dr. Denise Whitfield, an emergency room physician at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, said ambulance crews are left waiting around for patients to be seen.

"Over the last nine months that we've been dealing with this COVID pandemic, I can say that it's been the worst that I've seen things in terms of looking at our capacity to care for our patients," she said.

The virus has killed more than 300,000 Americans, and the nation is averaging over 2,500 deaths and more than 215,000 new cases per day. Nationwide the number of patients in the hospital with COVID-19 has climbed to an all-time high of more than 113,000.

Around the country, other hospitals are likewise parking patients in ERs because they have run out of ICU beds, and also moving adults into pediatric hospitals and bringing in staff from out of state to treat the sick in makeshift wards.

Doctors are being forced to make tough decisions. Some hospitals are sending lower-risk COVID-19 patients home with oxygen and monitors to free up beds for the seriously ill.

Some states are preparing for the possibility of rationing care if hospitals are further swamped. If a hospital doesn't have enough ventilators, for example, doctors would have to make the agonizing decision of which patients should get them.

Idaho's top public health leaders last week cleared the way for the state to resort to rationing — or impose what are called crisis standards of care — if necessary. Hospitals would have to reserve scarce, potentially lifesaving resources for those patients most likely to survive.

In Texas, many intensive care units are either full or approaching capacity. On Wednesday, authorities reported having just over 700 ICU beds open across the entire state.

In St. Louis, where intensive care units are about 90 percent full, hospitals have had to double up patients in ICU rooms and pull nurses out of the operating room so they could help those who are seriously ill, said Dr. Alex Garza, head of the St. Louis Metropolitan Pandemic Task Force.

Garza said overworked health care workers can only keep this up for so long: "You are just going to burn them out or you're going to make them sick or something is going to happen."

California's hospitalizations are now double the summertime peak. The state has brought in more than 500 extra staff and deployed them around the state, though most don't have the skills to help in ICUs. The state is seeking a total of 3,000 contracted medical staff members.

Fresno County's hospital system is under so much strain that officials hired an outside team of 31 doctors, nurses and support staff to help treat patients in a makeshift ward.

In the farm-heavy Central Valley, where hospital space is dwindling fast, health officials say the heavily Latino and migrant farmworker region is burdened by a lack of access to transportation and health care; higher rates of disease, mistrust of medicine; crowded households; and jobs that do not allow people to work from home.

"They're front-line workers, they work in our grocery stores, they work in sanitation. They cannot stay at home. They don't have the luxury of work at home," Dr. Piero Garzaro, an infectious-disease specialist at Kaiser Permanente Central Valley. "How can you isolate when you live in a 1,000-square-foot apartment when there are five people there, including Grandpa and Grandma?"

Richer reported from Boston. Associated Press reporters Amy Taxin in Orange County, Haven Daley and Olga R. Rodriguez in San Francisco and Paul Weber in Austin, Texas contributed to this report.

EU, UK leaders concede big gaps remain in post-Brexit talks

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN and PAN PYLAS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The U.K. and the European Union provided sober updates Thursday on the state of post-Brexit trade discussions, with only two weeks to go before a potentially chaotic split.

While Ursula von der Leyen, president of the European Union's executive commission, noted "substantial progress on many issues," she voiced concerns about the discussions taking place around fishing rights. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson also warned that that a no-deal outcome seemed "very likely."

The two spoke early Thursday evening, their latest in a series of conversations in the past couple of weeks aimed at unclogging the talks which have moved at a snail's pace ever since the U.K. left the EU on Jan. 31.

The U.K. still remains within the EU's tariff-free single market and customs union until Dec. 31. A failure to reach a post-Brexit deal would likely lead to chaos on the borders at the start of 2021 as tariffs and other impediments to trade are enacted by both sides. The talks have got bogged down on three main issues — the EU's access to U.K. fishing waters, the level playing field to ensure fair competition between businesses and the governance of any deal.

Following their latest conversation, von der Leyen warned that bridging big differences, in particular on fisheries, "will be very challenging." Negotiations, she added, would continue on Friday.

According to a statement from Johnson's office at 10. Downing Street, the prime minister stressed that "time was very short" and that it "now looked very likely that agreement would not be reached unless the EU position changed substantially."

Johnson, like von der Leyen, focused on the lack of progress on fisheries. which has proved to be a hugely intractable issue in the talks — even though it accounts for only a very small amount of economic output.

On fisheries, the EU has repeatedly said it wants an agreement that guarantees a reciprocal access to markets and waters. EU fishermen are keen to keep working in British waters and the U.K. seafood industry is extremely dependent on exports to the 27-nation bloc. Johnson has made fisheries and U.K. control over its waters a key demand in the long saga of Britain's departure from the EU.

According to Downing Street, Johnson stressed that the U.K. could "not accept a situation where it was the only sovereign country in the world not to be able to control access to its own waters for an extended period and to be faced with fisheries quotas which hugely disadvantaged its own industry."

The EU's position, according to Johnson, "was simply not reasonable and if there was to be an agreement it needed to shift significantly."

Earlier, the European Parliament issued a three-day ultimatum to negotiators to strike a trade deal if it's to be in a position to ratify an agreement this year. European lawmakers said they will need to have the terms of any deal in front of them by late Sunday if they are to organize a special gathering before the end of the year.

If a deal comes later, it could only be ratified in 2021, as the parliament wouldn't have enough time to debate the agreement before that.

"We give until Sunday to Boris Johnson to make a decision," said Dacian Ciolos, president of the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament. "The uncertainty hanging over citizens and businesses as a result of U.K. choices becomes intolerable."

A trade deal would ensure there are no tariffs and quotas on trade in goods between the two sides, but there would still be technical costs, partly associated with customs checks and non-tariff barriers on services.

Britain's Parliament must also approve any Brexit deal and the Christmas break adds to the timing complications. Lawmakers are due to be on vacation from Friday until Jan. 5, but the government has said they can be called back on 48 hours' notice to approve an agreement if one is struck.

Though both sides would suffer economically from a failure to secure a trade deal, most economists think the British economy would take a greater hit, at least in the near-term, as it is relatively more reliant on trade with the EU than vice versa.

Both sides have said they would try to mitigate the impact of a no-deal, but most experts think that

whatever short-term measures are put in place, the disruptions to trade will be immense.

"The prime minister repeated that little time was left," Downing Street said in its statement after the call. "He said that, if no agreement could be reached, the UK and the EU would part as friends, with the UK trading with the EU on Australian-style terms."

Australia does not have a free trade deal with the EU.

Pan Pylas contributed from London.

Follow all AP stories about Brexit and British politics at <https://apnews.com/Brexit>

Damage from border wall: blown-up mountains, toppled cactus

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

GUADALUPE CANYON, Ariz. (AP) — Work crews ignite dynamite blasts in the remote and rugged south-east corner of Arizona, forever reshaping the landscape as they pulverize mountaintops in a rush to build more of President Donald Trump's border wall before his term ends next month.

Each blast in Guadalupe Canyon releases puffs of dust as workers level land to make way for 30-foot-tall (9-meter-tall) steel columns near the New Mexico line. Heavy machines crawl over roads gouged into rocky slopes while one tap-tap-taps open holes for posts on U.S. Bureau of Land Management property.

Trump has expedited border wall construction in his last year, mostly in wildlife refuges and Indigenous territory the government owns in Arizona and New Mexico, avoiding the legal fights over private land in busier crossing areas of Texas. The work has caused environmental damage, preventing animals from moving freely and scarring unique mountain and desert landscapes that conservationists fear could be irreversible. The administration says it's protecting national security, citing it to waive environmental laws in its drive to fulfill a signature immigration policy.

Environmentalists hope President-elect Joe Biden will stop the work, but that could be difficult and expensive to do quickly and may still leave pillars towering over sensitive borderlands.

The worst damage is along Arizona's border, from century-old saguaro cactuses toppled in the western desert to shrinking ponds of endangered fish in eastern canyons. Recent construction has sealed off what was the Southwest's last major undammed river. It's more difficult for desert tortoises, the occasional ocelot and the world's tiniest owls to cross the boundary.

"Interconnected landscapes that stretch across two countries are being converted into industrial wastelands," said Randy Serraglio of the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson.

In the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge near Guadalupe Canyon, biologist Myles Traphagen said field cameras have captured 90% less movement by animals like mountain lions, bobcats and pig-like javelinas over the past three months.

"This wall is the largest impediment to wildlife movement we've ever seen in this part of the world," said Traphagen of the nonprofit Wildlands Network. "It's altering the evolutionary history of North America."

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1982 established the nearly 4-square-mile (10-square-kilometer) refuge to protect water resources and endangered native fish. Diverse hummingbirds, bees, butterflies and bats also live there.

Since contractors for U.S. Customs and Border Protection began building a new stretch of wall there in October, environmentalists estimate that millions of gallons of groundwater have been pumped to mix cement and spray down dusty dirt roads.

Solar power now pumps water into a shrinking pond underneath rustling cottonwood trees. Bullfrogs croak and Yaqui topminnows wiggle through the pool once fed solely by natural artesian wells pulling ancient water from an aquifer.

A 3-mile (5-kilometer) barrier has sealed off a migratory corridor for wildlife between Mexico's Sierra Madre and the Rocky Mountains to the north, threatening species like the endangered Chiricahua leopard frog and blue-gray aplomado falcon.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 76 of 90

The Trump administration says it's completed 430 miles (692 kilometers) of the \$15 billion wall and promises to reach 450 miles (725 kilometers) by year's end.

Biden transition officials say he stands by his campaign promise — "not another foot" of wall. It's unclear how Biden would stop construction, but it could leave projects half-finished, force the government to pay to break contracts and anger those who consider the wall essential to border security.

"Building a wall will do little to deter criminals and cartels seeking to exploit our borders," Biden's transition team has said. It says Biden will focus on "smart border enforcement efforts, like investments in improving screening infrastructure at our ports of entry, that will actually keep America safer."

Environmentalists hope for an ally in Alejandro Mayorkas, Biden's nominee to lead the Department of Homeland Security, which oversees Customs and Border Protection.

Until construction is stopped, "every day, it will be another another mile of borderlands being trashed," Serraglio said.

Environmental law attorney Dinah Bear said Biden's administration could terminate building contracts, which would allow companies to seek settlements. What that would cost isn't clear because the contracts aren't public, but Bear said it would pale in comparison to the price of finishing and maintaining the wall. Military funds reappropriated under a national emergency declared by Trump are now funding the work.

Bear, who worked at the White House's Council on Environmental Quality under Republican and Democratic administrations, said she wants to see Congress set aside money to repair damage by removing the wall in critical areas, buying more habitat and replanting slopes.

Ecologists say damage could be reversed in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, where thousands of tree-like saguaros were bulldozed, with some reportedly replanted elsewhere.

They say keeping floodgates open could help ease damage done by damming the San Pedro River, which runs north from just below the Mexican border through the central corridor of the Sierra Madre's "Sky Islands."

These high mountains have ecosystems dramatically different from the desert below, with 300 bird species, including the yellow-billed cuckoo, nesting along what was the Southwest's last major free-flowing river. The white-nosed, racoon-like coati and the yellow-striped Sonoran tiger salamander also live there.

In the nearby Coronado National Monument, scientists are using cameras to document wildlife as crews prepare to start building. Switchbacks have been slashed into mountainsides, but 30-foot (9-meter) posts aren't yet up along where a Spanish expedition marched through around 1540.

The government plans to install the towering pillars 4 inches (10 centimeters) apart where there are now vehicle barriers a couple of feet high with openings large enough to allow large cats and other animals to cross to mate and hunt.

Biologist Emily Burns of the nonprofit Sky Island Alliance said construction will hurt elf owls, the world's littlest at less than 5 inches (13 centimeters) tall. The birds are too small to fly over the fence and likely wouldn't know to squeeze through.

"This kind of large-scale disruption can push a species to the brink, even if they aren't threatened," said Louise Misztal, alliance executive director.

Follow Anita Snow on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/asnowreports>

Trump's move to his Florida estate challenged by neighbor

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump's expected move to his Mar-a-Lago club after he leaves office next month is being challenged by a lawyer who says a 1990s agreement allowing Trump to convert the Florida property into a business prohibits anyone from living there, including him.

Attorney Reginald Stambaugh sent a letter this week to the Town of Palm Beach saying he represents a neighbor who doesn't want the president to take up residence at the 17-acre property because it would decrease the area's property values. He also asserts that a microwave security barrier operated by the

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 77 of 90

Secret Service is harming his client, who he says is exhibiting symptoms of microwave exposure. He did not give the client's name.

The president and first lady Melania Trump changed their legal residence from New York City to Palm Beach last year. Stambaugh says that violates the 1993 agreement between Trump and the town that allowed him to turn Mar-a-Lago from a private home into a club that has 10 guest rooms for rent.

The agreement says only members can stay overnight and for no more than 21 days per year, divided into three one-week stays that cannot run consecutively. The question is whether Trump is a club member and covered by those rules. Stambaugh believes he is — and comments Trump's lawyer made in 1993 back that up.

"In order to avoid an embarrassing situation for everyone and to give the President time to make other living arrangements in the area, we trust you will work with his team to remind them" of the agreement, Stambaugh wrote. "Palm Beach has many lovely estates for sale and surely he can find one which meets his needs." He did not immediately respond to a call and email Thursday seeking further comment.

The Trump Organization issued a statement Thursday saying, "There is no document or agreement in place that prohibits President Trump from using Mar-A-Lago as his residence."

Town Manager Kirk Blouin declined comment Thursday through an aide, and Mayor Gail Coniglio did not respond to an email and phone call seeking comment. Mar-a-Lago manager Bernd Lembcke also did not return a phone call.

Trump purchased Mar-a-Lago for \$10 million in 1985 from the estate of Marjorie Merriweather Post, the owner of General Foods. The 126-room mansion had deteriorated after her death in 1973, when she left it to the U.S. government as a possible presidential vacation home. The government gave it back in 1981.

After Trump bought it, he spent millions upgrading the property while living there part-time, usually between November and May when Florida's weather is temperate.

By the early 1990s, however, Trump was in financial straits as real estate prices dropped and several of his businesses flopped, including a New Jersey casino. He told the town he could no longer afford the \$3 million annual upkeep and it was unfair that he was shouldering the costs alone. He proposed subdividing the property and building mansions. The town rejected the proposal.

In 1993, Trump and the town agreed he could turn the estate into a private club. It would be limited to 500 members — the initiation fee is now \$200,000 and annual dues are \$14,000. The agreement has strict restrictions on parking and noise and specifically bars Trump from operating a casino or an animal circus. The town did not respond to questions about why the latter prohibition was added.

According to 1993 Palm Beach Post articles, Trump attorney Paul Rampell told the town council Trump would no longer reside at the mansion if the agreement were approved.

"Another question that's often asked to me is whether Mr. Trump will continue to live at Mar-a-Lago," Rampell told the council, according to the Post. "No, except that he will be a member of the club and therefore will be entitled to the use of guest rooms."

Rampell did not respond to an email and phone call Thursday.

The length of Trump's stays at Mar-a-Lago before his presidency are unknown, but since taking office he has spent more than 21 days per year there, including visits of about two weeks during the Christmas holidays. He has hosted several world leaders there, including Chinese President Xi Jinping and former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Before he became president, Trump and the town often clashed over the club's operation. Neighbors complained about noise and a car lot-sized U.S. flag and its 80-foot pole that Trump erected in 2006 without the proper permits. The two sides eventually settled: Trump got his pole, and his foundation gave \$100,000 to veteran charities. He unsuccessfully sued Palm Beach County because jetliners taking off from the nearby international airport flew over the mansion.

Since his 2016 election, his visits have created traffic snarls as vehicles are diverted away from Mar-a-Lago when he is there. Palm Beach is one of Florida's most exclusive towns, with a median home price of over a million dollars.

There have been numerous protests by Trump opponents and rallies by supporters near Mar-a-Lago in

the last four years and several incidents that resulted in arrests. Those include:

- A Chinese businesswoman illegally gained admission last year when Secret Service agents thought she was the daughter of a member. She was found guilty on federal trespassing charges and deported after spending eight months in jail.

— A University of Wisconsin student got inside by mingling with a group entering for a party. He apologized and got probation.

— A Connecticut opera singer sped through a Secret Service checkpoint on the road outside the estate in January, drawing gunfire from agents and sheriff's deputies. She is awaiting trial. Her attorney says she will mount an insanity defense.

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 — distraught about 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.

The anniversary of Bouazizi's act is normally marked with a festival of concerts, sports and conferences, but the 10th anniversary was scaled back because of coronavirus concerns. And authorities called off an event Thursday in Sidi Bouzid because of a protest over economic struggles.

"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 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 the 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

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 79 of 90

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 is 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."

Mehdi El Arem in Sidi Bouzid contributed.

Putin denies involvement in poisoning of Kremlin foe Navalny

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday rejected allegations that the Kremlin was behind the poisoning of his top political foe, opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and accused U.S. intelligence agencies of fomenting the claims even as he held out hope for better ties with Washington.

Putin also voiced hope that the administration of President-elect Joe Biden would move to extend the

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 80 of 90

last remaining U.S.-Russian arms control pact that is set to expire in early February.

Speaking via video hookup during his annual marathon news conference that lasted 4 1/2 hours, the Russian leader countered the accusations by saying that if the Kremlin wanted to poison Navalny, it would have succeeded.

"If there was such a desire, it would have been done," Putin said with a chuckle.

Navalny fell sick on Aug. 20 during a domestic flight in Russia and was flown while still in a coma to Berlin for treatment two days later. Labs in Germany, France and Sweden, and tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established that he was exposed to a Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent.

Russian authorities have vehemently denied any involvement in the poisoning.

On Monday, the investigative group Bellingcat and Russian outlet The Insider released a report alleging that operatives from the FSB, Russia's domestic security agency, which is a top KGB successor, followed Navalny during his trips since 2017, had "specialized training in chemical weapons, chemistry and medicine," and "were in the vicinity of the opposition activist in the days and hours of the time-range during which he was poisoned."

The investigation, done also in cooperation with CNN and Der Spiegel, identified the supposed FSB operatives and laboratories working on poisons like Novichok after analyzing telephone metadata and flight information. It mentioned two instances in 2019 and 2020, in which Navalny or his wife Yulia suffered from unexplained symptoms.

Navalny said the investigation has proven beyond doubt that FSB operatives tried to kill him on Putin's orders.

In his first comment since the report's publication, Putin charged that it relied on data provided by U.S. spy agencies. Its authors have denied any link to U.S. or any other Western intelligence services.

"It's not some kind of investigation, it's just the legalization of materials provided by U.S. special services," he said, adding that it means that Navalny "relies on the support of U.S. special services."

"It's curious, and in that case, special services indeed need to keep an eye on him," Putin said. "But that doesn't mean that there is a need to poison him. Who would need that?"

The president reaffirmed a call for Germany and others to conduct a joint probe and share specific proof of Navalny's poisoning, including his biological samples.

Speaking in Berlin, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said Russia has had ample opportunity to investigate the case.

"In the past weeks and months, we have seen so many smoke screens raised by Moscow in connection with the Navalny case," he said. "I believe there have been a variety of opportunities to investigate the things that happened in Russia in relation to the poisoning of Mr. Navalny there, or at least to initiate an investigation, but this has never been the case and we have serious doubts about their willingness to meet their obligations."

Putin alleged that Navalny was accusing the Kremlin of ordering to poison him in order to raise his political profile. As before, Putin refrained from mentioning Navalny by name, referring to him as a "blogger" and the "Berlin patient."

Navalny said after the news conference that Putin effectively confirmed the investigative report proving that the FSB was shadowing him for nearly four years. "Even Putin, who is the king of lies, can't deny that the FSB operatives were following me," he said on YouTube. He reaffirmed that he was planning to return home from Germany to continue his fight against the Kremlin.

Even as Putin accused U.S. spy agencies, he held the door open for cooperation with the incoming administration. Putin congratulated Biden on his victory earlier this week.

"We proceed from the assumption that the newly elected U.S. president would realize what's going on. He's quite experienced in both domestic and foreign policies, and we hope that the problems that have emerged, at least some of them, would be solved under the new administration," Putin said.

He noted that Russia remains ready to extend the last remaining U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control pact still standing, the New START, which expires in early February. He added that the deal's demise would

"leave no restrictions on weapons systems."

Putin emphasized that Russia is ready to discuss its new hypersonic weapons system, including the Avangard glide vehicle, in future arms control talks with the United States. He charged that Moscow built Avangard and other new weapons to prevent the U.S.-designed missile defense system from eroding Russia's nuclear deterrent.

"We either had to develop our own missile defense, or create systems immune to missile defense," Putin said. "We did it with hypersonic weapons, including Avangard."

Russian officials say Avangard can fly 27 times faster than the speed of sound and make sharp maneuvers on its way to target to dodge the enemy's missile shield.

Putin said Russia is also completing tests of another hypersonic missile, Zircon, designed for its warships and submarines.

The Russian leader added that the development of other weapons systems that he announced in 2018, including the Burevestnik nuclear-powered cruise missile and the Poseidon nuclear drone, was proceeding as planned.

Poseidon is capable of unleashing a nuclear explosion, causing a powerful tsunami.

Russia-U.S. relations have sunk to post-Cold War lows after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and Russian meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Putin has reaffirmed Russian denials of meddling in the 2016 vote to help Donald Trump win and rejected media reports earlier this month that alleged a new attack by Russian hackers, charging that U.S. authorities had made the claims for domestic policy goals.

Asked if Russia would offer Trump political asylum and a job after he steps down, Putin responded that "Trump doesn't need a job."

"He has quite a broad base of support in the United States and, as far as I understand, he has no intention to leave the country's politics," Putin said.

Associated Press writer David Rising in Berlin contributed.

After years fighting them, Milley talks peace with Taliban

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — In his three combat tours in Afghanistan, Gen. Mark Milley saw the Taliban as a formidable foe, one unlikely to "fade away in the dust," as he put it in 2013. This week, Milley, now chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, sat across a negotiating table with leaders of the group that seemed defeated after the U.S. invaded in 2001 but will remain a force even as the U.S. sends troops home.

Milley held an unannounced meeting with Taliban leaders in Doha, Qatar, to discuss military aspects of last February's U.S.-Taliban agreement, which was intended to set the stage for direct peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

He then flew to Kabul to consult with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani. Milley said he emphasized to both parties the need to rapidly reduce levels of violence.

"Everything else hinges on that," he told reporters from The Associated Press and two other news organizations.

Although Milley reported no breakthrough, his Taliban meetings represent a remarkable milestone — America's top general coming face-to-face with representatives of the group that ruled Afghanistan until it was ousted 19 years ago this month in the early stages of what became America's longest war.

Milley served his first tour in Afghanistan as a brigade commander with the 10th Mountain Division in 2003, returned five years later as a deputy commander of the 101st Airborne Division, and then served as head of the international coalition's Joint Command in Kabul from May 2013 to February 2014.

The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 was aimed at overthrowing the Taliban regime, running al-Qaida out of the country and laying the groundwork for a global "war on terrorism." It turned into something more ambitious but less well-defined and became far more costly in blood and treasure.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 82 of 90

Milley believes the United States still has an important national interest in Afghanistan, where al-Qaida militants plotted the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. But it's unclear — probably to him and to the Taliban as well — how Joe Biden as president will approach the evolving Afghan-Taliban peace process. Milley is in the second year of a four-year term as Joint Chiefs chairman and is likely to be a source of military continuity as the Biden administration settles in.

Biden has not said publicly whether he will continue the drawdown or how he will proceed with the February agreement negotiated by Trump's peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad.

In that agreement, the Taliban agreed to renounce al-Qaida and take other steps to enhance peace prospects, while the Trump administration agreed to reduce its troops — reaching a complete U.S. withdrawal by May 2021. Washington, however, has complained that violence levels are too high.

In his talks with the Taliban on Tuesday, Milley urged a reduction in violence across Afghanistan, as senior American officials in Kabul warned that stepped-up Taliban attacks endanger the militant group's nascent peace negotiations with the Afghan government.

"The most important part of the discussions that I had with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan was the need for an immediate reduction in violence," Milley said in an interview.

Under ground rules set by Milley for security reasons, the journalists traveling with him agreed not to report on his talks until he had departed the region. It was Milley's second unannounced meeting with the Taliban's negotiating team; the first, in June, also in Doha, had not been reported until now.

Army Gen. Scott Miller, the top commander of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, said in an interview at his military headquarters in Kabul on Wednesday that the Taliban have stepped up attacks on Afghan forces, particularly in the southern provinces of Helmand and Kandahar, and against roadways and other infrastructure.

"My assessment is, it puts the peace process at risk — the higher the violence, the higher the risk," Miller said. He meets at least once a month with Taliban negotiators as part of Washington's effort to advance the peace process.

Speaking in the same interview, Ross Wilson, the ranking American diplomat in Kabul, said he also sees growing risk from Taliban violence. He said it has created "an unbearable burden" on the Afghan armed forces and the society as a whole.

Miller said he was saddened by what he called the Taliban's deliberate campaign to damage roadways, bridges and other infrastructure as part of an effort to limit the Afghan government's ability to reinforce its troops.

"Military commanders on the ground are now starting to do things that are not conducive to peace talks and reconstruction and stability," Miller said. "Clearly, the Taliban use violence as leverage" against the Afghan government.

Miller said he is executing Trump's order to reduce U.S. forces from 4,500 to 2,500 by Jan. 15, just days before Biden is sworn in as Trump's successor. Miller said troop levels are now at about 4,000 and will reach the 2,500 target on time.

As the troops pull out, some U.S. military equipment will be given to the Afghans, some will be sent to the United States, and some will be destroyed, Miller said.

Biden has not laid out a detailed plan for Afghanistan but has made clear he prefers a small U.S. military footprint and limited goals. He has acknowledged that he dissented from then-President Barack Obama's decision in December 2009 to vastly increase troop levels in hope of forcing the Taliban to the peace table.

"I think we should only have troops there to make sure that it's impossible for... ISIS or al-Qaida to re-establish a foothold there," Biden told CBS News in February.

Debunked COVID-19 myths survive online, despite facts

By AMANDA SEITZ and BEATRICE DUPUY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — From speculation that the coronavirus was created in a lab to hoax cures, an overwhelming amount of false information clung to COVID-19 as it circled the globe in 2020.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 83 of 90

Public health officials, fact checkers and doctors tried to quash hundreds of rumors in myriad ways. But misinformation around the pandemic has endured as vexingly as the virus itself. And with the U.S., U.K. and Canada rolling out vaccinations this month, many falsehoods are seeing a resurgence online.

A look at five stubborn myths around COVID-19 that were shared this year and continue to travel:

MYTH: MASKS DON'T OFFER PROTECTION FROM THE VIRUS

In fact, they do.

However, mixed messaging early on caused some confusion. U.S. officials initially told Americans they did not need to wear or buy masks, at a time when there was a shortage of N95 masks for health workers. They later reversed course, urging the public to wear cloth masks and face coverings outside.

The early messaging gave people "a little more room to take up these narratives" against wearing masks, explained Stephanie Edgerly, a communications professor at Northwestern University.

Some social media users, for example, are still circulating a video from March of Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert, saying people "should not be walking around with masks," although he has since urged people to cover their faces in public. Versions of that clip have been watched millions of times on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter.

Online claims that masks are not an effective form of protection spiked again in October after U.S. President Donald Trump and two U.S. senators contracted COVID-19 during a Rose Garden ceremony, according to media intelligence firm Zignal Labs. Social media users claimed that the coverings must not be effective because the senators wore masks at some points during the event.

But masks do prevent virus particles from spreading. Last month, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which continues to advise Americans to wear masks, cited research that suggested masks can protect the wearer as well as other people.

MYTH: THE VIRUS WAS MAN-MADE

It was not.

Social media users and fringe websites weaved together a conspiracy theory that the virus was leaked — either accidentally or intentionally — from a lab in Wuhan, China, before the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March. The falsehood was espoused by elected officials, including Trump.

The origins of the virus are far less scandalous: It likely originated in nature. Bats are thought to be the original or intermediary hosts for several viruses that have triggered recent epidemics, including COVID-19. U.S. intelligence agencies also concluded the virus is not man-made.

Yet the conspiracy theory continues to travel online, and made a resurgence in September when a Chinese virologist repeated the claim on Fox News.

MYTH: COVID-19 IS SIMILAR TO THE FLU

In fact, COVID-19 has proved to be far deadlier.

Early similarities between the symptoms of COVID-19 and influenza led many to speculate that there was not much difference between the two illnesses. Social media posts and videos viewed thousands of times online also claim that COVID-19 is no deadlier than the flu. Trump tweeted a faulty comparison between the flu and COVID-19 in March and October, as states implemented stay-at-home orders.

COVID-19 has been blamed for more than 300,000 American deaths this year, and has killed roughly 1.5 million worldwide. By comparison, the CDC estimates there are 12,000 to 61,000 flu-related deaths annually.

COVID-19 symptoms can be far more serious and persist for months. Health experts have also uncovered a range of bizarre coronavirus symptoms, from brain fog to swollen toes.

MYTH: OFFICIALS ARE EXAGGERATING COVID-19'S TOLL

They are not.

Social media users began photographing empty hospital waiting rooms earlier this year, claiming few people were sick with COVID-19. The photos and videos gained traction with the #FilmYourHospital hashtag, part of a right-wing conspiracy theory that public health officials and politicians were exaggerating COVID-19's deadly toll. But fewer people are in waiting areas because hospitals started taking appointments virtually, canceling elective procedures and prohibiting visitors during the pandemic.

This month, a Nevada doctor's selfie at an empty makeshift care site set up to handle additional coro-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 84 of 90

navirus patients was shared online as evidence that hospitals are not full. However, the photo was taken on Nov. 12, before the site opened. It has since served at least 200 patients.

MYTH: THE VIRUS IS A PLOY TO FORCE GLOBAL VACCINATIONS

That's not true.

Anti-vaccine supporters have been pushing this conspiracy theory since January, when some falsely claimed online that the virus had been patented by pharmaceutical companies as a scheme to cash in on the illness. Some targeted billionaire and vaccine advocate Bill Gates, claiming he was part of a global plan around COVID-19 to microchip billions of people through mass vaccinations. Gates has not threatened to microchip anyone. Instead, he suggested creating a database of people who have been inoculated against the virus.

Skepticism also has grown around the speed of vaccine development. A video viewed nearly 100,000 times on social media, for example, falsely claimed pharmaceutical companies skipped animal trials for the vaccines. In fact, the vaccines were tested on mice and macaques.

The U.K., Canada and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration have authorized Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine. The FDA will review Moderna's shot Thursday.

Still, only about half of Americans say they are willing to get the vaccine, according to a survey this month by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Ongoing misinformation around the vaccine might drive some of that hesitancy.

"I don't think it was one myth that caused the problem," said Nancy Kass, deputy director for public health at the Johns Hopkins Berman Institute of Bioethics. "It's the fact that there were many, many, many myths."

Russia can't use its name and flag at the next 2 Olympics

By GRAHAM DUNBAR AP Sports Writer

GENEVA (AP) — Russia will not be able to use its name, flag and anthem at the next two Olympics or at any world championships for the next two years after a ruling Thursday by the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

The Lausanne-based court halved the four-year ban proposed last year by the World Anti-Doping Agency in a landmark case that accused Russia of state-ordered tampering of a testing laboratory database in Moscow. The ruling also blocked Russia from bidding to host major sporting events for two years.

Russian athletes and teams will still be allowed to compete at next year's Tokyo Olympics and the 2022 Winter Games in Beijing, as well as world championships including the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, if they are not banned for or suspected of doping.

One win for Russia is the proposed team name at major events. The name "Russia" can be retained on uniforms if the words "Neutral Athlete" or equivalents like "Neutral Team" have equal prominence, the court said.

The burden of proof was also shifted away from Russian athletes and more toward WADA when their doping history is vetted for selection to the Olympics or other sporting events.

Russian athletes and teams can also retain the national flag colors of red, white and blue in their uniforms at major events. That was not possible for Russians at the past two track world championships.

Even with those concessions, the court's three judges imposed the most severe penalties on Russia since allegations of state-backed doping and cover-ups emerged after the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

WADA president Witold Bańka hailed the court's decision despite its preferred ban being cut to two years.

"The (CAS) panel has clearly upheld our findings that the Russian authorities brazenly and illegally manipulated the Moscow Laboratory data in an effort to cover up an institutionalized doping scheme," Bańka said in a statement.

The case centered on accusations that Russian state agencies altered and deleted parts of the database before handing it over to WADA investigators last year. It contained likely evidence to prosecute long-standing doping violations.

The CAS process was formally between WADA and the Russian anti-doping agency, which refused to accept last year's four-year ban. The Russian agency, known as Rusada, was ruled non-compliant last

year — a decision upheld Thursday by the three judges.

Rusada was also ordered to pay WADA \$1.27 million to cover investigation costs, plus it was fined \$100,000 and ordered to pay 400,000 Swiss francs (\$452,000) toward legal costs.

The Russian agency can appeal the sanctions to the Swiss supreme court in Lausanne.

The acting CEO of Rusada, Mikhail Bukhanov, said at a news conference in Moscow "it appears that not all of the arguments presented by our lawyers were heard."

The judges' 186-page ruling is expected to be published by CAS in the next few weeks.

In a brief extract in the court's statement, the judges said their decision to impose punishments less severe than WADA wanted "should not, however, be read as any validation of the conduct of Rusada or the Russian authorities."

The ruling does allow Russian government officials, including President Vladimir Putin, to attend major sporting events if invited by the host nation's head of state.

When a four-day hearing was held in Lausanne last month, 43 Russian athletes and their lawyers took part as third parties arguing they should not be punished for misconduct by state officials not working in sports.

Giving WADA the lab database by a December 2018 deadline was a key condition for Rusada being reinstated three months earlier when a previous expulsion from the anti-doping community was lifted.

WADA investigators in Moscow eventually got the data one month late. Evidence of doping tests and emails appeared to have been deleted or changed, and whistleblowers like former lab director Grigory Rodchenkov were implicated.

WADA investigators went to Moscow two years ago to collect the database and begin verifying evidence that would help sports governing bodies prosecute suspected doping violations dating back several years.

Although Russia would be stripped of hosting world championships in the next two years, events can be reprieved. Governing bodies have been advised to find a new host "unless it is legally or practically impossible to do so."

Russia is scheduled to host the 2022 world championships in men's volleyball and shooting. The president of the shooting federation is Vladimir Lisin, a billionaire with close ties to the Kremlin.

Last year, the International Olympic Committee described the database tampering as "flagrant manipulation" and "an insult to the sporting movement."

On Thursday, the IOC merely noted the verdict, adding it would consult sports governing bodies and the International Paralympic Committee "with a view to having a consistent approach in the implementation of the award."

More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

6 men indicted in alleged plot to kidnap Michigan governor

By JOHN FLESHER Associated Press

TRAVERSE CITY, Mich. (AP) — A federal grand jury has charged six men with conspiring to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in what investigators say was a plot by anti-government extremists who were angry over her coronavirus policies.

The indictment released Thursday by U.S. Attorney Andrew Birge levied the conspiracy charge against Adam Dean Fox, Barry Gordon Croft Jr., Ty Gerard Garbin, Kaleb James Franks, Daniel Joseph Harris and Brandon Michael-Ray Caserta. They are all from Michigan except for Croft, who lives in Delaware.

The charge carries a maximum penalty of life in prison, Birge said in a statement.

The six were arrested in early October following an FBI investigation into an alleged plot to kidnap the Democratic governor at her vacation home in northern Michigan.

Defense attorneys have said their clients were "big talkers" who didn't intend to follow through on the alleged plan.

The indictment repeats allegations made during an October hearing, where agent Richard Trask testified

that the men were involved with paramilitary groups.

Fox and Croft attended a June meeting in Dublin, Ohio, at which the possible kidnapping of governors and other actions were discussed, the indictment states. During the hearing, Trask said Virginia's Democratic governor, Ralph Northam, was among those mentioned as potential targets.

It says Fox later met Garbin, a leader of a Michigan group called the "Wolverine Watchmen," at a rally outside of the Michigan Capitol in Lansing. At a meeting in Grand Rapids, the two men and other members of the Watchmen agreed to work together "toward their common goals," the document says.

It describes live-fire "field training exercises" and other preparations, including the surveillance of Whitmer's vacation house and the exchange of encrypted messages.

During one training event, "they practiced assaulting a building in teams, and discussed tactics for fighting the governor's security detail with improvised explosive devices, a projectile launcher, and other weapons," the indictment says.

They also discussed destroying a highway bridge near Whitmer's house to prevent law enforcement from responding, it states.

The indictment says that in an electronic message, Caserta wrote that if the men encountered police during a reconnaissance mission, "they should give the officers one opportunity to leave, and kill them if they did not comply."

They were arrested after four members scheduled an Oct. 7 meeting in Ypsilanti, west of Detroit, to meet an undercover FBI agent and buy explosives and other supplies, the indictment says.

Eight other men who are said to be members or associates of the Wolverine Watchmen are charged in state court with counts including providing material support for terrorist acts. Some of them are accused of taking part in the alleged plot against Whitmer.

Follow John Flesher on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/johnflesher>

US jobless claims rise to 885,000 amid resurgence of virus

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose again last week to 885,000, the highest weekly total since September, as a resurgence of coronavirus cases threatens the economy's recovery from its springtime collapse.

The Labor Department said Thursday that the number of applications increased from 862,000 the previous week. It showed that nine months after the virus paralyzed the economy, many employers are still slashing jobs as the pandemic forces more business restrictions and leads many consumers to stay home. The number of claims was much higher than the 800,000 that economists had expected.

Before the coronavirus erupted in March, weekly jobless claims had typically numbered only about 225,000. The far-higher current pace reflects an employment market under stress and diminished job security for many.

The total number of people who are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits fell to 5.5 million from 5.8 million. That figure is down sharply from its peak of nearly 23 million in May. It means that some jobless Americans are finding jobs and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

With layoffs still elevated and new confirmed viral cases in the United States now exceeding 200,000 a day on average, the economy's modest recovery is increasingly in danger. States and cities are issuing mask mandates, limiting the size of gatherings, restricting restaurant dining, closing gyms or reducing the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses.

"U.S. weekly jobless claims continue to head in the wrong direction," Edward Moya, an analyst at the currency trading firm OANDA, wrote in a research note. "The labor market outlook is bleak as the winter wave of the virus is going to lead to more shutdowns."

On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve signaled that it expects the economy to rebound at a healthy pace

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 87 of 90

next year as viral vaccines become widely distributed. But Chair Jerome Powell warned that the next three to six months will likely be painful for the unemployed and small businesses as pandemic cases spike. The Fed made clear that it's prepared to keep interest rates ultra-low for the long run to help the economy withstand those threats.

Many jobless Americans are now collecting checks under two federal programs that were created this year to ease the economic pain inflicted by the pandemic. But those programs are set to expire the day after Christmas. Unless Congress acts to extend that aid, benefits will end completely for an estimated 9.1 million unemployed people. In a report Wednesday, the JPMorgan Chase Institute warned that a cut-off in benefits would likely cause the families of the unemployed to slash spending and to fall behind on mortgage payments.

Some federal aid appears likely to arrive soon. On Wednesday, congressional negotiators closed 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 number of jobless people who are collecting aid from one of the two federal extended-benefit programs — the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which offers coverage to gig workers and others who don't qualify for traditional benefits — surged to 9.2 million from 8.6 million for the week that ended Nov. 28.

But the number of people receiving aid under the second program — the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which provides 13 weeks of federal benefits to people who have exhausted their state aid — also rose from 4.5 million to 4.8 million.

All told, 20.6 million people are now receiving some type of unemployment benefits. (Figures for the two pandemic-related programs aren't adjusted for seasonal variations.)

The pandemic has been an economic as well as a health disaster. In March and April, employers slashed a dizzying 22 million jobs after the virus and the measures meant to contain it brought normal business activity to a halt. The nation's gross domestic product — the broadest measure of economic output — plummeted from April to June at a record annual rate of 31.4%.

The comeback started strong, boosted by a \$2 trillion federal rescue package in March. But it has since lost momentum as confirmed COVID-19 cases have surged and Congress has thus far failed to enact further aid. Though GDP expanded at a record annual rate of 33.1% from July-September, the annual pace of growth is thought to be slowing significantly in the current quarter -- a slump that's considered likely to extend into early next year.

The pace of job creation has diminished steadily — from 4.8 million added jobs in June to 1.8 million in July, 1.5 million in August, 711,000 in September, 610,000 in October and 245,000 in November.

On Wednesday, the Commerce Department reported that retail sales skidded 1.1% in November, the biggest drop in seven months and a troubling sign at the start of the all-important holiday shopping season.

Businesses appear to be retrenching as cases surge and the economy sputters. The data firm Womply reports that 23% of local businesses were closed Dec. 1, up steadily from 17% at the start of August. Womply also found that 41% of all local bars are closed along with 28% of restaurants and 32% of hair salons and other health and beauty shops.

AP Economics Writer Christopher Rugaber 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 col-

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 88 of 90

lege 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 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.

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 89 of 90

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?'"

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

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 18, the 353rd day of 2020. There are 13 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 18, 1865, the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery, was declared in effect by Secretary of State William H. Seward.

On this date:

In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson, whose first wife, Ellen, had died the year before, married Edith Bolling Galt, a widow, at her Washington home.

In 1917, Congress passed the 18th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" and sent it to the states for ratification.

In 1940, Adolf Hitler signed a secret directive ordering preparations for a Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. (Operation Barbarossa was launched in June 1941.)

In 1944, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the government's wartime evacuation of people of Japanese descent from the West Coast while at the same time ruling that "concededly loyal" Americans of Japanese ancestry could not continue to be detained.

In 1956, Japan was admitted to the United Nations.

In 1957, the Shippingport Atomic Power Station in Pennsylvania, the first nuclear facility to generate electricity in the United States, went on line. (It was taken out of service in 1982.)

In 1987, Ivan F. Boesky was sentenced to three years in prison for his role in a major Wall Street insider-trading scandal. (Boesky served about two years of his sentence).

In 1998, the House debated articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton. South Carolina carried out the nation's 500th execution since capital punishment resumed in 1977.

In 2000, the Electoral College cast its ballots, with President-elect George W. Bush receiving the expected 271; Al Gore, however, received 266, one fewer than expected, because of a District of Columbia Democrat who'd left her ballot blank to protest the district's lack of representation in Congress.

In 2003, two federal appeals courts ruled the U.S. military could not indefinitely hold prisoners without access to lawyers or American courts.

In 2008, W. Mark Felt, the former FBI second-in-command who'd revealed himself as "Deep Throat"

Groton Daily Independent

Friday, Dec. 18, 2020 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 167 ~ 90 of 90

three decades after the Watergate scandal, died in Santa Rosa, Calif., at age 95.

In 2018, the Trump administration banned bump stocks, the firearm attachments that allowed semi-automatic weapons to fire like machine guns, and gave gun owners until late March to turn in or destroy the devices. The president authorized the Defense Department to create a new Space Command, an effort to better organize and advance the military's operations in space.

Ten years ago: The U.S. Senate approved repeal of the military's 17-year "don't ask, don't tell" ban on openly gay troops in a 65-31 vote. (President Barack Obama later signed it into law.) Skier Lindsey Vonn was named the 2010 Female Athlete of the Year as chosen by members of The Associated Press.

Five years ago: Congress ended a chaotic year on a surprising note of bipartisan unity and productivity as it overwhelmingly approved a massive 2016 tax and spending package and sent it to President Barack Obama, who promptly signed it. United Nations Security Council members unanimously approved a resolution endorsing a peace process for Syria.

One year ago: The U.S. House impeached President Donald Trump on two charges, sending his case to the Senate for trial; the articles of impeachment accused him of abusing the power of the presidency to investigate a political rival ahead of the 2020 election and then obstructing Congress' investigation. At a Michigan rally that took place as the House voted to impeach him, a defiant Trump declared that the vote was a "suicide march" for the Democratic Party. Trump also suggested that the late Democratic Rep. John Dingell was "looking up," rather than down, from beyond the grave; some Republicans joined Democrats in calling for an apology.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Cicely Tyson is 96. Former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark is 93. Actor Roger Mosley is 82. Rock musician Keith Richards is 77. Writer-director Alan Rudolph is 77. Movie producer-director Steven Spielberg is 74. Blues artist Rod Piazza is 73. Movie director Gillian Armstrong is 70. Movie reviewer Leonard Maltin is 70. Rock musician Elliot Easton is 67. Actor Ray Liotta is 66. Comedian Ron White is 64. R&B singer Angie Stone is 59. Actor Brad Pitt is 57. Professional wrestler-turned-actor "Stone Cold" Steve Austin is 56. Actor Shawn Christian is 55. Actor Rachel Griffiths is 52. Singer Alejandro Sanz is 52. Actor Casper Van Dien is 52. Country/rap singer Cowboy Troy is 50. Rapper DMX is 50. International Tennis Hall of Famer Arantxa Sanchez Vicario is 49. DJ Lethal (Limp Bizkit) is 48. Pop singer Sia is 45. Country singer Randy Houser is 44. Actor Josh Dallas is 42. Actor Katie Holmes is 42. Actor Ravi Patel is 42. Singer Christina Aguilera is 40. Actor Ashley Benson is 31. NHL defenseman Victor Hedman is 30. Actor-singer Bridgit Mendler is 28. Atlanta Braves outfielder Ronald Acuña Jr. is 23. Electro-pop singer Billie Eilish is 19. Actor Isabella Crovetti is 16.