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Show Choir Video Archived

Yesterday the Groton Show Choir had a rehearsal for the parents at the GHS Gym. We recorded the event and the video is posted the archived videos under "Other Events." (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM video)



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Coming up on GDILIVE.COM



**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.

We will be live-streaming the Girls JV game starting at 6 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



V Boys



Groton Area at Redfield
Tuesday, Dec. 22, 7:30 p.m.
GDILIVE.COM

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The Minnesota Vikings' playoff hopes were dealt a serious blow on Sunday after the team lost 33-27 to the Chicago Bears. Technically, the Vikings have a four percent chance of reaching the postseason, but let's be real... the Vikings don't belong anywhere near the playoffs this season. And that's ok. Hopefully, with an offseason to make some roster improvements and injured players returning, the Vikings can get back into the playoff picture next season.



By Jordan Wright

Offense

The Chicago Bears' defensive backfield was heavily depleted, yet the Vikings rarely if ever took advantage through the first three-quarters of the game. The offensive line is the main reason the Vikings were gun shy on Sunday, as Cousins was under pressure on 40 percent of his dropbacks. For context, the Vikings are 5-1 this season when Cousins is pressured less than 40% of the time. With a porous offensive line, Cousins has been trying to speed up his decision making to compensate, which has had mixed results so far. The coaching staff also has some blame for the loss – they've known all year the o-line (particularly the interior) has been bad and should have called better plays.

Kirk Cousins: 24/35, 271 yards, 2 TD, 1 INT, 1 fumble

Dalvin Cook: 24 carries, 132 yards, 1 TD

Justin Jefferson: 8 receptions, 104 yards

Defense

It's hard to place too much blame on the Vikings' defense, even after a poor performance like what we saw against the Chicago Bears. After losing Danielle Hunter, Eric Kendricks, and Anthony Barr to injury, the Vikings have no one who can consistently put pressure on the passer. To make matters worse, the Vikings are extremely young at cornerback (a position that is notoriously difficult to grasp in Mike Zimmer's defense). Usually, you can overcome poor play at one of those positions; if you have inexperienced corners, put some pressure on the quarterback – if you can't generate a pass rush, have lockdown corners. Unfortunately for the Vikings, they can do neither of those things, making it way too easy for opposing offenses.

With that being said, many young defensive players have begun to show some promise. Both Jeff Gladney and Cameron Dantzler have had some good moments at corner this season, and rookie defensive end D.J. Wonnum is making plays every week.

Players of the game

Linebacker Todd Davis, who was filling in for the injured Eric Kendricks, really stuffed the stat sheet on Sunday. Davis finished the game with eight tackles, the team's only sack, a QB hit, a tackle for a loss, and a pass deflection.

Cameron Dantzler, who had the play of the game, is another player who deserves some recognition. With three minutes left in the fourth quarter, the Bears had marched down the field and had third-and-goal at the Vikings' six-yard-line. The Vikings were down three points and needed someone to make a play, which is where Dantzler comes in. Mitch Trubisky threw a pass into the corner of the endzone, but Dantzler was ready for it, reaching up and snagging the interception. The Vikings suddenly had hope, needing a touchdown to win or a field goal to tie the game and go to overtime with the momentum. In true Vikings fashion, the offense failed to pick up a first down and the game was over.

Looking ahead, the Vikings sail to New Orleans and will try to sack the Saints. This game will be on Christmas Day and will air on Fox starting at 3:30 PM (CT). The Vikings have played well against the Saints over the past few years, but ESPN is giving New Orleans a 71.9% chance to win this matchup. Vikings will be hoping for a Christmas Day miracle. Skoll!

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Deacon Jeffrey James Schulte is pictured with his yard sign as he leaves Groton. On his facebook page, he said, "Thank you all for making my time in Groton/Turton so wonderful! I will miss you all."

(Photo from Deacon Jeff's FB Page)

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#301 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

As we embark together tonight on the fourth hundred of these Updates, I find myself wanting it to end before we need to go into a fifth, but I am not hopeful. While I have enjoyed this little community we have built here, I will not be sorry to see this whole sorry episode end. Time will tell: Maybe we won't need to check back in on this again in just over three months.

We have a typical Sunday with slow reporting. Most of the numbers are coming in much below recent trends. We did not set a single record today. Our Sunday numbers are, once again, worse week-on-week, but I do see something of a lightening in the trend. On the other hand, we are pretty certain to hit 18 million cases tomorrow, and that's certainly no cause for celebration. California will record its two-millionth case this week, and that's not happy news either. We are at 17,876,300 cases reported in the US so far in the pandemic. There were just 197,300 new cases reported today for a 1.1% increase in total cases. We've been over 150,000 daily new cases for over three weeks running. We've been over 90,000 cases for a solid seven weeks and over 70,000 for eight weeks. I think we're a long way from a break in those trends. I see signs we might be leveling off in new cases, however I am concerned about what Christmas is going to do to us. We will not see any effect from the holiday next week, but by the following one, the damage should have begun to come into focus. Hospitalizations are down for the second consecutive day at 113,929; we've stopped, at least for the present, setting new ones every day. I hope that continues; the health care system seriously needs a break.

We're back up to 50 states and territories in the red zone, three in orange, and just one in yellow. One-week increase in total cases was 1,543,900 (10.4%) last week and is down to 1,511,500 (9.2%) this week, which is progress. That is the leveling-off I noted above. Two-week increase was 2,920,500 (21.7%) and is up to 3,055,400 (20.6%) this week. While the raw number increase is higher this week, the percentage, as with the one-week percentage, is down. This is cause for some optimism because it is due to a fairly significant slow-down this week. We've added over four million cases since the first of the month, and we're not three weeks in; that's pretty depressing. I have us at a one-week daily average new-case number of 215,929, which is down from last week, more evidence we're on a leveling-off trend. I hope this—and next week too—buy us some breathing space before the Christmas numbers hit. I am really concerned about those.

I track 54 states and US territories, including the District of Columbia; and the number of these showing two-week rates of increase greater than 25% is down to 12. Here are the states and territories with the greatest rate of growth in cases over 14 days with their percentage increase in that time: New Hampshire (47.52% - decrease), Maine (41.94% - increase), Connecticut (38.00%), California (37.69 - increase), Pennsylvania (32.13% - decrease), West Virginia (31.54% - decrease), Ohio (31.11% - decrease), Tennessee (29.25% - increase), Vermont 28.47% - big increase), Delaware (26.82%), Massachusetts (25.96% - decrease), and Rhode Island (25.23% - decrease). Coming off the list this week are Alaska, Oregon, Colorado, Arizona, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Kentucky. We have only 18 states and territories with growth rates above the US growth rate, which is a decrease for the second consecutive week. Transmission is still very widespread, but that seems to be tapering off too: progress.

The pandemic continues to shift, the fastest spread is more dispersed across the country. Highest per capita new-case numbers in the past week are in Tennessee, California, Rhode Island, Arizona, Nevada, Indiana, and Oklahoma. There's been a real movement to the South and Southwest.

There were 1575 deaths reported today, a 0.5% increase to 317,788. Average daily deaths have soared; at 2437.1 last week, they're up to 2638.7 this week. Three of our four worse days were this week. Four states, California, Texas, Illinois, and Pennsylvania, reported more than 1000 deaths this week. This is the fifth consecutive week since spring we've reported over 10,000 deaths, and we're nearing 20,000; this trend is expected to continue. Consider that this summer we were below 500 daily deaths routinely; we just couldn't do the hard things to keep them low. States with the most per capita deaths over the past week are Tennessee, California, Rhode Island, Arizona, Nevada, Indiana, and Oklahoma. Not one state on the list this week was on it last week, a complete shift.

I told you I'd update you when I heard something about how soon after vaccination you'd be protected

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with the Moderna vaccine. This isn't definite, but I am seeing the clinical trials protocol evaluated immunity at 14 days following the second dose. That's going to be my rule of thumb going forward unless and until I see something else. So dose 1 occurs on Day 1; dose 2 occurs on Day 28; and I'd consider myself to be protected 14 days after that or on Day 42.

I mentioned last night that today we'd talk about these allergic reactions we've been hearing about. The first thing we should establish is that they're very infrequent: In the UK, over 130,000 people were vaccinated in the first week with just two allergic reactions. In the US so far, we've vaccinated around 272,000 people (that we know of; there's about a three-day lag in reporting) and seen six cases of allergic reaction, only one in a person who has a history of vaccination reactions. The US Surgeon General said yesterday that allergic reactions are not unexpected, and he cited a robust system for detecting and reporting these reactions so we can track them.

Everyone who receives a vaccine should be monitored on-site for 30 minutes if they have a history of severe allergic reactions or for 15 minutes if they do not. Vaccine providers should have medications and equipment available at all vaccination sites so they will be prepared to respond if you would have a reaction. If you do have a reaction, you should be monitored for several hours. People who have a severe allergic reaction to the vaccine should not receive the second dose.

Since there's not much in this vaccine and we know the lipid ALC-3015 can be associated with allergic reactions, my money's on this component getting a lot of attention; but I'm going to guess there really isn't a readily available substitute for it at the moment. I'm also going to guess that, unless these reactions get a whole lot more frequent, they're not going to mess with the EUA which has been issued. I will note that an FDA official has made a statement that the agency will alert the public if they have to make changes to the emergency use authorization (EUA) for these vaccines as we go along. Dr. Doran Fink, deputy director of the FDA's Clinical Division of Vaccines and Related Products Division, said in yesterday's CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices meeting that some of the reactions seen were serious or anaphylactic reactions. "We will update the public in a timely manner if we find anything that would cause us to change the conditions of the emergency use authorization or if we need to provide any additional information to inform the public about the benefits and risks of the vaccine." Importantly, he added, "the totality of the data continue to support vaccinations under the Pfizer EUA without any new restrictions."

All of the US reactions occurred within the recommended observation window, which is 30 minutes for those with a history of severe allergies and 15 minutes for everyone else. As I understand it, all of these were successfully treated. In light of these recent developments, the current CDC guidance for Covid-19 vaccination with respect to allergy is that (a) if you have ever had a severe allergic reaction to any ingredient in the vaccine, you should not receive that vaccine, (b) if you have had a severe allergic reaction to other vaccines or injected drugs, you should consult with your physician about whether to have the vaccine, (c) if you have a history of severe reactions not related to vaccines or injected drugs (food, pets, venom, environmental, latex), you may be vaccinated, and (d) if you have a history of allergies to oral medications or a family history of severe allergic reactions or a milder allergy to vaccines, you may be vaccinated.

I now have the ingredients list for the Moderna vaccine from the FDA Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee meeting notes from Thursday. Here it is:

Active Ingredient:

synthetic messenger ribonucleic acid (mRNA) encoding the pre-fusion stabilized spike glycoprotein (S) of SARS-CoV-2 virus

Lipids:

SM-102 [This one's proprietary, so we do not have a formula.]

1,2-dimyristoyl-rac-glycero-3-methoxypolyethylene glycol-2000 [PEG2000-DMG]

Cholesterol

1,2-distearoyl-snglycero-3-phosphocholine [DSPC]

pH Stabilizers:

Tromethamine

tromethamine hydrochloride

acetic acid

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sodium acetate

Sugar:

Sucrose

If you have a look at the discussion last night of the Pfizer vaccine components, you can see pretty well how these fit into the same game plan: mRNA for the actual immunogenicity, lipids to protect the RNA and help it slip into your cells, pH stabilizers to prevent tissue irritation and injury and to prevent premature degradation of the RNA, and sugar as a cryopreservative. This one does not have a diluent; it is used as supplied. Still no adjuvants, no preservatives. If I get new information that makes a difference in terms of understanding how all of this works together, I'll pass that along; but this is pretty straightforward otherwise.

This is a weird thing: Three volunteers in the Moderna vaccine clinical trials have had serious allergic reactions. One was in the vaccine arm of the trial and had a history of allergies to shellfish; this person had the reaction 63 days after receiving the vaccine. I suppose anything's possible, but I have some difficulty believing the allergic reaction was linked to the vaccine at all. Another was in the placebo group, which is certainly not due to the vaccine (since this volunteer did not receive vaccine). And just Friday night, another placebo recipient also had a serious allergic reaction—no way that's from the vaccine either for the same reason. I know as well as any that quirky things happen, but this is really quirky. (And no, I do not think the placebo is causing trouble; it's saline.) For the record, after these reactions, the company re-examined its data to see whether any other volunteers had had allergic reactions within 48 hours of the vaccination. The did find four who reported some sort of reaction, but none of them was classified as serious—not sure which arm of the study they were in.

While we're talking about adverse events following vaccination, I know I mentioned briefly a day or two ago that some vaccine recipients in clinical trials developed Bell's palsy, that usually temporary weakness of facial muscles on one side of the face. I am seeing contradictory information about this, one source saying the rate of occurrence in these participants is about the same as it would be in the general population and another saying the rate of occurrence is a bit higher than it would be in the general population. I also note to my chagrin that on different days I cited each of these, thus contradicting myself; never caught it until today either. I guess I've warned you all along that I'm doing my best to get these things right, but cannot guarantee I'll never miss. Here was a miss. Where we are is, since I have not been successful in ascertaining which of these is true, I'll just leave this here for now. The official stance in either case is to watch and track these occurrences; they have been very infrequent.

I spent a lot (some would say too much) time last night debunking the usual anti-vaxxer garbage regarding these two authorized Covid-19 vaccines. I see I need to (briefly, I promise) address another set of claims. I was thinking they were too ludicrous to bother with; but it probably won't hurt to get this out of the way early. There is a chain of wild speculation (I will not dignify it by calling it a thought) that these vaccines are part of a larger plot to either track all of us or exert some sort of mind control over us by using them as an opportunity to insert a nefarious bit of electronic wizardry into our bodies with each injection. Some of this seizes on the use of the word, nanoparticles, which the vaccine developers accurately (but perhaps unwisely) used to describe the nanoparticles of fats that surround and protect the mRNA strands in the vaccines, I guess because nano sounds all computer-y and everything. Sigh.

So could there be nanos in this vaccine—the digital kind? Well, no. You see, there is actually no such thing as “a nano” because a nano is not a thing, it's a descriptor. Nano means things on a nano scale, that is, the scale of the nanometer, which is a measurement that is one billionth of a meter (which is just over a yard). It's kind of hard to visualize things at that scale; maybe it helps to know that the average human hair is somewhere between 80,000 and 100,000 nanometers in diameter. Nanometers are really, really small. So when you hear about nanotechnology, people aren't talking about making objects or devices called nanos; they're talking about creating or working with things that can be measured in nanometers, that is, really, really small things. Those nanoparticles of fat in the vaccine? Yep, just really, really little particles.

But what about that article your brother-in-law told you about where IBM produced computer chips that were really small, like five nanometers? Those could be injected, right? Nope. For starters, these haven't been commercially produced yet; no way there's a supply sufficient to be sure every American gets one—not to mention all of the other billions of people on earth who also need to be tracked and controlled. And

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any computer expert who happens along is welcome to correct me if I get this wrong, but as I understand it, these 5 nm chips aren't 5 nm big; they're just 5 nm thick, but they're mounted on a "wafer" containing bunches of them. So the actual object on which these reside is not something that's going into any arm through a syringe. Additionally—and again, I'll welcome further information from people who know things because I'm working way above my pay grade here—I'm thinking these microscopic computer chips, supposing they did exist in sufficient quantity to enable such a plot, would need to be powered somehow, wouldn't they? What are our overlords going to do about a battery to make the little chip/bot/nano run?

Also, I do not believe the state of the technology is such that a chip inserted along with a battery into an unwitting recipient would actually enable mind control anyhow. I don't think anyone's figured out how to do that yet. (I know, I know, "they" certainly wouldn't tell me, now would they? I still have great difficulty believing no one outside the secretive government agency plotting against us has even a clue this is happening; there are a lot of really smart computer-ish people here on the outside with us dupes of the system.) So what if they're just going to track us? I've read that "they" could then know everything about us—when we eat, sleep, have sex, go places, etc. And I find myself wondering why anyone would want to know? I'm not that important, and I'm pretty sure (no offense) you aren't either. Not that interesting either. Trust me, if you followed me around for a couple of days, you'd die of boredom (especially these days, but really any time). Now I could understand the desire to track elected officials or captains of industry or rich people you want to blackmail (no one blackmails poor people); but the whole damned population?? Strikes me as pretty damned unlikely, but maybe this is just a failure of imagination on my part.

There are a couple of other practical matters here. One is cost. I do not believe Congress has appropriated anything like enough money to fund 327 million cutting-edge teeny, tiny computer chips in addition to all the money they're having to spend on everything else. I mean, they're quibbling about whether to send \$600 or \$1200 or however much it is now to each adult; where on earth are they going to get the money to fund all these microchips? And no, I don't think Bill Gates and George Soros are impoverishing themselves to fund this endeavor; and I'm pretty sure, despite the apparent success of his book, President Obama doesn't have that kind of money.

Last problem with this: Delivery. Here's our problem. The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine comes in multi-dose vials, planned for five doses per, although some vials are showing up with enough for six or even seven doses—we talked about that the other day. At any rate, if you suspend five (or six or even seven) little microchips in that vial, how are you going to make sure the person drawing up vaccine to give to each recipient gets one and just one microchip in each syringe-full of vaccine? (Remember these things are too small to be detected with the naked eye.) And the problem is going to be worse with the Moderna vaccine, which comes in 10-dose vials.

This all is why I initially thought there would be no need to address these claims; they simply beggar belief. But here we are in the brave new world where we all make up our own facts to suit us. So here you have it, in case anyone brings it up. (I think, when this pandemic is over, I'm going to try to teach a dog to read. It would be easier.)

One more thing on the vaccines, and that is the issue of children. We've talked about the fact that trials were done first in adults because children were not the at-risk group and, generally speaking, we seek to protect children during scientific research of all kinds. But now that we have two authorized vaccines for adults, our attention very naturally turns to vaccination of children.

Moderna launched a study in adolescents ages 12 to 18 on December 9. This was discussed at yesterday's CDC Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices meeting. The company representative said, "We need to have discussions about how much data would be sufficient to potentially evaluate the potential to lower the age indication for the vaccine." They plan to speak with the FDA about this in coming days. They are also working with the National Institutes of Health on designing a pediatric trial for those aged six months to 12 years. Pfizer has been recruiting and testing in children down to the age of 12 for a couple of weeks now. The hope is to have something authorized before school starts in the fall of 2021, but that's going to be a pretty tall order; I've seen opinions that they may not be authorized until some time after school starts. While children's immune systems are somewhat different from those of adults, most experts expect responses to the vaccine will be similar in children to what we've already seen in adults.

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Mike and Judy Sullivan have a hobby that definitely assures they don't run out of things to do. Mike told CNN they spend eight to 10 hours a day six or seven days a week in the workshop. Mike, a retired Army veteran, is a woodworker; he apparently took up the skill to stave off boredom. I'm not sure how Judy ended up involved, but I'm married to a project guy, so I can guess. So Mike builds toys, and Judy paints and decorates them. They build creatures, trucks and trains and big equipment, puzzles, pull-toys—all kinds of charming toys. Their grandchildren are their toy testers: They come over and play with things. If a toy breaks, that tells Mike it needs to be more sturdily built. If they love it and take it home, then the toy's a winner.

And over the years, they've built thousands of toys which they—believe it or not—give away. All of them. You can't buy a toy from this guy; he doesn't take money. If you ask them to ship you a toy, they do it at their expense. People come by—carefully scheduled, masked, and distanced these days—to pick something up. They deliver toys to a school, to a shelter, and to a food pantry. They also have a drive-through giveaway planned. They've made and given away thousands of toys over the years and have produced 1400 just for this Christmas alone.

Mike explained to CNN that he knows what it's like to be poor; he grew up that way, and his dad and brothers made him toys when he was a kid. He said, "They were wonderful toys. I know how much I enjoyed them and just hope that kids that get them now still do." This is why he wants to help families to give their children at Christmas.

The Sullivans spent \$19,000 last year on materials. They belong to a woodworking club that generally contributes to their supply budget, but had to cut back this year like so many others have had to do. The couple finally started a GoFundMe to help them cope with rising costs and so they don't have to deny anyone who needs a toy for their children. Mike delivered one last message when he was interviewed: He hopes anyone who wants a present next year will let him know. He'll give it his best shot, wherever they are.

What do you think of that? These folks have more than full-time unpaid jobs that help other people, and they love their jobs. Life could be worse. Kind of makes you want to do something, doesn't it?

As we prepare for what I most sincerely hope is one of the last lost holidays of this pandemic, let's think about how we can ease this difficult time for someone who's struggling—maybe a call, a card, an unexpected pot of soup or other kindness. We all have the capacity to brighten someone's day.

And be well. I'll be back.

Groton Area COVID-19 Cases

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated December 16, 2020; 1:58 PM

JK	KG	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	Staff	Total
0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	2	7

A positive case is considered active for a minimum of ten days after onset of symptoms. It is important to note that not all reported cases have been in school or school activities during their infectious periods (48 hours prior to onset of symptoms).

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December 20th 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: +391 (94,727 total) Positivity Rate: 12.6%

Total Tests: 3107 (716,285 total)

Hospitalized: +26 (5411 total). 345 currently hospitalized -20)

Avera St. Luke's: 12 (-3) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 3 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 8 (-3) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +11 (1361 total)

Females: 6 Males: 5

70s+3, 80+=8

Counties: Beadle-1, Brown-1, Day-1, Lincoln-2, Minnehaha-3, Union-2, Yankon-1.

Recovered: +606 (85,096 total)

Active Cases: -226 (8,270)

Percent Recovered: 89.8%

Beadle (34) +3 positive, +5 recovered (110 active cases)

Brookings (24) +11 positive, +9 recovered (229 active cases)

Brown (51): +14 positive, +19 recovered (303 active cases)

Clark (2): +0 positive, +1 recovered (26 active cases)

Clay (11): +3 positive, +12 recovered (108 active cases)

Codington (66): +16 positive, +33 recovered (426 active cases)

Davison (52): +16 positive, +12 recovered (152 active cases)

Day (18): +2 positive, +11 recovered (58 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +4 positive, +0 recovered (49 active cases)

Faulk (10): +0 positive, +2 recovered (16 active cases)

Grant (21): +2 positive, +2 recovered (88 active cases)

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

Hughes (25): +8 positive, +20 recovered (158 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +17 positive, +25 recovered (220 active cases)

Lincoln (60): +29 positive, +38 recovered (593

active cases)

Marshall (4): +1 positive, +3 recovered (32 active cases)

McCook (21): +0 positive, +2 recovered (41 active cases)

McPherson (1): +0 positive, +0 recovery (16 active case)

Minnehaha (247): +80 positive, +159 recovered (2052 active cases)

Pennington (123): +51 positive, +76 recovered (1075 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +3 recovered (5 active cases)

Roberts (26): +1 positive, +7 recovered (118 active cases)

Spink (21): +0 positive, +6 recovered (76 active cases)

Walworth (14): +2 positive, +1 recovered (65 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 19:

- 6.3% rolling 14-day positivity
- 241 new positives
- 5,152 susceptible test encounters
- 154 currently hospitalized (+10)
- 2,885 active cases (-176)
- 1,231 total deaths (+6)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	398	366	753	8	Substantial	7.89%
Beadle	2459	2315	5027	34	Substantial	9.56%
Bennett	347	318	1071	8	Substantial	4.46%
Bon Homme	1445	1371	1843	22	Substantial	22.50%
Brookings	2815	2562	9664	24	Substantial	11.67%
Brown	4209	3855	10844	51	Substantial	17.62%
Brule	624	585	1665	6	Substantial	26.00%
Buffalo	406	384	841	10	Substantial	26.19%
Butte	834	758	2779	16	Substantial	20.54%
Campbell	109	103	202	3	Minimal	6.67%
Charles Mix	1063	975	3497	10	Substantial	27.42%
Clark	300	272	830	2	Substantial	6.25%
Clay	1561	1442	4391	11	Substantial	17.42%
Codington	3278	2860	8136	66	Substantial	21.28%
Corson	443	408	879	7	Substantial	22.64%
Custer	654	587	2333	8	Substantial	21.66%
Davison	2647	2443	5599	52	Substantial	13.88%
Day	504	428	1488	18	Substantial	17.95%
Deuel	394	333	968	6	Substantial	18.60%
Dewey	1224	1043	3446	10	Substantial	30.23%
Douglas	363	310	811	7	Substantial	18.09%
Edmunds	322	269	869	4	Substantial	16.81%
Fall River	425	375	2236	10	Substantial	17.76%
Faulk	307	281	582	10	Substantial	23.08%
Grant	804	694	1875	21	Substantial	22.16%
Gregory	473	425	1057	25	Substantial	12.50%
Haakon	220	167	460	5	Substantial	21.43%
Hamlin	575	499	1474	32	Substantial	9.26%
Hand	310	293	692	2	Moderate	11.54%
Hanson	302	279	585	3	Substantial	16.28%
Harding	88	76	150	0	Moderate	21.43%
Hughes	1928	1745	5443	25	Substantial	12.33%
Hutchinson	676	599	1989	14	Substantial	23.60%

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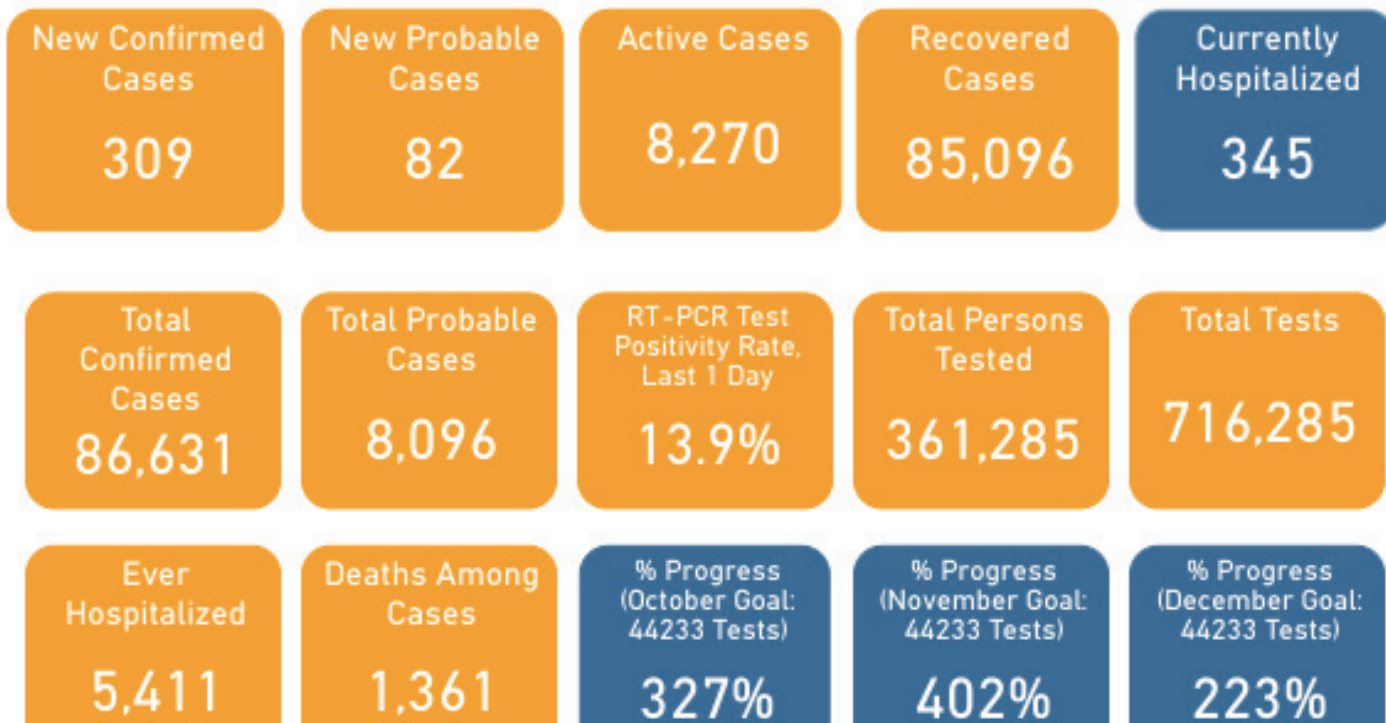
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Hyde	130	126	356	0	Minimal	12.50%
Jackson	257	214	849	8	Substantial	44.29%
Jerauld	258	229	483	15	Moderate	23.81%
Jones	63	63	180	0	Minimal	0.00%
Kingsbury	507	456	1377	13	Substantial	12.66%
Lake	971	891	2704	13	Substantial	18.24%
Lawrence	2423	2187	7448	27	Substantial	17.95%
Lincoln	6410	5757	16834	60	Substantial	22.18%
Lyman	510	475	1670	9	Substantial	10.84%
Marshall	249	213	972	4	Substantial	24.68%
McCook	650	588	1376	21	Substantial	24.29%
McPherson	173	156	491	1	Moderate	3.97%
Meade	2113	1893	6527	21	Substantial	21.25%
Mellette	213	193	642	2	Substantial	21.43%
Miner	218	194	488	6	Substantial	4.35%
Minnehaha	23980	21681	65859	247	Substantial	19.39%
Moody	520	442	1555	14	Substantial	33.73%
Oglala Lakota	1862	1658	6129	33	Substantial	15.11%
Pennington	10505	9307	32879	123	Substantial	23.58%
Perkins	258	213	644	9	Substantial	15.56%
Potter	292	285	702	2	Substantial	13.33%
Roberts	909	765	3675	26	Substantial	25.94%
Sanborn	300	283	595	3	Substantial	12.12%
Spink	683	586	1816	21	Substantial	18.48%
Stanley	260	239	750	2	Moderate	12.20%
Sully	103	93	239	3	Moderate	0.00%
Todd	1124	1034	3735	17	Substantial	17.28%
Tripp	611	549	1299	10	Substantial	15.49%
Turner	927	803	2319	47	Substantial	17.59%
Union	1512	1330	5197	30	Substantial	18.62%
Walworth	594	515	1595	14	Substantial	26.80%
Yankton	2354	2033	8049	23	Substantial	22.83%
Ziebach	281	225	689	7	Substantial	33.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1956	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3496	0
10-19 years	10438	0
20-29 years	17402	3
30-39 years	15701	12
40-49 years	13531	22
50-59 years	13436	69
60-69 years	10713	173
70-79 years	5628	287
80+ years	4382	795

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	49513	661
Male	45214	700

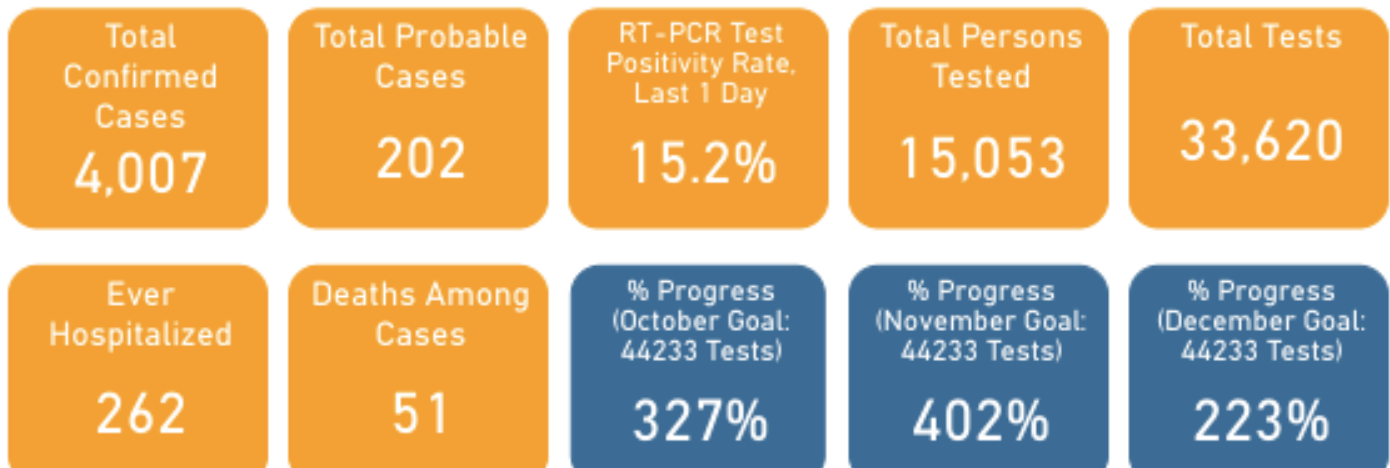
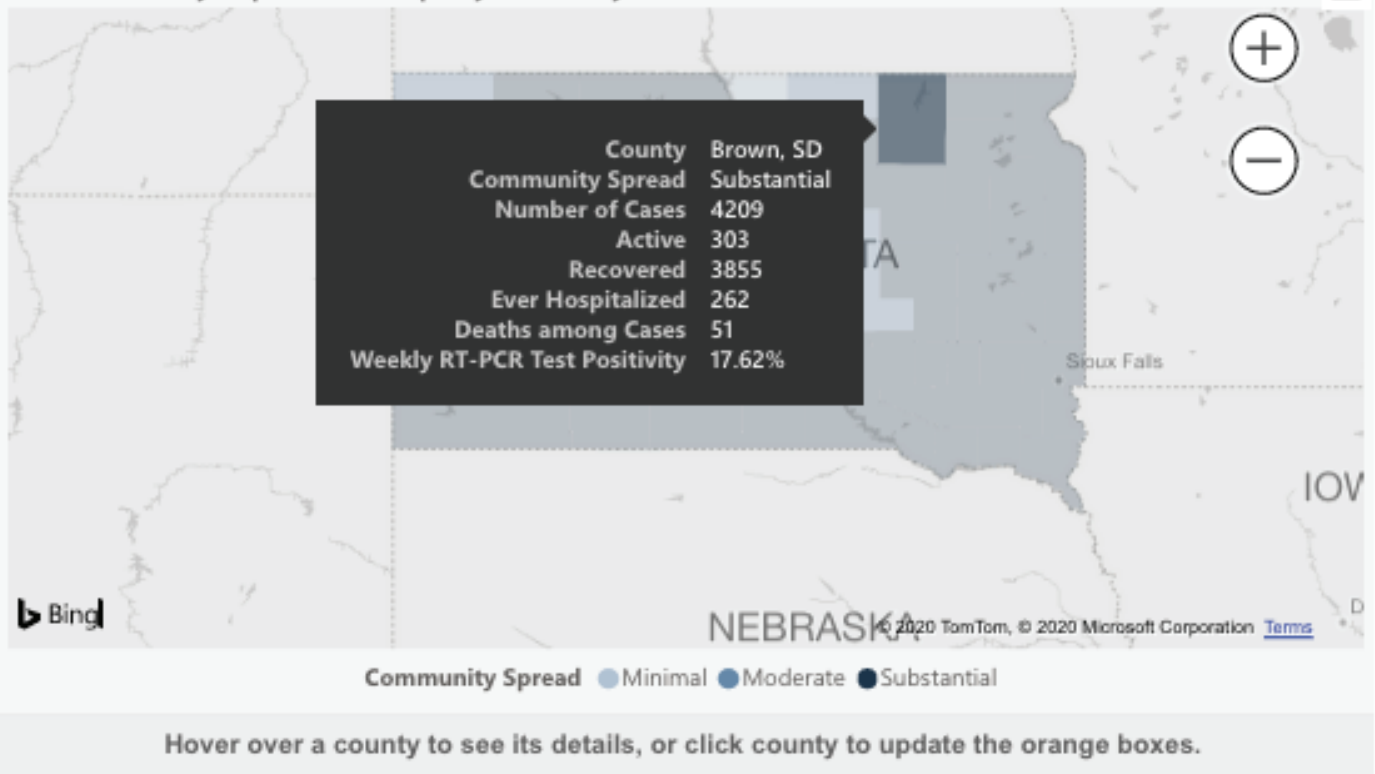
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



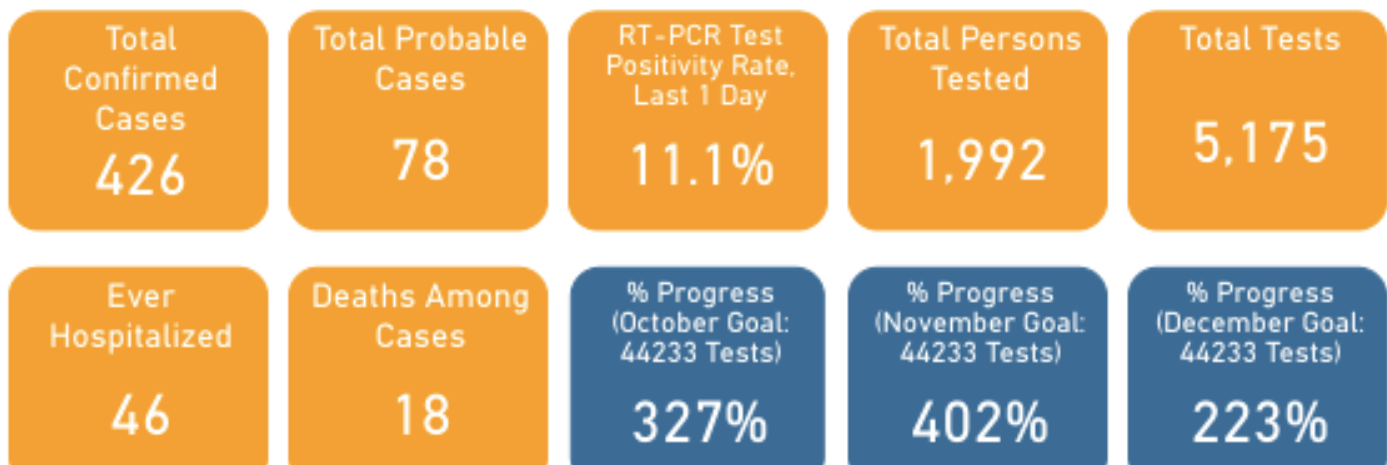
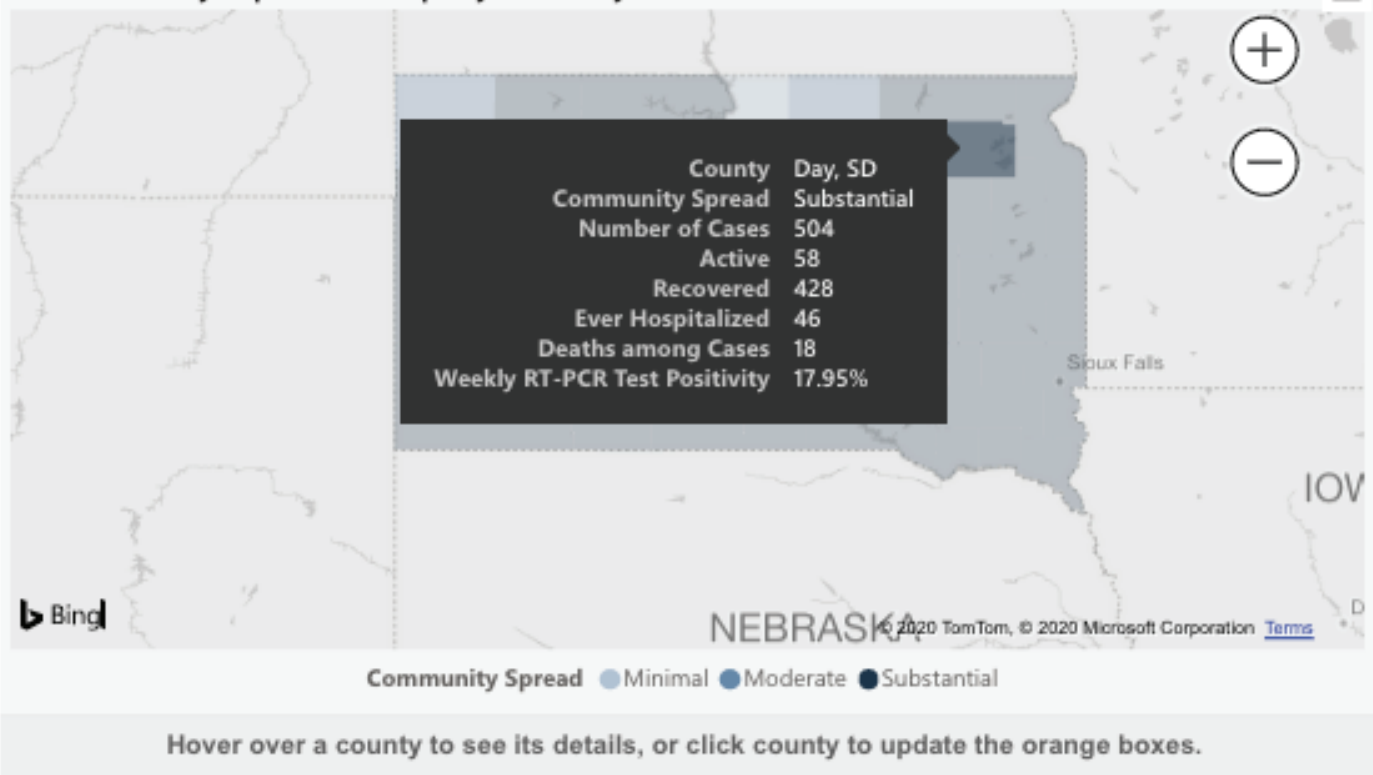
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Day County



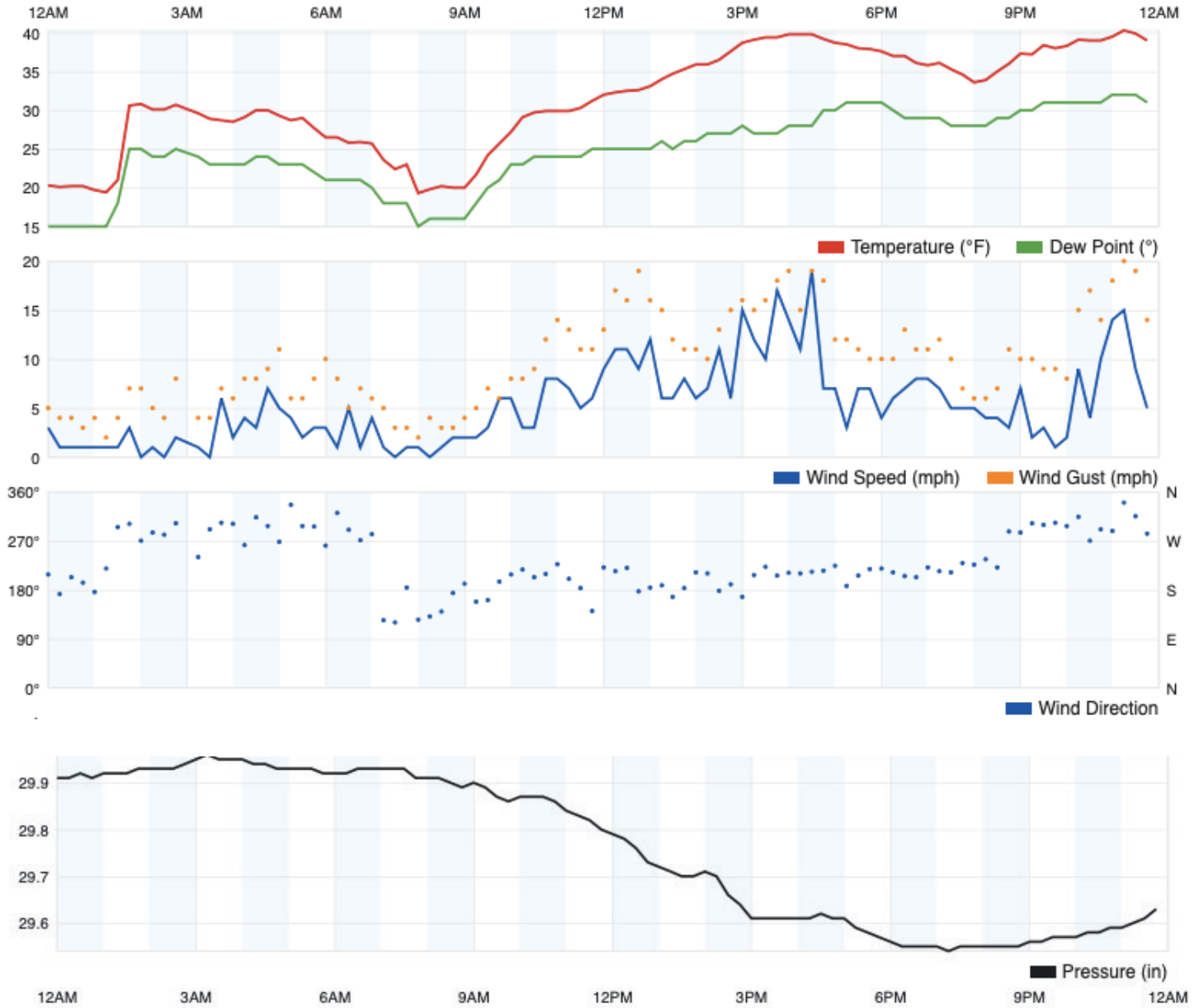
Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Monday



Sunny and Breezy

Monday Night



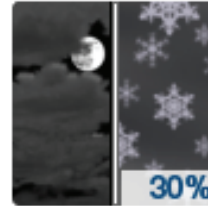
Increasing Clouds

Tuesday



Mostly Sunny

Tuesday Night



Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow and

Wednesday



Windy. Slight Chance Snow then Mostly



White Christmas?

Today



35-49°

Winds gusting to 50 mph

Tuesday



43-61°

Wednesday



18-27°

Up to 1" of snow possible
Much Colder

Warm Temperatures Today and Tuesday

Updated: 12/21/2020 5:38 AM Cent

A marked change in the weather is expected mid week. The holiday week will begin with gusty winds and highs well above normal. A low moves through Tuesday. Behind this low on Wednesday, temperatures will be much colder, winds will be strong, and up to an inch of snow is possible, especially across northeast SD.

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Today in Weather History

December 21, 1968: A blizzard visited South Dakota and Minnesota on the 21st and 22nd. Snowfall during the storm was generally 1 to 2 inches in the western part of South Dakota, to 5 to 10 inches in Minnesota. More than 12 inches of snow was reported from Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County to the southeast in Minnesota and up to 18 inches in east-central and southeast South Dakota. The snowfall, on top of an already-existing deep snowpack, was whipped by 30-50 mph winds causing reduced visibility to near zero, created snowdrifts up to 10 feet or more. Almost all forms of traffic were blocked on highways for Sunday and blocked most of the secondary roads as well as some other roads for nearly a week.

Early blizzard warnings and the fact that the blizzard occurred late Saturday through Sunday, the highway patrol reported a minimum of accidents and stranded travelers. Most schools were closed, and other activities were curtailed. Many utility lines were down. Record December snowfall amounts were recorded for more than 40 locations in Minnesota. Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County received 16 inches of snow from this storm, by far its largest daily snowfall on record for any month of the year. Clear Lake, in Deuel County, measured 18 inches of snow, which also remains the most substantial daily snowfall on record for any month in that location. Watertown and Bryant received nine inches from this blizzard, while Castlewood reported seven inches.

1967: An F4 tornado traveled 33 miles across Iron and Washington Counties in Missouri during an unusual time of day, 12:45 to 1:20 am. The tornado killed 3 and injured 52 others. Most of the intense damage occurred in the town of Potosi, about 55 miles southwest of St. Louis. The tornado swept through the business district, destroying City Hall, library, a large supermarket, and a shopping center complex. Northeast of town, two people were killed when their home was swept from its foundation. The Red Cross reported 24 homes and trailers, along with 14 businesses destroyed. 81 other houses and trailers were damaged.

1892 - Portland, OR, was buried under a record 27.5 inches of snow. (21st-24th) (The Weather Channel)

1929 - An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas. The storm produced 26 inches of snow at Hillsboro TX, 18 inches at El Dorado AR, and 14 inches at Bossier LA. (21st-22nd) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1964 - A great warm surge from the Pacific Ocean across Oregon and northern California brought torrential rains on a deep snow cover resulting in record floods. (David Ludlum)

1987 - High winds continued along the eastern slopes of the Rockies. During the morning hours winds gusted to 64 mph at Cheyenne WY, and reached 97 mph near Boulder CO. Gale force winds prevailed across the Great Lakes Region. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Seven cities in the eastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date, including Charleston SC with a reading of 78 degrees. A storm in the northwestern U.S. produced 22 inches of snow at Idaho City ID in two days, and up to two feet of snow at Happy Camp CA. Ski resorts in Idaho reported three to six feet of snow on the ground. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Forty cities in the north central U.S., including thirteen in Iowa, reported record low temperatures for the date. Havre and Jordan, MT, tied for honors as the cold spot in the nation with morning lows of 43 degrees below zero, and the temperature remained close to 40 degrees below zero through the daylight hours. Dickinson ND reported a morning low of 33 degrees below zero and a wind chill reading of 86 degrees below zero. The high for the date of 16 degrees below zero at Sioux Falls SD was December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary)

1998 - Cold air spread into the southern San Joaquin Valley of California. For the next four nights, temperatures in the agricultural portions of Fresno, Tulare, and Kern counties dropped below 28 degrees for several hours at a time. In some locations, temperatures dipped into the teens. The California citrus industry suffered more than \$600 million in damages due to the extreme cold.

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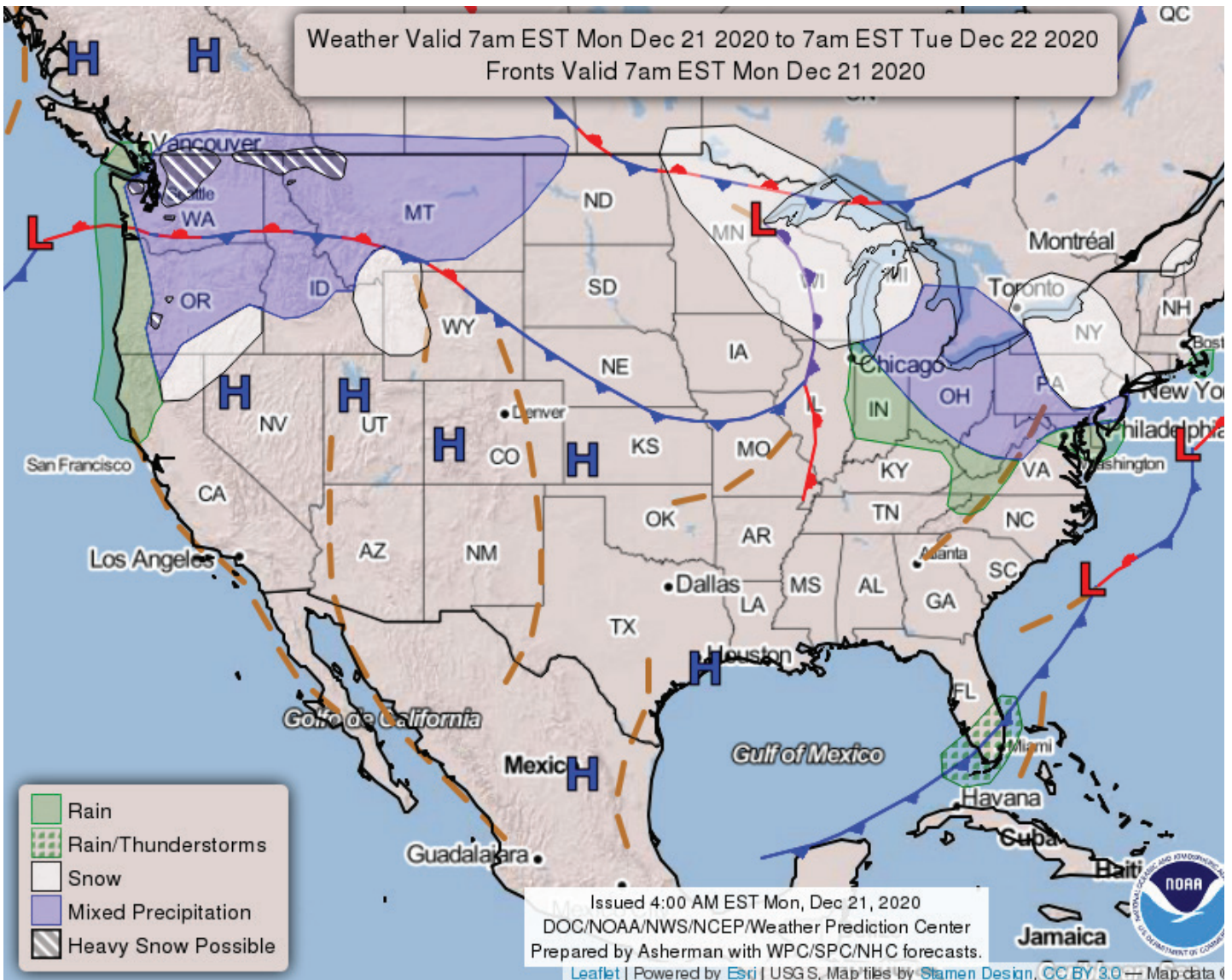
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 40 °F at 11:16 PM
Low Temp: 19 °F at 1:22 AM
Wind: 21 mph at 4:30 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 50° in 1893, 1979
Record Low: -31° in 1916
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.33
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.53
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:53 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:11 a.m.



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FACING FEAR WITH FACTS

A bright light on a dark night would frighten most individuals if it was unexpected. How much more frightening would it be if an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared and God's glory lit up the area where sheep were quietly sleeping, and shepherds were watching them carefully and constantly to make certain that they were safe.

Sensing the fear of the shepherds, the angel said confidently, "Don't be afraid of this Light!" The angel wanted to calm their pounding hearts. "I came with Good News. News that will bring great joy to everyone, everywhere who is willing to accept this Good News!"

How gracious is our God! The shepherds did what any of us would have done: react with apprehension and fear. Yet, God, in His love and mercy, first gave them His assurance that they were safe and then explained to them what had happened: "A Savior, Christ, who is the Anointed One, the One that you have been waiting for, even the LORD, has been born!"

There is a wonderful lesson here for each of us. Rarely do we get through any day without something unusual – sometimes a tragedy, perhaps a life-threatening or grief-producing event – invading our lives. It is normal and natural to react with fear when the unwelcomed comes.

But, as God said to the shepherds then and as He says to us every day, "Don't be afraid. Good News awaits you. Your Savior is with you. Turn to Him in faith and He will save you!"

Prayer: How thankful we are, Father, to know that Your Son, our Savior, is with us every moment of every day. Calm our fears and bring peace to our hearts through Him. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:8-12 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.

News from the Associated Press

Mom and pop coaches: 2 sports, 2 parents for Rapid City girl

By MATT CASE Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Just a few weeks removed from the end of her volleyball season, Olivia Kieffer is gearing up for her sophomore campaign with the Rapid City Christian girls' basketball team.

In years past, she would finish up a volleyball season that was coached by her mother, Elizabeth Kieffer, before moving on to basketball under AJ Trennepohl. This year is a bit different, however, as the new Lady Comets basketball head coach isn't only a familiar face to the program, but a very familiar face to Olivia.

Joe Kieffer, Olivia's father, has taken over the reigns of the Rapid City Christian squad after serving as an assistant last season, meaning Olivia is transitioning from being coached by her mother to being coached by her father. While some may consider it a curious situation or find it problematic, Olivia doesn't see it that way.

"I really enjoy it, and they both bring super different things, but awesome things," Olivia, a 5-foot-10 guard, said of her parents. "It's a good change, but I feel so blessed to be able to be coached by both of them."

Joe is no stranger to coaching his daughter, as he's taught her the game since she was in second grade. High school basketball is, of course, different than elementary and middle school basketball, and he said he recognizes the different approaches to it, especially as the program leader. He is grateful their dynamic does work.

"Thankfully, we have a really good relationship or else it could get really awkward," he said with a chuckle. "She says she really enjoys it. She really likes that. Growing up as a coach's kid, there's a lot of pluses to it and a lot of minuses to it, but we hope the pluses outweigh all those minuses."

Joe said he's taught Olivia that her last name and her connection to the coaching staff doesn't guarantee her anything in sports, and that she needs to earn everything on her own merits. In response, he added, she's done just that, the Rapid City Journal reported.

"Olivia's a very driven player," he said. "She doesn't need her parents to coach her to get to where she's at. She's got that mindset, and she likes to be challenged and she appreciates the hard work it takes."

Her father and mother have a few differences in coaching styles and methods, Olivia said, but it's mostly similar. While they push their players to work hard, they always look for places to lighten things up.

"They both hold us all to a super high standard, but both practices are always really fun," she said of volleyball and basketball. "We find a way to have fun."

Under Trennepohl, the Lady Comets finished the 2019-20 season one game over .500 and were knocked out of postseason contention following a close 63-58 loss to Lead-Deadwood in the Region 8 tournament.

Heading into this season, Joe Kieffer said he and Trennepohl decided to swap coaching duties as Trennepohl takes on more full-time administrative responsibilities with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and the two discussed the future of girls' basketball at Rapid City Christian.

"We talked about the level of accountability the program should get to, and we just mutually agreed that it might be better if we switched roles, so that's what we did," Joe Kieffer said. "You have to switch your mindset as a coach because the assistant's role is very different from the head coach's role, and so I switched mindsets, got excited about it and here we are."

He wants to put the program on the map in terms of being a perennial contender, especially with RC Christian, a Class A school, moving to the Black Hills Conference next season. While they compete against strong teams, he said his squad's typical Class B slate — seven of their 16 scheduled opponents hail from Class B — has them lagging in their endeavor to develop a "true program."

For the 2020-21 season, the Lady Comets are emphasizing outworking their opponents, and outrebounding them.

"You can only have so many things you're going to focus on, and that's definitely what we're going to focus on," Joe Kieffer said. "We don't have a lot of experience with girls playing in offseasons, so our

basketball IQ as a team is lower than a lot of opponents, but you can really make up for that with a little attitude and a little effort.”

Morgan Swarthout, a 5-foot-9 senior forward, said her team isn't focused on wins and losses but simply playing their best. If they're able to fix some of last season's pitfalls, however, positive results could happen.

“Definitely talking with each other and really communicating on defense, and then rebounding as well, making sure we're finding our girls and boxing them out,” Swarthout said. “If we can do that, we'll have a good chance at winning some games.”

Olivia Kieffer said the Lady Comets' success this season will depend on cohesion, with players knowing their assignments, reading the game, but not acting like “robots” on the court.

“I think we can win a lot of games this year, but that's not really where our focus is,” she said. “We're just trying to go out there and focus; be the best we can and just execute what we know how to execute.”

Umude lifts South Dakota over NAIA Mount Marty 84-44

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Stanley Umude scored 21 points with eight rebounds as South Dakota easily beat Mount Marty 84-44 on Sunday.

Umude is the Summit League's top scorer and was 8-for-11 shooting in 23 minutes. A.J. Plitzuweit had 13 points for South Dakota (2-6). Mason Archambault added 11 points off the bench. Damani Hayes had eight rebounds and four points.

Allen Wilson had 12 points for the NAIA Lancers, the only Mount Marty player in double figures. Jonah Larson added six points and eight rebounds.

The Summit League opener is next for South Dakota, taking on Denver in back-to-back games Jan. 2-3.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/Collegebasketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Elements of this story were generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

South Dakota's COVID-19 case count continues to decline

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The number of COVID-19 cases in South Dakota over the last two weeks continued to fall compared to the rest of the country, although the state's death count still remains high on a per capita basis.

State health officials on Sunday reported 391 cases in the last day, for a total of 94,727 infections since the start of the pandemic. The state that had been among the worst in the country for the coronavirus in late summer and fall now ranks 16th for new cases per capita over the last two weeks, according to The COVID Tracking Project.

One in every 225 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week, the project reported.

The update showed 11 deaths in the last day, bringing the total number of fatalities to 1,361, of which 415 have been in December. The state is ranked No. 7 per capita at 153 deaths per 100,000 people, Johns Hopkins University researchers reported.

Three of the deaths reported Sunday were in Minnehaha County and two came from Lincoln and Union counties. There was one fatality each confirmed in Beadle, Brown, Day and Yankton counties.

South Dakota had vaccinated 6,311 residents with the Pfizer vaccine as of Sunday morning.

UK holds crisis talks as France closes border on virus fears

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Trucks waiting to get in and out of Britain backed up for miles and people were stranded at airports Monday as many countries imposed stringent travel restrictions over concerns about a new

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strain of the coronavirus that is spreading in southeast England.

Countries across the world have halted air travel to the U.K. while France has banned trucks from entering for a period of 48 hours while the new variant is assessed. There were rising hopes Monday, however, that France would allow traffic to flow again, with truck drivers having to take rapid coronavirus tests on arrival.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson will chair a meeting of the government's emergency committee later Monday amid mounting concerns over the new restrictions that could lead to shortages of food if they are not reversed soon. The government has already urged against travel to Kent, the southeastern county where many ports are located.

Most of the perishable goods coming into Britain from France arrive in trucks. Goods carried by containers on ships, such as manufactured products are not affected by the ban.

Though the French ban does not prevent goods from crossing the English Channel into Britain, the confusion over the new regulations was adding to long backups on both sides at a time when traffic was already being snarled by Christmas-related traffic and uncertainty over Britain's future trade relationship with the European Union.

Around 10,000 trucks pass through Britain's Port of Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the U.K.'s trade in goods. British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said France's ban was "slightly surprising" — but tried to calm nerves by noting that the majority of Britain's trade was not affected.

Shapps insisted that the public won't notice any shortages "for the most part."

France's Minister of Transport Jean-Baptiste Djebbari indicated that a solution was coming. In a tweet, he said that "in the coming hours, at a European level, we will put a solid health protocol in place so that the flow from the United Kingdom can resume."

A croaky-voiced French President Emmanuel Macron told a Cabinet meeting by video Monday: "We are looking at systematic testing upon arrival." Macron has been working from the Elysee Palace as he recovers from his COVID-19 infection.

Canada, India, Hungary and Switzerland are among the latest countries to halt flights from the U.K., following the lead of many in Europe. In the U.S., the governor of New York state said he wanted a ban on flights from Britain to New York City. France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland and Ireland were among those who on Sunday announced widespread restrictions on flights from the U.K. Eurotunnel, the rail service that links Britain with mainland Europe, has also suspended services.

The moves come in the wake of Johnson's announcement on Saturday that he was placing London and the southeast of England in a new Tier 4 level of restrictions after a warning from its scientific advisers — using what is widely considered to be one of the world's most sophisticated genome sequencing regimes — that it had detected a new variant of the coronavirus that may be more contagious.

Johnson said early indications are that the new variant of the virus is 70% more transmissible and is driving the rapid spread of new infections in the capital and surrounding areas. Johnson will meet with the COBRA civil contingencies committee later Monday amid warnings of "significant disruption" around the ports in the English Channel.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said Monday that while preliminary analysis in the U.K. suggests the new variant is "significantly more transmissible," there is no indication that infections are more severe. Experts, however, have stressed that even if the new strain is not more lethal, it's inevitable that more cases will lead to more hospitalizations and subsequent virus-related deaths.

The Stockholm-based agency said a few cases with the new variant have been reported already by Iceland, Denmark and the Netherlands. It also cited media reports of cases in Belgium and Italy.

Roman Woelfel, head of the Bundeswehr Institute of Microbiology in Munich, said the variants being described by the U.K. have not been seen in patient samples screened in Germany. However, he noted the U.K.'s consortium for sequencing the virus is particularly good at finding new variants.

In Brussels, experts from EU member countries were meeting to discuss the new variant on Monday.

The chaos at the border comes at a time of huge uncertainty for the U.K., less than two weeks before the final stage of Britain's exit from the EU.

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Though the U.K. left the bloc on Jan. 31, it is in a transition period that effectively sees it abide by EU rules until the end of this year. Talks on a post-Brexit trade relationship are still deadlocked and are set to resume on Monday.

Retailers played down fears of food shortages in the short term at least, but warned that there could be problems if the travel bans last for a while and if the U.K. and the EU fail to agree a post-Brexit trade deal.

The British Retail Consortium warned that the closure of France-to-U.K. traffic would create trading "difficulties" in the busy Christmas period.

"Retailers have stocked up on goods ahead of Christmas which should prevent immediate problems," said Andrew Opie, Director of Food & Sustainability at the British Retail Consortium.

"However, any prolonged closure of the French border would be a problem as the U.K. enters the final weeks before the transition ends."

Trade association Logistics U.K. has urged people to stay calm and not to rush to supermarkets to stockpile goods.

"Shoppers should not panic buy," said Kevin Green, its director of marketing and communications. "If freight gets moving again today, then the overall impact on fresh produce arriving to supermarkets should be fairly minimal."

Associated Press writers Frank Jordans in Berlin, Thomas Adamson in Paris and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed to this report.

Follow AP coverage of the virus outbreak at <https://apnews.com/VirusOutbreak> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>.

COVID-19 spikes follow in prisons after inmate transfers

By CARY ASPINWALL of The Marshall Project and ED WHITE of The Associated Press
DETROIT (AP) — Families of men incarcerated at Michigan's Kinross Correctional Facility believed its remote location would spare it from a deadly COVID-19 outbreak. For a while, they seemed to be right.

Kinross, built on the grounds of a former Air Force base in the Upper Peninsula, is closer to Canada than it is to Detroit. Unlike most prisons in Michigan, Kinross had remained almost unscathed by the novel coronavirus with only one case between March and October.

But on Oct. 28, corrections officials transferred nine prisoners to Kinross from Marquette Branch Prison, several hours west, where COVID-19 was running rampant. There were 837 confirmed cases by late October, 350 of which were still active when the men were transferred.

Roughly three weeks later, Kinross had its first major outbreak, corrections department data showed. Though agency officials say it's not because of the transfers, more than 1,100 prisoners have now been infected, at least seven have died and more than 100 guards have fallen ill. The prisoners who came to Kinross had been transferred twice, sent first to Marquette after a riot where they were held, and then had tested positive for COVID-19 there before leaving for Kinross, officials said.

In prisons around the country, COVID-19 outbreaks have followed transfers of prisoners or prison workers. Nearly all of the 25 state prison systems and the federal Bureau of Prisons that responded to a survey conducted by The Marshall Project and The Associated Press said they had reduced or limited the number of prisoners they moved due to the pandemic. Eight states halted the practice except in special circumstances. The reductions were keeping in line with medical guidelines.

But most of those states lifted their restrictions by September and few prison systems heeded the earlier lessons as the pandemic worsened this winter, worrying families of prisoners and correctional officers who work in the prisons.

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

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Dallas.

The coronavirus has killed more than 300,000 people in the U.S., and cases are rising again this winter after leveling off in the late summer months. There have been more than 275,000 cases inside U.S. prisons. Prisons are a particular concern because social distancing is virtually nonexistent behind bars, prisoners sleep in close quarters and share bathrooms, and each prison has varying policies on personal protective equipment and who gets it.

Oklahoma's prisons reported relatively few cases of COVID-19 until state officials closed several units because of budget cuts, transferring more than 4,500 prisoners between facilities from late July to September. Major outbreaks followed, with more than 5,800 prisoners testing positive and at least 33 dying from the virus.

In Amarillo, Texas, officers who worked at the Neal Unit prison were proud the facility remained unscathed by the virus, but that changed in September. That's when strict protocols were loosened by the warden, including mandatory isolation of transferred prisoners, according to a longtime correction officer at the prison who had direct knowledge of the protocols but was not authorized to discuss them publicly and spoke to The Marshall Project on condition of anonymity.

The virus soon took over, infecting hundreds of prisoners and killing a chaplain and a food service manager at the prison. Jeremy Desel, spokesman for the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, said the cases were found mostly among prisoners who were asymptomatic and disputed the officer's account. "There has been no relaxing of protocols. If anything they've been tightened," Desel said.

Families of those who've died from the virus in California prisons have directly blamed transfers for the uncontrolled spread of disease, including an outbreak at San Quentin State Prison that led to 28 deaths. The family of a prisoner who died filed a notice they would sue, alleging officials ignored health officials' recommendations when they transferred high-risk prisoners from California Institute for Men in Chino, where an outbreak was already spreading. Health experts had warned of transfers between facilities, saying "mass movement of high-risk inmates between institutions is ill-advised and potentially dangerous," and would likely spread the virus between prisons, according to the notice.

Transfers have also been linked to outbreaks in the federal prison system, including a recent outbreak at the facility in Fort Dix, New Jersey. Families and advocates say it was the result of the Bureau of Prisons transferring 150 prisoners there from a facility in Ohio that's been battling COVID-19 cases for months.

Michigan had some of the worst and earliest outbreaks of any state prison system. About 20,000 prisoners have contracted the virus since March, and at least 102 have died. Central Michigan Correctional Facility currently has one of the largest outbreaks in the country, with more than 2,000 prisoners testing positive.

State officials said they have followed proper infection-control protocols. Chris Gautz, a spokesman for the Michigan Department of Corrections, acknowledged the transfer of the nine men from Marquette to Kinross on Oct. 28, but insisted that transfers "are not the issue" in the virus surge.

"We've looked into that," Gautz said. "All prisoners who had previously been positive were in a step-down phase, meaning they were no longer contagious. It wasn't until weeks later when there was a big spike in Kinross."

But prisoners at Kinross and their families say the virus spiked within roughly three weeks of the transfers, within the window medical experts say the virus remains contagious. Some of the men transferred still had symptoms and were moved into the prison's general population too quickly, said Matt Tjapkes, who runs a nonprofit dedicated to prisoners' medical rights in Michigan called Humanity for Prisoners.

"The prisoners feel so helpless because they can't control it and they can't stop it," he said. "They feel like they're sitting ducks — and they are."

Corrections officers, too, are worried about the safety of transfers, said Byron Osborn, president of the union that represents most of Michigan's correctional officers. More than 2,500 correctional staff have contracted the virus in Michigan and at least three have died.

"There is obviously not a lot of definitive information from the communicable disease experts on the

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spread of the COVID-19 virus or on the topic of when infected people are no longer contagious," Osborn said. "We believe that everyone would agree that this is problematic."

Families of the prisoners who've fallen ill at Kinross say they're angry because the movement of prisoners is the one thing the corrections department controls.

Amy Wallace's husband is one of the men incarcerated at Kinross who caught the virus and recovered. But she said a state prison spokesman recently gave a statement to local media that "pinched a nerve."

The spokesman said it was difficult to know how COVID arrived at the prison, she recalled.

"Well, OK. We do," she said.

Michigan state Sen. Ed McBroom, a Republican from the Upper Peninsula, chairs an oversight committee that has held hearings on the corrections department's response to COVID-19. He said he has no firm knowledge that points to transfers as the culprit in spreading the virus behind bars. But he called the agency opaque and overly positive, and didn't give it high marks for communication.

"We have to dig in and find out why these outbreaks happen," he said in an interview. "Were mistakes made? I just don't know."

Jennifer Gross thought Kinross' remote location might keep her fiancé, Robert Vermett, and the other men locked up there safer from the virus, even though she hasn't been able to visit. Vermett is serving a life sentence for a murder conviction.

Days after the transfers, Vermett told her the virus appeared to have made it inside. He got sick, too and remained seriously ill for more than two weeks.

In an email to her on Nov. 18, shortly before he tested positive, he said: "This WHOLE F—— COMPOUND IS INFECTED. Every unit, the control center, the gym, the school, the chow hall, every where ... So why are they moving anybody anywhere?"

With winter at hand, the virus whips up winds of uncertainty

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

Coronavirus cases spiking nationwide. A chill, existential and literal, setting in once more. And now: a winter likely to be streaked by a soundtrack of sirens instead of silver bells.

It was winter when the pandemic began, and it will be winter long before it's over. Weary and traumatized from months of death and confinement, Americans are being handed mixed messages, from governments to their own internal clocks running haywire on flattened time.

Shouldn't it be over by now? After all, vaccines are arriving. But before the average person will get inoculated, winter will exact its toll.

The holidays are wreathed in danger for those who travel and may spread the virus — and those who don't and may suffer from isolation. Small gifts of normalcy, like in-person schooling and indoor dining, are being interrupted again. A new president will take the helm of a deeply cleaved country. And a belated reckoning with social issues marches on.

"We need to hunker down and get through this fall and winter, because it's not going to be easy," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the country's top infectious-disease expert, was saying as early as September.

Now, winter is at hand — a winter like no other in living American memory. And with its arrival Monday, a nation holds its breath.

"I think there's a pretty common sentiment that a lot of people feel like the world is falling apart," says Monica Johnson, a psychologist in New York who primarily serves patients from marginalized groups.

For months now, activities like socially distanced hangs in parks and bike rides have been the social capital that has allowed many Americans to reclaim a semblance of pre-pandemic life. For example, New York's CitiBike broke its monthly ridership record in September, a Lyft spokesperson says.

Winter is different. "Going outside" becomes a very different act in the cold, and indoors — where winter naturally draws us when the temperatures drop — is where the virus has spread most aggressively.

Exhibit A: public transportation, typically a mainstay of American cities in foul and fine conditions. Ridership of subway, bus and commuter rail systems has plunged this year.

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Metropolitan Transit Authority bus operator Regan Weal has driven three Manhattan routes over the course of the pandemic, the beginning of which was “mentally exhausting,” she says. While both ridership and conditions for drivers have improved, she says, it remains fraught. More than 130 MTA workers have died of COVID-related causes.

“I worry about when it gets cold, and now people are going to want to be on the bus more because they don’t want to walk to the train,” she says.

Novelist Laura Ingalls Wilder, chronicler of the American pioneer era, titled one of her “Little House” books “The Long Winter.” Barbara Mayes Boustead, an Omaha-based meteorologist instructor with NOAA, used Wilder’s writing as inspiration to co-develop the “Accumulated Winter Season Severity Index.”

“In Laura’s story, really, the winter is that antagonist out there, that thing that’s preventing them from getting what they need. In the world we’re in this year, I don’t know if COVID is the compounding factor or the antagonist here,” Mayes Boustead says. “It may be that COVID is the antagonist, and then the winter, should it be severe in some places, could be a compounding factor.”

That’s playing out in rural eastern Pennsylvania, where English teacher Kerry Palumbo, 52, had been heading into work every day at Palmerton High School to instruct a mixture of in-person and virtual students. Palmerton, which Palumbo describes as “like Brigadoon” for its small-town charm, has had many of the area’s cases because of its commuting culture and its proximity to ski areas.

Palumbo’s entire family — she has parents in their 70s, two children in college and siblings who telecommute — had hoped to meet for Christmas.

“My biggest fear is that I will be the one who brings it to my family. I don’t know how I would handle the guilt if that happens,” she texted in October. But by Thanksgiving break, her classroom had moved back home amid rising cases in Carbon County, which had seen more than 2,100 cases and 85 COVID-related deaths as of Sunday night.

“None of us feel as confident as we did before Thanksgiving that Christmas will be in person this year,” she texted last week.

Rio Santisteban, 27, lives close enough to their New York City workplace that they can usually just walk when they have to go in. Their pandemic experience has been a “roller coaster” that summer improved. Winter is different: They have seasonal affective disorder that typically manifests as low-grade depression.

“I start losing the energy to go outside or see friends,” Santisteban says. “It becomes a lot more difficult and intense, a lot more of a journey and a challenge to actually see people rather than just sort of pull up and do nothing.”

To cope, the administrative assistant ordered an array of lights to stave off the dark and will “suck it up and freeze” to see friends outdoors during the winter months.

That’s in line with recommendations from Alycia Scott, a psychologist who recommends that those fighting SAD counter the tendency to isolate. Scott has seen a growing “feeling of kind of impotence and not being able to do anything, especially because of the backdrop of coronavirus” among her patients, who are primarily Black and brown.

For SAD patients, she also recommends sun lamps. The makers of light therapy lamps that top consumer recommendation lists report growing demand. One, Carex, has seen a 180% surge in demand compared to 2019 since August, a spokesperson says.

Another type of lamp may help restaurants endure: heat lamps. In late September, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio extended outdoor dining year-round, granting a lifeline sought by the New York City Hospitality Alliance. How many of the city’s 27,000-odd restaurants have already permanently closed remains unclear, but the city comptroller’s office estimates it’s at least over 1,200.

Restaurateur Philippe Massoud of ILLI, a Manhattan restaurant, has lost more than two-thirds of his 180-person staff during the pandemic but had remained open until the pandemic clawed indoor dining back again. He wasn’t sure if he could withstand a second shutdown during the winter months.

“I never thought that I would be a master of emotional elasticity,” he said before the new shutdown. “Waking up one day thinking I have nothing, waking up the other day and having all sorts of hope and

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dreams that okay, things are going to be okay. And then the third day, I'm losing everything all over again."

Before being elected president, Joe Biden issued a warning: "We're about to go into a dark winter." After he won, he said he believed Americans had voted to "marshal the forces of science and the forces of hope in the great battles of our time."

With vaccines rolling out, a tangible end — or, at least, a way forward — is in sight. Before that moment arrives, though, it's clear that Americans will have to navigate, as Santisteban puts it, this "horrible, horrible winter that may or may not be horrible" — a winter dreaded, feared, unwanted, but tinged anew with hope.

Follow AP journalist Mallika Sen on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/mallikavsen>.

Congress seals agreement on \$900 billion COVID relief bill

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Capitol Hill negotiators sealed a deal on a \$900 billion COVID-19 economic relief package, finally delivering long-overdue help to businesses and individuals and providing money to deliver vaccines to a nation eager for them.

The package, expected to draw votes in Congress on Monday, would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit and a \$600 direct stimulus payment to most Americans, along with a new round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

It came together Sunday after months of battling and posturing, but the negotiating dynamic changed in Republicans' favor after the election and as the end of the congressional session neared. President-elect Joe Biden was eager for a deal to deliver long-awaited help to suffering people and a boost to the economy, even though it was less than half the size that Democrats wanted this fall.

Biden praised the bipartisan spirit that produced the measure, which he called "just the beginning."

"This is a model for the challenging work ahead for our nation," Biden said Sunday in a statement.

House leaders informed lawmakers that they would vote on the legislation on Monday, and the Senate was likely to vote on Monday, too. Lawmakers were eager to leave Washington and close out a tumultuous year.

"There will be another major rescue package for the American people," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said in announcing the agreement for the relief bill. "It is packed with targeted policies to help struggling Americans who have already waited too long."

Democrats acknowledged it wasn't as robust a relief package as they initially sought — or, they say, the country needs. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi vowed more to come once President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

"It is a first step," she said. "We have to do more."

A fight over Federal Reserve emergency powers was resolved Saturday night by the Senate's top Democrat, Chuck Schumer of New York, and conservative Republican Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania. That breakthrough led to a final round of negotiations Sunday.

Still, delays in finalizing the agreement prompted the House to pass a one-day stopgap spending bill to prevent a government shutdown at midnight Sunday. The Senate was likely to pass the measure Sunday night as well.

The final agreement would be the largest spending measure yet. It combined \$900 billion for COVID-19 relief with a \$1.4 trillion government-wide funding plan and lots of other unrelated measures on taxes, health, infrastructure and education. The government-wide funding would keep the government open through September.

Passage neared as coronavirus cases and deaths spiked and evidence piled up that the economy was struggling. The legislation had been held up by months of dysfunction, posturing and bad faith. But talks turned serious in recent days as lawmakers on both sides finally faced the deadline of acting before leaving Washington for Christmas.

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"This bill is a good bill. Tonight is a good night. But it is not the end of the story, it is not the end of the job," Schumer told reporters. "Anyone who thinks this bill is enough does not know what's going on in America."

The \$300 per week bonus jobless benefit was one half the supplemental federal unemployment benefit provided under the \$1.8 billion CARES Act in March and would be limited to 11 weeks instead of 16 weeks. The direct \$600 stimulus payment to most people would also be half the March payment, subject to the same income limits in which an individual's payment began to phase out after \$75,000.

The CARES Act was credited with keeping the economy from falling off a cliff amid widespread lockdowns this spring, but Republicans controlling the Senate cited debt concerns in pushing against Democratic demands. Republican politicians, starting with President Donald Trump, focused more on reopening the economy and less on taxpayer-financed steps like supplemental jobless benefits.

Progress came after a bipartisan group of pragmatists and moderates devised a \$908 billion plan that built a middle ground position that the top four leaders of Congress — the GOP and Democratic leaders of both the House and Senate — used as the basis for their talks. The lawmakers urged leaders on both sides to back off of hard-line positions.

"We put our heads down and worked around the clock for nearly a month to produce a bipartisan, bicameral bill to address the emergency needs of our country," the bipartisan group of about a dozen lawmakers said in a statement. "Our consensus bill was the foundation of this final package."

Republicans were most intent on reviving the Paycheck Protection Program with \$284 billion, which would cover a second round of PPP grants to especially hard-hit businesses. Democrats won set-asides for low-income and minority communities.

Late-breaking decisions would limit \$300 per week bonus jobless benefits — one half the supplemental federal unemployment benefit provided under the CARES Act in March — to 11 weeks instead of 16 weeks as before. The direct \$600 stimulus payment to most people would be half the March payment, subject to the same income limits in which an individual's payment begins to phase out after \$75,000.

After the announcement, Schumer and Pelosi, D-Calif., announced additional details, including \$25 billion in rental assistance, \$15 billion for theaters and other live venues, \$82 billion for local schools, colleges and universities, and \$10 billion for child care.

The governmentwide appropriations bill would fund agencies through next September. That measure was likely to provide a last \$1.4 billion installment for Trump's U.S.-Mexico border wall as a condition of winning his signature.

The bill was an engine to carry much of Capitol Hill's unfinished business, including 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 addition would extend a batch of soon-to-expire tax breaks, including one for craft brewers, wineries and distillers.

It also would carry numerous clean energy provisions, \$7 billion to increase access to broadband, \$4 billion to help other nations vaccinate their people, \$14 billion for cash-starved transit systems, Amtrak and airports.

Democrats failed in a monthslong battle to deliver direct fiscal relief to states and local governments, but they successfully pressed for \$22 billion would help states and local governments with COVID-19-related health expenses like testing and vaccines.

The end-of-session rush also promised relief for victims of shockingly steep surprise medical bills, a phenomenon that often occurs when providers drop out of insurance company networks.

Report: gov't spyware targets phones of Al-Jazeera reporters

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Dozens of journalists at Al-Jazeera, the Qatari state-owned media company, have been targeted by advanced spyware in an attack likely linked to the governments of Saudi

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Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, a cybersecurity watchdog said Sunday.

Citizen Lab at the University of Toronto said it traced malware that infected the personal phones of 36 journalists, producers, anchors and executives at Al-Jazeera back to the Israel-based NSO Group, which has been widely condemned for selling spyware to repressive governments.

Most unnerving to the investigators was that iMessages were infecting targeted cellphones without the users taking any action — what's known as a zero-click vulnerability. Through push notifications alone, the malware instructed the phones to upload their content to servers linked to the NSO Group, Citizen Lab said, turning journalists' iPhones into powerful surveillance tools without even luring users to click on suspicious links or threatening texts.

The coordinated attacks on Qatari-funded Al-Jazeera, which Citizen Lab described as the largest concentration of phone hacks targeting a single organization, occurred in July, just weeks before the Trump administration announced the normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE, the archival to Qatar. The breakthrough deal took public what had been a long-secret alliance. Analysts say normalization likely will lead to stronger cooperation in digital surveillance between Israel and Persian Gulf sheikhdoms.

Apple said it was aware of the Citizen Lab report and said the latest version of its mobile operating system, iOS 14, "delivered new protections against these kinds of attacks." It sought to reassure users that NSO doesn't target the average iPhone owner, but rather sells its software to foreign governments to target a limited group. Apple said it has not been able to independently verify Citizen Lab's analysis.

Citizen Lab, which has been tracking NSO spyware for four years, tied the attacks "with medium confidence" to the Emirati and Saudi governments, based on their past targeting of dissidents at home and abroad with the same spyware. The two countries are embroiled in a bitter geopolitical dispute with Qatar in which hacking and cyber surveillance have increasingly become favored tools.

In 2017, the two Gulf nations and their allies imposed a blockade on Qatar over its alleged support for extremist groups, a charge Doha denies. The UAE and Saudi Arabia served the tiny country with a list of demands, among them shutting down its influential Arabic-language TV network, which the UAE and Saudi Arabia see as promoting a political agenda at odds with their own. The feud continues to fester, although officials recently have indicated a resolution may be within reach.

Emirati and Saudi authorities did not respond to requests for comment.

The NSO Group cast doubt on Citizen Lab's accusations in a statement but said it was "unable to comment on a report that we have not yet seen." The firm said it provides technology for the sole purpose of enabling "governmental law enforcement agencies to tackle serious organized crime and counterterrorism." Nevertheless, it added, "when we receive credible evidence of misuse ... we take all necessary steps in accordance with our product misuse investigation procedure in order to review the allegations." NSO does not identify its customers.

Prior to Sunday's report, NSO's spyware has repeatedly been found deployed to hack journalists, lawyers, human rights defenders and dissidents. Most notably, the spyware was implicated in the gruesome killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was dismembered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018 and whose body has never been found. Several alleged targets of the spyware, including a close friend of Khashoggi and several Mexican civil society figures, sued NSO in an Israeli court over the hacking.

The NSO Group's surveillance software, known as Pegasus, is designed to bypass detection and mask its activity. The malware infiltrates phones to vacuum up personal and location data and surreptitiously control the smartphone's microphones and cameras, allowing hackers to spy on reporters' face-to-face meetings with sources.

"It's not only very scary, but it's the holy grail of phone hacking," said Bill Marczak, a senior researcher at Citizen Lab. "You can be using your phone normally, completely unaware that someone else is looking at everything you're doing."

The Citizen Lab researchers connected the hacks to previously identified Pegasus operators in attacks attributed to Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the last four years.

Rania Dridi, a newscaster at the London-based satellite channel Al Araby, never noticed anything amiss. Although she said she's accustomed to Emirati and Saudi criticism over her reporting on human rights and

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the UAE's role in wars in Libya and Yemen, she was shocked to learn her phone had been infected with invasive spyware on several occasions starting October 2019.

"It's a horrible feeling to be so insecure, to know my private life wasn't private this whole time," she said.

The zero-click vulnerability is increasingly being used to hack cellphones without a trace, said Marczak. Last year, WhatsApp and its parent company Facebook filed an unprecedented lawsuit against the NSO Group, accusing the Israeli firm of targeting some 1,400 users of its encrypted messaging service with highly sophisticated spyware through missed calls. Earlier this month, an Al-Jazeera anchor filed another lawsuit in the U.S., alleging that the NSO Group hacked her phone through WhatsApp over her reporting on Saudi Arabia's powerful Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

With the UAE and Bahrain normalizing ties with Israel, the use of Israeli spyware in the region may accelerate, Marczak added, encompassing a "much wider range of government agencies and customers across the Gulf."

The Al-Jazeera attack represents the tip of the iceberg, said Yaniv Balmas, head of cyber research at Check Point, an Israeli security company.

"These hacks are not supposed to be public," he said. "We should assume they're happening all the time, everywhere."

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More EU nations ban travel from UK, fearing virus variant

By KIRSTEN GRIESHABER and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A growing list of European Union nations and Canada barred travel from the U.K. on Sunday and others were considering similar action, in a bid to block a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England from spreading to the continent.

France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Ireland and Bulgaria all announced restrictions on U.K. travel, hours after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that Christmas shopping and gatherings in southern England must be canceled because of rapidly spreading infections blamed on the new coronavirus variant.

Johnson immediately placed those regions under a strict new Tier 4 restriction level, upending Christmas plans for millions.

France banned all travel from the U.K. for 48 hours from midnight Sunday, including trucks carrying freight through the tunnel under the English Channel or from the port of Dover on England's south coast. French officials said the pause would buy time to find a "common doctrine" on how to deal with the threat, but it threw the busy cross-channel route used by thousands of trucks a day into chaos.

The Port of Dover tweeted Sunday night that its ferry terminal was "closed to all accompanied traffic leaving the UK until further notice due to border restrictions in France."

Eurostar passenger trains from London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam were also halted.

Germany said all flights coming from Britain, except cargo flights, were no longer allowed to land starting midnight Sunday. It didn't immediately say how long the flight ban would last. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said he was issuing a flight ban for 24 hours starting at midnight "out of precaution." "There are a great many questions about this new mutation," he said, adding he hoped to have more clarity by Tuesday.

Canada announced its own ban Sunday night. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement that for 72 hours starting at midnight Sunday, "all flights from the UK will be prohibited from entering Canada." He added that travelers who arrived Sunday would be subject to secondary screening and other health measures. A follow-up statement from the government said cargo flights were not included in the ban.

The Central American nation of El Salvador, meanwhile, said it would refuse entry to anyone who has visited Britain in the preceding 30 days.

The British government said Johnson would preside at a meeting of the government's crisis committee, COBRA, on Monday in the wake of the other nations' measures. They come at a time of huge economic uncertainty for the U.K., less than two weeks before it leaves the EU's economic structures Dec. 31, and with talks on a new post-Brexit trade relationship still deadlocked.

Johnson said Saturday that a fast-moving new variant of the virus that is 70% more transmissible than existing strains appeared to be driving the rapid spread of new infections in London and southern England in recent weeks. But he stressed "there's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," or that vaccines will be less effective against it.

On Sunday, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock added to the alarm when he said "the new variant is out of control." The U.K. recorded 35,928 further confirmed cases, around double the number from a week ago.

Germany, which holds the rotating EU presidency, called a special crisis meeting on Monday to coordinate the response to the virus news among the bloc's 27 member states.

The Netherlands banned flights from the U.K. for at least the rest of the year. Ireland issued a 48-hour flight ban. Italy said it would block flights from the U.K. until Jan.6, and an order signed Sunday prohibits entry into Italy by anyone who has been in the U.K. in the last 14 days.

The Czech Republic imposed stricter quarantine measures from people arriving from Britain.

Beyond Europe, Israel also said it was banning flights from Britain, Denmark and South Africa because those were the countries where the mutation is found.

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The World Health Organization tweeted late Saturday that it was "in close contact with U.K. officials on the new #COVID19 virus variant" and promised to update governments and the public as more is learned.

The new strain was identified in southeastern England in September and has been spreading in the area ever since, a WHO official told the BBC on Sunday.

"What we understand is that it does have increased transmissibility, in terms of its ability to spread," said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19.

Studies are under way to better understand how fast it spreads and whether "it's related to the variant itself, or a combination of factors with behavior," she added.

She said the strain had also been identified in Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia, where there was one case that didn't spread further.

"The longer this virus spreads, the more opportunities it has to change," she said. "So we really need to do everything we can right now to prevent spread."

Viruses mutate regularly, and scientists have found thousands of different mutations among samples of the virus causing COVID-19. Many of these changes have no effect on how easily the virus spreads or how severe symptoms are.

British health authorities said that while the variant has been circulating since September, it wasn't until the last week that officials felt they had enough evidence to declare that it has higher transmissibility than other circulating coronaviruses.

Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said officials are concerned about the new variant because it contained 23 different changes, "an unusually large number of variants" affecting how the virus binds to and enters cells in the body.

Officials aren't certain whether it originated in the U.K., Vallance added. But by December, he said it was causing over 60% of infections in London.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for U.S. surgeon general said Sunday that the emergence of the new strain doesn't change the public health guidance on precautions for reducing the spread of the virus, such as wearing masks, social distancing and washing hands.

"While it seems to be more easily transmissible, we do not have evidence yet that this is a more deadly virus to an individual who acquires it," Vivek Murthy said on NBC's "Meet the Press." "There's no reason to believe that the vaccines that have been developed will not be effective against this virus, as well."

Europe has been walloped this fall by soaring new infections and deaths due to a resurgence of the virus, and many nations have reimposed a series of restrictions to reign in their outbreaks.

Britain has seen over 67,000 deaths in the pandemic, the second-highest confirmed toll in Europe after Italy. Europe as a whole has recorded nearly 499,000 virus deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University that experts believe is an undercount, due to limited testing and missed cases.

The European Medicines Agency, meanwhile, is meeting Monday to approve the first COVID-19 vaccine for the European Union's 27 nations, bringing vaccinations closer for millions of EU citizens. The vaccine made by German pharmaceutical company BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer is already in use in the United States, Britain, Canada and other countries.

The EMA moved up its assessment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by a week after heavy pressure from EU governments, especially Germany, which has said that after the EMA approval it could start vaccinating citizens as early as next Sunday.

In an urgent address to the nation on Saturday, Johnson ordered all non-essential shops, hairdressers and gyms in London and large parts of southern England closed and told Britons to reorganize their holiday plans. No mixing of households is allowed indoors in the region, and only essential travel is permitted. In the rest of England, people will be allowed to meet in Christmas bubbles for just one day instead of the five that were planned.

After he spoke, videos emerged online showing crowds of people at London's train stations, apparently making a dash for places in the U.K. with less stringent coronavirus restrictions. Health Secretary Matt Hancock called those scenes "totally irresponsible."

While Hancock insisted officials had acted "very quickly and decisively," critics said Britain's Conservative

government should have moved against rising infections much earlier.

"The alarms bells have been ringing for weeks, but the prime minister chose to ignore them," said Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party. "It is an act of gross negligence by a prime minister who, once again, has been caught behind the curve."

Associated Press writer Kirsten Grieshaber reported this story in Berlin and AP writer Sylvia Hui reported from London. AP writers Jill Lawless in London, Thomas Adamson in Paris, Raf Casert in Brussels, Colleen Barry in Milan, Karel Janicek in Prague, Veselin Toshkov in Sofia, Bulgaria, John Hanna in Washington and Rob Gillies in Toronto contributed to this report.

The Latest: Tenn. governor enacts new virus restrictions

The Associated Press undefined

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee Gov. Bill Lee has announced new social gathering restrictions while still refusing to implement a mask mandate despite pleas from front-line healthcare workers in a state experiencing the highest new cases per capita in the country.

Instead of a mask mandate, the Republican on Sunday signed an executive order limiting public gatherings to 10 people. However, places of worship, weddings and funerals are exempt from the order.

He called the state "ground zero" in the COVID-19 battle and urged Tennesseans not to gather with people outside their immediate households during the upcoming holidays. His message comes just a day after Lee confirmed that his wife Maria had tested positive for COVID-19. Lee says he has tested negative but will remain in quarantine at the governor's residence.

Tennessee is one of a dozen states without a mask mandate. Instead, local counties have the option of implementing their own mask restrictions.

Lee was originally scheduled to take reporter questions after his statewide address, but his office later postponed that until Monday without giving a reason why.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

In Congress, negotiators have reached agreement on a new round of pandemic aid that would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefits and \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans, along with a fresh round of subsidies for hard-hit businesses and funding for schools, health care providers, and renters facing eviction. An expert committee has put people 75 and older and essential workers like firefighters, teachers and grocery store workers next in line for COVID-19 shots as a second vaccine began rolling out to U.S. hospitals. European countries are halting U.K. flights, fearing a new coronavirus variant. The variant seems to spread more easily than others, though experts are unsure about that, and they add that there is no evidence that it is any deadlier.

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

SYDNEY — The apparent spread of the COVID-19 outbreak in Sydney's northern beach suburbs had slowed to 83 cases on Monday, an increase of only 15 infections in the past 24 hours.

The number of new infections had halved since the previous 24 hours, despite more than 38,000 people being tested in the latest day, New South Wales state Premier Gladys Berejiklian said.

She cautioned against any assumption that the rate of recorded infections will continue to decline.

"Unfortunately, one day's results doesn't tell us it's a trend," Berejiklian told reporters. "In a pandemic, there is a level of volatility, so we'll closely monitor what happens."

All 15 new cases were linked to two Avlon Beach live music revenues from where many infections originated on Dec. 11 and Dec. 13.

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The original infection is a U.S.-strain suspected to have leaked from Sydney hotel quarantine. More than 250,000 Sydney residents in the northern beaches area are under a four-day lockdown until Wednesday.

Berejiklian said what restrictions continue over Christmas will be reviewed on Wednesday.

All Australian states have imposed restrictions on travelers from Sydney and parts of New South Wales because the coronavirus risk.

Berejiklian urged other state leaders to "think about things compassionately" due to Christmas approaching and to base decisions on border restrictions on the facts.

TORONTO — Canada is banning passenger flights from the UK in a bid to block a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England.

A person familiar with the matter confirmed the development on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to speak publicly ahead of an announcement.

France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Ireland and Bulgaria all announced restrictions on U.K. travel, hours after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that Christmas shopping and gatherings in southern England must be canceled because of rapidly spreading infections blamed on the new coronavirus variant.

Johnson said Saturday that a fast-moving new variant of the virus that is 70% more transmissible than existing strains appeared to be driving the rapid spread of new infections in London and southern England in recent weeks. But he stressed "there's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," or that vaccines will be less effective against it.

GAINESVILLE, Ga. — The leader of a north Georgia megachurch who has been a spiritual adviser to President Donald Trump has tested positive for COVID-19.

News outlets report Jentezen Franklin was absent from Sunday services at Free Chapel in Gainesville. Pastor Javon Ruff announced the diagnosis during Free Chapel's Sunday service.

The diagnosis came within days of Franklin attending a Christmas party at the White House. More than a dozen parties at the White House have been criticized for being held indoors and not enforcing masks, but a church spokesperson says Franklin's infection wasn't related to that visit.

LOS ANGELES -- Medical staffing is stretched increasingly thin as California hospitals scramble to find beds for patients amid an explosion of coronavirus cases that threatens to overwhelm the state's emergency care system.

As of Sunday, more than 16,840 people were hospitalized with confirmed COVID-19 infections — more than double the previous peak reached in July.

An enormous crush of cases in the last six weeks has California's death toll spiraling ever higher. Another 161 fatalities were reported Sunday.

All of Southern California and the 12-county San Joaquin Valley to the north have exhausted their regular intensive care unit capacity, and some hospitals have begun using "surge" space.

A nurse in hard-hit Los Angeles County estimates she's been averaging less than 10 minutes of care per patient every hour.

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Arkansas' governor is urging residents to protect each other from the coronavirus this holiday season.

The state on Sunday reported 1,536 new COVID-19 cases and 46 more deaths. One in every 190 people in Arkansas tested positive in the past week. The Arkansas Department of Health said that the state has reported more than 201,000 cases and more than 3,200 deaths since the pandemic began.

"The high number of Arkansans who have died is heartbreaking," Gov. Asa Hutchinson said Sunday on Twitter.

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Noting that Christmas is just five days away, he asked Arkansans to protect each other and said, "What we do will determine how we start our new year."

Health officials said that 1,057 people with COVID-19 are in Arkansas hospitals.

TOPEKA, Kan. — A FedEx executive says a higher-than-normal volume of Christmas-season package deliveries won't interfere with the company's effort to ship coronavirus vaccine doses.

Jenny Robertson, a FedEx senior vice president, said two trucks on Sunday moved doses of a vaccine developed by Moderna and the National Institutes of Health from a factory in Olive Branch, Mississippi, to the company's world hub in nearby Memphis, Tennessee, so that shipments could be loaded onto its airplanes bound for multiple states.

She said the company is keeping its networks for shipping the vaccine and handling Christmas packages separate.

"Nothing's more important than the delivery of the vaccine to us, but we have put in place distinct networks that are keeping e-commerce moving through our ground network and vaccines moving through our express network," she said. "We're able to manage this volume right now."

Robertson said the company has seen holiday-level volumes for shipping packages since March because consumers switched how they buy products during the pandemic.

ZAGREB, Croatia — Croatia's prime minister says the country is temporarily suspending air traffic with Great Britain over fears about the new strain of coronavirus.

Several European countries said Sunday they would halt flights from the U.K., hours after Britain's government imposed tough new coronavirus restrictions on large areas of southern England to curb what officials described as a fast-moving new strain of the virus.

Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic on Sunday said on Twitter the suspension will apply for 48 hours until more information is available.

Plenkovic says "citizens' health comes first."

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia has temporarily suspended all international passenger flights for citizens and residents over fears about the fast-spreading new variant of the coronavirus.

The kingdom's interior ministry says the one-week flight ban may be extended "until medical information about the nature of this virus becomes clear."

The country's land and sea ports will also close for a week. The government ordered anyone who has returned from or passed through a European country over the past three months to get tested for COVID-19 immediately.

The ministry added that the travel suspension will not affect the country's cargo flights and supply chains.

NEW YORK -- Gov. Andrew Cuomo wants a ban on flights from Great Britain to New York City over fears about the new strain of coronavirus.

Cuomo told reporters in a teleconference on Sunday that the six flights arriving daily at Kennedy Airport from Britain pose a health risk. He called on the federal government to either ban the flights or require testing on all passengers.

The first wave of coronavirus infections in New York "came from Europe and we did nothing," the Democratic governor said. "Doing nothing is negligent."

OKLAHOMA CITY — As new daily cases of the coronavirus have surged in Oklahoma, Gov. Kevin Stitt is starring in a promotional video encouraging people to visit.

The Oklahoma State Department of Health on Sunday reported 4,970 new cases and 23 deaths. That brings the state's totals to more than 260,000 cases and more than 2,200 deaths since the pandemic began. Researchers at Johns Hopkins University say there were 1,081 new cases per 100,000 people in Oklahoma over the past two weeks, which ranks 12th in the country for new cases per capita. One in

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every 175 people in Oklahoma tested positive in the past week.

Stitt, who has resisted calls for a statewide mask mandate, stars in a 30-second video that has more than 100,000 views on YouTube. The video is also being promoted on digital and social media platforms in surrounding states, The Oklahoman reported.

"Today, we all need a place that offers hope," Stitt says in the video. "Oklahoma is open to the challenge. We're open with new, exciting places to explore safely."

The video was posted on YouTube on Nov. 19 — the same day the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised against traveling around the Thanksgiving holiday. An Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department spokeswoman says the ads will run through Dec. 30.

Stitt spokesman Charlie Hannema tells The Oklahoman newspaper that the campaign is part of a state strategy to support businesses affected by the pandemic.

"We need people to continue to take precautions, but with the vaccination rollout starting, the light is at the end of the tunnel," Hannema said.

Health officials in the state have been pleading with residents to take precautions, and warn that pandemic is far from over.

On Friday, Keith Reed, deputy commissioner of health with the Oklahoma State Department of Health, said that while it had been "a historic, yet emotional week" for health care workers, "we still have a long road ahead of us."

WASHINGTON — The chief science adviser for the U.S. government's vaccine distribution effort says it will be shipping nearly 8 million doses of coronavirus vaccine Monday.

Dr. Moncef Slaoui said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union" that 5.9 million doses of a vaccine made by Moderna and 2 million of a vaccine made by Pfizer will be shipped.

At least a dozen states reported last week that they would receive a smaller second shipment of the Pfizer vaccine than they had been told previously. Army Gen. Gustave Perna, in charge of the distribution effort, apologized Saturday for "miscommunication" with states over the number of doses to be delivered in the early stages of distribution.

Slaoui said the mistake was assuming vaccines that had been produced were ready for shipment when there was a two-day delay.

"And unless it's perfectly right, we will not release vaccine doses for usage," he said. "And, sometimes, there could be small hiccups. There have been none, actually, in manufacturing now. The hiccup was more into the planning."

Slaoui also said the U.S. will experience "a continuing surge" in the coronavirus, with larger numbers of cases possible from gatherings for the Christmas holiday.

SOFIA, Bulgaria— Bulgaria is banning until January 31 all flights coming from and leaving for Britain in reaction to the new coronavirus strain.

At an emergency meeting on Sunday, the government had introduced new restrictive measures for all persons arriving from the United Kingdom, including a mandatory 10-day quarantine. Hours later, it added the flight ban to the list of restrictions.

SAN RAMON, Calif. - More than 1 million people have passed through U.S. airport security checkpoints in each of the past two days in a sign that public health pleas to avoid holiday travel are being ignored, despite an alarming surge in COVID-19 cases across the country.

It marks the first time U.S. airports have screened more than 1 million passengers since Nov. 29. That came at the end of a Thanksgiving weekend that saw far more travel around the country than had been hoped as the weather turned colder and COVID-19 cases were already spiking again.

Now, hospitals in many parts of the country are being overwhelmed amid the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in the U.S. since the pandemic since March when most people in the U.S. were ordered to stay at home and avoid interactions with other households.

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— WASHINGTON — President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for U.S. surgeon general says it's more realistic to think it may be mid-summer or early fall before coronavirus vaccines are available to the general population in the United States, rather than late spring.

Speaking on Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press," Vivek Murthy said Biden's team is working toward having coronavirus vaccines available to lower-risk individuals by late spring but doing so requires "everything to go exactly on schedule."

"I think it's more realistic to assume that it may be closer to mid-summer or early fall when this vaccine makes its way to the general population," Murthy said. "So, we want to be optimistic, but we want to be cautious as well."

Murthy, who also served as surgeon general in the Obama administration, said Biden's promise of 100 million vaccines during his first 100 days in office is realistic and that the Biden team has seen more cooperation from Trump administration officials.

— WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's surgeon general is defending Trump's not getting a coronavirus vaccine, saying there are medical reasons for it.

U.S. Surgeon General and Vice Admiral Jerome Adams, speaking on CBS' "Face the Nation" on Sunday, noted that Trump both contracted COVID-19 in October and was treated with monoclonal antibodies.

"And that is actually one scenario where we tell people maybe you should hold off on getting the vaccine, talk to your health provider to find out the right time," Adams said.

Asked about Trump doing a public-service announcement for the vaccine to encourage his supporters to get it, Adams noted that both he and Vice President Mike Pence got vaccinated.

Adams, who is Black, said he understands that mistrust of the medical community and the vaccine among Blacks "comes from a real place," the mistreatment of communities of color.

— JERUSALEM — Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the country is banning flights from Britain, Denmark or South Africa due to fears about the new strain of coronavirus.

"Those are the countries where the mutation is found," he said.

He also said Sunday that anyone returning from those countries would have to go into mandatory 14-day quarantine in state-run hotels.

Netanyahu spoke a day after he was vaccinated against the coronavirus – the first Israeli to do so in what he said was an attempt to encourage the public to follow suit. Israel pushed ahead with its vaccination campaign on Sunday, beginning with other top officials and front-line health-care workers.

— LONDON — Eurostar trains between London, Brussels and Amsterdam are being canceled from Monday, after the Belgian government announced that borders with the U.K will close at midnight Sunday.

The high-speed train operator said Sunday that trains continue to operate on the London to Paris route.

The Belgian government has said it will review the position in 24 hours. Eurostar said they're awaiting further details from relevant governments on how travel restrictions will be enforced.

European countries including the Netherlands, Austria and Italy said Sunday they would halt flights from the U.K., hours after Britain's government imposed tough new coronavirus restrictions on large areas of southern England to curb what officials described as a fast-moving new strain of the virus.

— MILAN — Both the number of COVID deaths and new positives were significantly lower on Sunday, a day when typically many fewer tests are carried out.

Deaths rose by 352, down by several hundred from recent days, and bringing Italy's known coronavirus dead to 68,799, the highest in Europe.

Another 15,104 people tested positive, down by over 1,000 from a day earlier as the number of tests dropped by nearly a quarter. Sunday marked the last day Italians were permitted to move from one region

to another without a valid motive, including work and health.

The government has imposed more stringent restrictions for the Christmas holiday in a bid to prevent celebrations from setting off a new surge. Shopping streets in major cities were packed ahead of the imposition of a partial lockdown this week.

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Birx travels, family visits highlight pandemic safety perils

By AAMER MADHANI and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As COVID-19 cases skyrocketed before the Thanksgiving holiday weekend, Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House coronavirus response, warned Americans to “be vigilant” and limit celebrations to “your immediate household.”

For many Americans that guidance has been difficult to abide, including for Birx herself.

The day after Thanksgiving, she traveled to one of her vacation properties on Fenwick Island in Delaware. She was accompanied by three generations of her family from two households. Birx, her husband Paige Reffe, a daughter, son-in-law and two young grandchildren were present.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has asked Americans not to travel over the holidays and discourages indoor activity involving members of different households. “People who do not currently live in your housing unit, such as college students who are returning home from school for the holidays, should be considered part of different households.”

Even in Birx's everyday life, there are challenges meeting that standard. She and her husband have a home in Washington. She also owns a home in nearby Potomac, Maryland, where her elderly parents, and her daughter and family live, and where Birx visits intermittently. In addition, the children's other grandmother, who is 77, also regularly travels to the Potomac house and returns to her 92-year-old husband near Baltimore.

Birx's own experiences underline the complexity and difficulty of trying to navigate the perils of the pandemic while balancing a job, family and health, especially among essential workers like her.

Yet some of Birx's peers in public health say she should be held to a higher standard given her prominent role in the government's response to the pandemic and the current surge in COVID-19 deaths across the country.

Birx has expressed a desire to maintain a significant role on the White House coronavirus task force when President-elect Joe Biden is inaugurated next month, according to a person familiar with the Biden team's personnel deliberations and a Trump administration coronavirus task force official. Neither was authorized to publicly discuss internal deliberations and both spoke on condition of anonymity.

“To me this disqualifies her from any future government health position,” said Dr. Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the Georgetown Center for Global Health Science and Security. “It's a terrible message for someone in public health to be sending to the American people.”

After The Associated Press raised questions about her Thanksgiving weekend travels, Birx acknowledged in a statement that she went to her Delaware property. She declined to be interviewed.

She insisted the purpose of the roughly 50-hour visit was to deal with the winterization of the property before a potential sale — something she says she previously hadn't had time to do because of her busy schedule.

“I did not go to Delaware for the purpose of celebrating Thanksgiving,” Birx said in her statement, adding that her family shared a meal together while in Delaware.

Birx said that everyone on her Delaware trip belongs to her “immediate household,” even as she acknowledged they live in two different homes. She initially called the Potomac home a “3 generation household

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(formerly 4 generations).” White House officials later said it continues to be a four-generation household, a distinction that would include Birx as part of the home.

While in Delaware, she conducted an interview with CBS’ “Face the Nation” in which she noted some Americans “went across the country or even into the next state” for the holiday weekend.

“Some people may have made mistakes over the Thanksgiving time period,” Birx said in the interview, adding that those who travelled should assume they were infected.

Birx’s job makes her an “essential worker” by federal guidelines, in a position that requires extensive travel to consult with state and local officials on the pandemic response. She has traveled to 43 states, driving 25,000 miles, she said, often to coronavirus hot spots. Birx also has an office in the White House, where numerous COVID-19 infections have been revealed.

Through it all, she said she has kept herself and her family safe through isolating, wearing a mask and regular testing.

Birx has not said how long she isolates for before visiting family. Medical experts say people who only recently became infected often do not test positive. They say wearing a mask has limited efficacy in an environment such as the White House, where few others use them.

Margaret Flynn, the children’s other grandmother comes to the Potomac home to provide child care, then returns to her husband, who has health complications. Birx said that she hasn’t seen the other grandmother since the beginning of the pandemic and does not know how frequently she visits the Potomac house.

Flynn confirmed that she hasn’t spoken to Birx in months. Flynn declined to say how frequently she visits the home to look after the grandchildren.

From the podium at the White House, Birx has spoken about how she comes from a multigenerational family with her parents and her daughter’s family, including grandchildren, all living under one roof. Many saw that as a relatable family dilemma.

In early April, she said she understood the sacrifices many were making and explained that she couldn’t visit her Potomac home when one of her grandchildren had a high fever.

“I did not go there,” she said, while standing next to President Donald Trump. “You can’t take that kind of risk.”

She has resumed her visits to the house since then.

Numerous elected officials, including prominent Democrats, have been forced to acknowledge that they have not heeded their own stern warnings to the public about the dangers of spreading the virus.

But Birx occupies a position of far greater authority when it comes to the pandemic. Many Americans rely on the advice that she and the government’s top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, have given.

Kathleen Flynn, whose brother is married to Birx’s daughter who lives in the Potomac house, said she brought forward information about Birx’s situation out of concern for her own parents, and acknowledged family friction over the matter.

“She cavalierly violated her own guidance,” Flynn said of Birx.

Richard Flynn, her father, confirmed details of Birx’s Thanksgiving holiday gathering and visits to the Potomac house, but said he trusted the doctor and believes she’s doing what’s right. He said Birx’s visits to the house have occurred only every few weeks of late.

“Dr. Birx is very conscientious and a very good doctor and scientist from everything I can see,” Richard Flynn said during a recent interview.

Medical experts say public health officials such as Birx need to lead by example, including personal conduct that’s beyond reproach.

“We need leadership to be setting an example, especially in terms of things they are asking average Americans to do who are far less privileged than they are,” said Dr. Abraar Karan, a global health specialist at Brigham and Women’s Hospital and Harvard Medical School, about the high-profile lapses in judgment.

Birx came to the White House coronavirus task force with a sterling reputation. A public servant since the Reagan administration, Birx has served as a U.S. Army physician and as a globally recognized AIDS researcher. She was pulled away from her ambassadorial post as the U.S. global AIDS coordinator to assist the task force in late February.

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Birx, however, has faced criticism from public health experts and Democratic lawmakers for not speaking out forcefully against Trump when he contradicted advice from medical advisers and scientists about how to fight the virus.

While she stayed in Trump's good graces far longer than Fauci, who frequently contradicted Trump, the president by late summer had sidelined Birx, too.

Kathleen Flynn said she urged her brother and sister-in-law not to allow her mother to babysit, arguing it put her mother at risk by spending so much time in a household other than her own, while also posing a danger to Birx's elderly parents. Flynn, who said she has long had a strained relationship with her brother, is currently not on speaking terms with him and has never met Birx.

Flynn said her mother waited about a week after Birx's Thanksgiving trip before returning to the Potomac home to provide child care help.

Lawrence Gostin, a public health expert at Georgetown University's law school who has known Birx professionally for years, said that he's confident that Birx took all necessary precautions to minimize risks in her Thanksgiving travel. Still, he said it undercuts her larger goal to get Americans to cooperate with government officials' efforts to minimize the death and suffering caused by the virus.

"It's extraordinarily important for the leaders of the coronavirus response to model the behavior that they recommend to the public," Gostin said. "We lose faith in our public health officials if they are saying these are the rules but they don't apply to me."

Madhani reported from Wilmington, Delaware.

EXPLAINER: Are new coronavirus strains cause for concern?

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

Reports from Britain and South Africa of new coronavirus strains that seem to spread more easily are causing alarm, but virus experts say it's unclear if that's the case or whether they pose any concern for vaccines or cause more severe disease.

Viruses naturally evolve as they move through the population, some more than others. It's one reason we need a fresh flu shot each year.

New variants, or strains, of the virus that causes COVID-19 have been seen almost since it was first detected in China nearly a year ago.

On Saturday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced new restrictions because of the new strain. Several European Union countries and Canada were banning or limiting some flights from the U.K. to try to limit any spread.

Here's what is known about the situation.

WHAT'S CONCERNING ABOUT THE RECENT STRAIN FOUND IN ENGLAND?

Health experts in the U.K. and U.S. said the strain seems to infect more easily than others, but there is no evidence yet it is more deadly.

Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said that the strain "moves fast and is becoming the dominant variant," causing over 60% of infections in London by December.

The strain is also concerning because it has so many mutations — nearly two dozen — and some are on the spiky protein that the virus uses to attach to and infect cells. That spike is what current vaccines target.

"I'm worried about this, for sure," but it's too soon to know how important it ultimately will prove to be, said Dr. Ravi Gupta, who studies viruses at the University of Cambridge in England. He and other researchers posted a report of it on a website scientists use to quickly share developments, but the paper has not been formally reviewed or published in a journal.

HOW DO THESE NEW STRAINS OCCUR?

Viruses often acquire small changes of a letter or two in their genetic alphabet just through normal evolution. A slightly modified strain can become the most common one in a country or region just because that's the strain that first took hold there or because "super spreader" events helped it become entrenched.

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A bigger worry is when a virus mutates by changing the proteins on its surface to help it escape from drugs or the immune system.

"Emerging evidence" suggests that may be starting to happen with the new coronavirus, Trevor Bedford, a biologist and genetics expert at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, wrote on Twitter. "We've now seen the emergence and spread of several variants" that suggest this, and some show resistance to antibody treatments, he noted.

WHAT OTHER STRAINS HAVE EMERGED?

In April, researchers in Sweden found a virus with two genetic changes that seemed to make it roughly two times more infectious, Gupta said. About 6,000 cases worldwide have been reported, mostly in Denmark and England, he said.

Several variations of that strain now have turned up. Some were reported in people who got them from mink farms in Denmark. A new South African strain has the two changes seen before, plus some others.

The one in the U.K. has the two changes and more, including eight to the spike protein, Gupta said. It's called a "variant under investigation" because its significance is not yet known.

The strain was identified in southeastern England in September and has been circulating in the area ever since, a World Health Organization official told the BBC on Sunday.

WILL PEOPLE WHO HAD COVID-19 FROM AN OLD STRAIN BE ABLE TO GET THE NEW ONE? WILL IT UNDERMINE VACCINES?

Probably not, former U.S. Food and Drug Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said Sunday on CBS's "Face the Nation."

"Unlikely," Gupta agreed.

President-elect Joe Biden's surgeon general nominee, Vivek Murthy, said Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that there's "no reason to believe that the vaccines that have been developed will not be effective against this virus as well."

Vaccines produce wide-ranging responses by the immune system beyond just those to the spike protein, several experts noted.

The possibility that new strains will be resistant to existing vaccines are low, but not "inexistent," Dr. Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser for the U.S. government's vaccine distribution effort, said Sunday on CNN's "State of the Union."

"Up to now, I don't think there has been a single variant that would be resistant," he said. "This particular variant in the U.K., I think, is very unlikely to have escaped the vaccine immunity."

Bedford agreed.

"I'm not concerned" because a lot of changes in the genetic code would probably be needed to undermine a vaccine, not just one or two mutations, Bedford wrote on Twitter. But vaccines may need fine-tuned over time as changes accumulate, and changes should be more closely monitored, he wrote.

Murthy said the new strain doesn't change the public health advice to wear masks, wash hands and maintain social distance.

Associated Press writers John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas, Sylvia Hui in London and Rob Gillies in Toronto contributed reporting.

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Ariana Grande announces engagement, shows ring on Instagram

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Ariana Grande has announced she is engaged in a series of photos of her and her fiancé and her engagement ring.

The "Rain on Me" singer posted the photos of her cuddling with Dalton Gomez, a luxury real estate agent, on Instagram on Sunday. Grande included a close-up shot of the ring in the post, which was cap-

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tioned "forever n then some."

The singer's mother congratulated the couple on Twitter, saying she was excited to welcome Gomez to the family.

People magazine reported Grande and Gomez started dating earlier this year.

Grande released her latest studio album, "Positions," in November. On Monday, Netflix will release a behind-the-scenes movie on her "Sweetener" world tour, titled "excuse me, i love you."

She was previously engaged to "Saturday Night Live" cast member Pete Davidson in 2018, but they ended their relationship later that year.

Panel: People over 75, essential workers next for vaccines

By JOHN HANNA and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal advisory panel recommended Sunday that people 75 and older and essential workers like firefighters, teachers and grocery store workers should be next in line for COVID-19 shots, while a second vaccine began rolling out to hospitals as the nation works to get the coronavirus pandemic under control.

The two developments came amid a vaccination program that began only in the last week and has given initial shots to about 556,000 Americans, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The COVID-19 vaccine developed by Pfizer Inc. and Germany's BioNTech already is being distributed, and regulators last week gave approval to the one from Moderna Inc. that began shipping Sunday.

Earlier this month, the Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices said health care workers and nursing home residents — about 24 million people — should be at the very front of the line for the vaccines.

Sunday's vote by the panel was who should be next in line, and by a vote of 13-1, it decided that it should be people 75 and older, who number about 20 million, as well as certain front-line workers, who total about 30 million.

The essential workers include firefighters and police; teachers and school staff; those working in food, agricultural and manufacturing sectors; corrections workers; U.S. Postal Service employees; public transit workers; and grocery store workers. They are considered at very high risk of infection because their jobs are critical and require them to be in regular contact with other people.

It's not clear how long it will take to vaccinate those groups. Vaccine doses have come out slower than earlier projections. But at the same time, some experts noted that not everyone who is recommended to get vaccinated may choose to get a shot.

The committee also voted that behind those groups should be people aged 65 to 74, numbering about 30 million; those aged 16 to 64 with medical conditions like obesity and cancer who are at higher risk if they get COVID-19, numbering as many as 110 million; and a tier of other essential workers. This group of as many as 57 million includes a wide category of food service and utility workers but also those in legal and financial jobs and the media.

The expert panel's recommendation next goes to the CDC director and to states as guidance to put together vaccination programs. CDC directors have almost always signed off on committee recommendations. No matter what the CDC says, there will be differences from state to state, because various health departments have different ideas about who should be closer to the front of the line.

Federal officials expect that vaccine doses will be limited for several months. CDC officials say up to 20 million are projected to start getting shots this month, another 30 million next month, and 50 million in February. That's 100 million out of a population of more than 330 million.

Pfizer's shots were first shipped out a week ago and started being used the next day, kicking off the nation's biggest vaccination drive.

Public health experts say the shots — and others in the pipeline — are the only way to stop a virus that has been spreading wildly. Nationwide, more than 219,000 people per day on average test positive for the virus, which has killed over 316,000 in the U.S. and nearly 1.7 million worldwide.

Earlier Sunday, trucks left the Olive Branch, Mississippi, factory, near Memphis, Tennessee, with the vaccine developed by Moderna and the National Institutes of Health. The much-needed shots are expected

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to be given starting Monday, just three days after the Food and Drug Administration authorized their emergency rollout.

In Louisville, Kentucky, UPS driver Todd Elble said his vaccine shipment was the "most important load that I've hauled" in a 37-year career. His parents contracted COVID-19 in November, and his 78-year-old father died. He said the family speculates that his father got infected while traveling on a hunting trip with four other relatives to Wyoming, and some are still sick.

"I'm going to take the vaccine myself. I'm going to be first in line for my father — I'll tell you that much — and any others that should follow," he said. "I feel in my heart that everybody should, to help get this stopped."

He added: "To bring this back, I feel Dad was in the truck with me today."

Dr. Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser to the federal government's vaccine distribution effort, said on CNN's "State of the Union" that nearly 8 million doses will be distributed Monday, about 5.9 million of the Moderna vaccine and 2 million of the Pfizer vaccine.

Slaoui also predicted the U.S. will experience "a continuing surge," with larger numbers of coronavirus cases possible from gatherings for Christmas.

"I think, unfortunately, it will get worse," he said.

There won't be enough shots for the general population until spring, so doses will be rationed at least for the next several months. President-elect Joe Biden pledged earlier this month to have 100 million doses distributed in his first 100 days in office, and his surgeon general nominee said Sunday that it's still a realistic goal.

But Vivek Murthy told NBC's "Meet the Press" it's more realistic to think it may be midsummer or early fall before vaccines are available to the general public, rather than late spring. Murthy said Biden's team is working toward having the shots available to lower-risk individuals by late spring but doing so requires "everything to go exactly on schedule."

Meanwhile, Trump's surgeon general, Jerome Adams, defended the administration's handling of the Pfizer vaccine Sunday, a day after the Army general charge of getting COVID-19 vaccines across the U.S. apologized Saturday for "miscommunication" with states over the number of doses to be delivered in the early stages of distribution. At least a dozen states reported they would receive a smaller second shipment of the Pfizer vaccine than they had been told previously.

Gen. Gustave Perna told reporters in a telephone briefing that he made mistakes by citing numbers of doses that he believed would be ready. Slaoui said the mistake was assuming vaccines that had been produced were ready for shipment when there was a two-day delay.

"And unless it's perfectly right, we will not release vaccine doses for usage," he said. "And, sometimes, there could be small hiccups. There have been none, actually, in manufacturing now. The hiccup was more into the planning."

But Adams told CBS' "Face the Nation" that "the numbers are going to go up and down."

"It absolutely was not poor planning," he said. "There's what we plan. There's what we actually allocate. There's what's delivered, and then there's what's actually put in people's arms."

Adams, who is Black, said he understands that mistrust of the medical community and the vaccine among Blacks "comes from a real place," the mistreatment of communities of color. He cited the decades-long Tuskegee experiment in Alabama, where Black men with syphilis were not treated so the disease could be studied.

He also said immigrants in the U.S. illegally should not be denied the vaccine because of their legal status because "it's not ethically right to deny those individuals."

"I want to reassure people that your information when collected to get your second shot, if you get the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, will not be used in any way, shape or form to harm you legally," Adams said. "That is something that I have been assured of."

Both the Moderna vaccine and the Pfizer-BioNTech shot require two doses several weeks apart. The second dose must be from the same company as the first. Both vaccines appeared safe and strongly protective in large, still unfinished studies.

Hanna reported from Topeka, Kansas. Also contributing was AP Radio correspondent Julie Walker in New York.

Biden to receive COVID vaccine as Trump remains on sidelines

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The leader of the Trump administration's vaccination program says people who have been infected with the coronavirus — a group that includes President Donald Trump — should receive the vaccine.

Moncef Slaoui, the chief adviser of Operation Warp Speed, told CNN's "State of the Union" on Sunday that the vaccine is safe for those who have recovered and offers stronger and potentially longer protection than does the virus itself.

"We know that infection doesn't induce a very strong immune response and it wanes over time. So I think, as a clear precaution, it is appropriate to be vaccinated because it's safe," he said. "I think people should be vaccinated, indeed."

Trump is now one of the only senior-most U.S. officials who has not received the first of two vaccination shots, which began being administered last week as part of the largest vaccination campaign in the nation's history. Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., all were given doses Friday. President-elect Joe Biden was to receive his Monday.

All have chosen to publicize their injections as part of a campaign to convince a skeptical public that the vaccines are safe and effective, in hopes of finally putting an end to a pandemic that has killed more than 317,000 people in the United States and upended life around the globe.

Trump, who in the past has spread misinformation about vaccine risks, tweeted earlier this month that he was "not scheduled" to take the vaccine, but looked "forward to doing so at the appropriate time." The White House says he is still discussing timing with his doctors.

Trump was hospitalized with COVID-19 in October and given an experimental monoclonal antibody treatment that he credited for his swift recovery.

A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advisory board has said people who received that treatment should wait at least 90 days to be vaccinated to avoid any potential interference.

"When the time is right, I'm sure he will remain willing to take it," White House spokesperson Brian Morgenstern echoed Friday. "It's just something we're working through."

Trump has spent the last week largely out of sight as he continues to stew about his election loss and floats increasingly outlandish schemes to remain in power. It's an approach that has bewildered top aides who see his silence as a missed opportunity for the president, who leaves office Jan. 20, to claim credit for helping oversee the speedy development of the vaccine and to burnish his legacy.

Trump has also come under criticism for failing to take the vaccine himself as an example to help allay concerns about its safety, especially among Republicans.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices said the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, which was the first to receive authorization, "is safe and likely efficacious" in people who have been infected with COVID-19 and "should be offered regardless of history of prior symptomatic or asymptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection."

While there is no recommended minimum wait time between infection and vaccination, because reinfection is uncommon in the three months after a person is infected, the committee said people who tested positive in the preceding 90 days "may delay vaccination until near the end of this period, if desired."

But the advisers also recommended that those who received the kind of treatment Trump did should put off being vaccinated for at least 90 days.

"Currently, there are no data on the safety and efficacy of Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccination in persons who received monoclonal antibodies or convalescent plasma as part of COVID-19 treatment," they wrote, recommending that vaccination "be deferred for at least 90 days, as a precautionary measure until

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additional information becomes available, to avoid interference of the antibody treatment with vaccine-induced immune responses.”

Surgeon General Jerome Adams cited that recommendation on CBS’s “Face the Nation” on Sunday when asked if Trump planned to receive the shot on camera.

“From a scientific point of view, I will remind people that the president has had COVID within the last 90 days. He received the monoclonal antibodies. And that is actually one scenario where we tell people maybe you should hold off on getting the vaccine, talk to your health provider to find out the right time,” Adams said.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany has given other explanations for the delay. She told reporters last week that Trump was holding off, in part, “to show Americans that our priority are the most vulnerable.”

“The President wants to send a parallel message, which is, you know, our long-term care facility residents and our frontline workers are paramount in importance, and he wants to set an example in that regard,” she said.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious diseases expert, is among those who have recommended that Trump be vaccinated 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,” he told ABC News.

Trump wants Supreme Court to overturn Pa. election results

By JILL COLVIN and MARC LEVY undefined

WASHINGTON (AP) — Undeterred by dismissals and admonitions from judges, President Donald Trump’s campaign continued with its unprecedented efforts to overturn the results of the Nov. 3. election Sunday, saying it had filed a new petition with the Supreme Court.

The petition seeks to reverse a trio of Pennsylvania Supreme Court cases having to do with mail-in ballots and asks the court to reject voters’ will and allow the Pennsylvania General Assembly to pick its own slate of electors.

While the prospect of the highest court in the land throwing out the results of a democratic election based on unfounded charges of voter fraud is extraordinary unlikely, it wouldn’t change the outcome. President-elect Joe Biden would still be the winner even without Pennsylvania because of his wide margin of victory in the Electoral College.

“The petition seeks all appropriate remedies, including vacating the appointment of electors committed to Joseph Biden and allowing the Pennsylvania General Assembly to select their replacements,” Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani said in a statement.

He is asking the court to move swiftly so it can rule before Congress meets on Jan. 6 to tally the vote of the Electoral College, which decisively confirmed Biden’s win with 306 electoral votes to Trump’s 232. But the justices are not scheduled to meet again, even privately, until Jan. 8, two days after Congress counts votes.

Pennsylvania last month certified Biden as the winner of the state’s 20 Electoral College votes after three weeks of vote counting and a string of failed legal challenges.

Trump’s campaign and his allies have now filed roughly 50 lawsuits alleging widespread voting fraud. Almost all have been dismissed or dropped because there is no evidence to support their allegations.

Trump has lost before judges of both political parties, including some he appointed. And some of his strongest rebukes have come from conservative Republicans. The Supreme Court has also refused to take up two cases — decisions that Trump has scorned.

The new case is at least the fourth involving Pennsylvania that Trump’s campaign or Republican allies have taken to the Supreme Court in a bid to overturn Biden’s victory in the state or at least reverse court decisions involving mail-in balloting. Many more cases were filed in state and federal courts. Roughly

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10,000 mail-in ballots that arrived after polls closed but before a state court-ordered deadline remain in limbo, awaiting the highest court's decision on whether they should be counted.

The Trump campaign's filing Sunday appears to target three decisions of Pennsylvania's Democratic-majority state Supreme Court.

In November, the state's highest court upheld a Philadelphia judge's ruling that state law only required election officials to allow partisan observers to be able to see mail-in ballots being processed, not stand close enough to election workers to see the writing on individual envelopes.

It also ruled that more than 8,300 mail-in ballots in Philadelphia that had been challenged by the Trump campaign because of minor technical errors — such as a voter's failure to write their name, address or date on the outer ballot envelope — should be counted. In October, the court ruled unanimously that counties are prohibited from rejecting mail-in ballots simply because a voter's signature does not resemble the signature on the person's voter registration form.

The Pennsylvania Republican Party has a pending petition on the state's mail-in-ballot deadline in which the party specifically says in its appeal that it recognizes the issue will not affect the outcome of the 2020 election.

Levy reported from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Associated Press writer Mark Sherman in Washington contributed to this report.

VIRUS TODAY: 2nd vaccine authorized in US shipped

By The Associated Press undefined

Here's what's happening Sunday with the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S.:

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— Initial shipments of the second COVID-19 vaccine authorized in the U.S. left a Memphis-area distribution center Sunday. The desperately needed shots are expected to be given starting Monday, just three days after the Food and Drug Administration authorized their emergency rollout. Nearly all of the shots will go to health care workers and residents in long-term care homes.

— The Associated Press reports that Dr. Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House coronavirus response, traveled to one of her vacation properties on a Delaware island the day after Thanksgiving, accompanied by three generations of her family from two households. Birx herself had urged Americans to "be vigilant" and limit celebrations to "your immediate household" shortly before the holiday weekend.

— State and local health departments are asking people to take a do-it-yourself approach to contact tracing as a skyrocketing number of infections have overwhelmed the agencies. Having people conduct their own contact tracing is not ideal, but it is likely the most effective way to reach people who may be at risk, health experts say.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. rose over the past two weeks from 2,150 on Dec. 5 to 2,608 on Saturday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll climbed to more than 316,000, rising above the population of Cincinnati.

QUOTABLE: "Ron's death might seem to outsiders like such a small matter," said JoAnn Yukimura, former mayor of Kauai, Hawaii, about the island's only COVID-19 fatality so far, a former tour driver named Ron Clark. But Clark's death "hit us hard because we on Kauai haven't become inured to death and sickness — and we don't ever want to get that way."

ICYMI: Small businesses are worried that COVID-19-related lawsuits could put them under as more than 6,000 coronavirus-related complaints have been filed across the country.

ON THE HORIZON: A federal pandemic relief package totaling nearly \$1 trillion is finally close to passage as lawmakers hammer out final details. The House is expected to vote Monday on the bill, which lawmakers and aides say would include \$600 direct stimulus payments to most Americans.

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

Mostly virus-free Kauai hit by pandemic after travel resumes

By CALEB JONES Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — On Hawaii's rural island of Kauai, where sprawling white sand beaches and dramatic seaside mountains attract visitors from around the world, local residents spent the first seven months of the pandemic sheltered from the viral storm.

Early and aggressive local measures coupled with a strictly enforced statewide travel quarantine kept Kauai's 72,000 residents mostly healthy — the island had only 61 known coronavirus cases from March through September. But on Oct. 15, the state launched a pre-travel testing program to reignite Hawaii's decimated tourism economy.

Kauai then went from having no active infections at all in the first part of October to at least 84 new cases in the ensuing seven weeks. The surge seeded community transmission and led to the island's first — and so far only — COVID-19 death: Ron Clark, who worked for decades as a tour driver.

Despite Hawaii's cautious effort at reopening that allowed travelers who tested negative for COVID-19 before they flew to the state to sidestep quarantine rules, the Kauai spike illustrates the difficulty of preserving public health — even on an isolated island — when economic recovery relies on travel. Kauai officials have decided the cost of vacationing in paradise, for now, is too high.

Clark got COVID-19 in November and died about 10 days later. At age 84, he worked until he contracted the disease and most recently shuttled airline pilots and crew to and from the airport. Airline crews are exempt from the state's testing and quarantine rules.

The day after Clark's death, Kauai officials said they would opt out of the state's testing program and require visitors to again quarantine for two weeks whether or not they test negative for COVID-19 before arriving.

Kauai officials say the single-test scheme did not do enough to protect the people who live there. With only nine ICU beds and 14 ventilators, the island's health care system could quickly become overwhelmed by a large outbreak, said Kauai Mayor Derek Kawakami.

Seeking to prevent such a scenario, Kawakami proposed a mandatory second test for all passengers after arrival. His plan would have included a short quarantine while people awaited their second result.

"We think having a negative test is a good prerequisite to getting on a plane," Kawakami said. But "once you land on Kauai ... (travelers) should be able to sit and cool off for three days."

But the proposal was turned down by state officials, with Democratic Gov. David Ige saying the plan would have to be locally funded and administered.

After the Kauai surge, the state Department of Health traced most of the island's October and November cases to returning residents and tourists who brought the virus in despite the pre-flight testing program.

JoAnn Yukimura, a former Kauai mayor and friend of Ron Clark's for more than three decades, said his death shook the community and that she constantly thinks "of him being alone at the hospital. ... How lonely it must have been to die."

"Ron's death might seem to outsiders like such a small matter," Yukimura said. But it "hit us hard because we on Kauai haven't become inured to death and sickness — and we don't ever want to get that way."

Before the pandemic, Hawaii welcomed about 30,000 tourists daily who spent nearly \$18 billion last year.

In March, when the state's two-week quarantine rule was imposed, tourist arrivals and revenue plummeted. Visitor numbers have since increased with the testing program, but only to about a third of pre-pandemic levels.

On Kauai, 57-year-old Edwin Pascua has been unemployed from his hotel bellhop job since March and worries about having contact with infected travelers — but would rather be working.

"If there are safeguards in place, that would lessen everything," he said. "I wouldn't be as afraid."

Pascua and his wife, who works at the same hotel, have gotten by with unemployment benefits but he knows people who "haven't even gotten a check yet, one check from unemployment."

Despite the new infection surge and record deaths on the U.S. mainland, top Hawaii officials insist that

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the pre-travel testing program works.

"The proof is in the pudding," Hawaii Lt. Gov. Josh Green said. "Hawaii has the lowest rate of COVID in the country because of this program right now."

Hawaii enjoys relatively low hospitalization and death rates, but health experts said because of the way COVID-19 accumulates in the body over time, second tests for travelers would weed out more infection.

Dr. Kapono Chong-Hanssen, a Native Hawaiian physician who runs a Kauai community health center, said the single test requirement "goes against the medical evidence."

"We're starting to see these big holes in the plan and I think it's a matter of time before we pay the price," he said.

There have been more than 380 travel-related infections in Hawaii since the testing program was launched, according to the state health department.

The real number of infections among the general population is believed to be far higher than what has been reported. Many asymptomatic people, who can still spread the disease, do not get tested.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of the school of public health at Brown University, said travel restrictions for most places at this point in the pandemic are "either counter-productive or relatively useless" and can give a false sense of security.

"There is evidence that international travel bans are helpful at slowing things down," Jha said. But "unless you seal your country off completely and do it early, it's pretty tough to use that as a strategy."

Kauai, isolated by the ocean and largely protected by early restrictions, had done just that.

When the original quarantine rule was in effect, Kauai residents went to restaurants, schools were open and locals spent their money in the community. That might happen again with Kauai's reinstatement of the quarantine rule amid hopes by locals that the community will remain healthy.

Travel "introduces a continuous stream of new infections," said Dr. Janet Berreman, Kauai's officer for the state health department.

"This tsunami, if you will, of disease," she said, "has marched across the mainland, from east to west. We're just a little farther west across a body of water. But everybody wants to come here for the holidays."

Associated Press writer David Koenig in Dallas contributed to this report.

Biden's team vows action against hack as US threats persist

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Once in office, President-elect Joe Biden will punish Russia for its suspected cyberespionage operation against the United States with financial sanctions and measures to hobble the Kremlin's ability to launch future hacks, his chief of staff said Sunday, as a GOP senator criticized President Donald Trump for having a "blind spot" when it comes to Moscow.

"Those who are responsible are going to face consequences for it," said Biden chief of staff Ron Klain. "It's not just sanctions. It's also steps and things we could do to degrade the capacity of foreign actors to repeat this sort of attack or, worse still, engage in even more dangerous attacks."

The head of the cybersecurity firm FireEye, which disclosed that it had been targeted by the spying attempt, said it was clear the foreign intrusions were not "one and done" and suggested there was little time to spare before the next one.

"These attacks will continue to escalate, and get worse if we do nothing," said CEO Kevin Mandia.

Cybersecurity experts and U.S. officials such as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have been clear over the past week that they believe Russia was behind the massive hack that infiltrated over 40 federal agencies, including the departments of Treasury, Energy and Commerce, as well as government contractors.

But Trump over the weekend cast doubt on that assessment, suggesting without evidence that China may be behind the cyber intrusions and minimizing the impact. "The Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality. I have been fully briefed and everything is well under control," Trump tweeted, contradicting his own cybersecurity agency, which described the hacks as a "grave" threat.

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On Sunday, Sen. Mitt Romney, R-Utah, blasted Trump for putting the U.S. at continuing risk. "Russia acted with impunity," he said. "They didn't fear what we would be able to do from a cybercapacity. They didn't think that our defense systems were particularly adequate. And they apparently didn't think that we would respond in a very aggressive way."

"I think we've come to recognize that the president has a blind spot when it comes to Russia," Romney added, urging an immediate response and calling cyberspace the "warfare of the future."

While Trump downplayed the impact of the hacks, the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency has said it compromised federal agencies as well as "critical infrastructure." 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.

It's not clear exactly what the hackers were seeking, but experts say it could include nuclear secrets, blueprints for advanced weaponry, COVID-19 vaccine-related research and information for dossiers on government and industry leaders.

Still, it may take months to kick elite hackers out of the U.S. government networks they have been quietly rifling through since as far back as March. Christopher Krebs, former director of CISA, highlighted the challenges ahead as Trump dismisses the threat and Biden prepares for his Jan. 20 inauguration.

"The federal civilian agencies, the 101 civilian agencies, are not really optimized for defense right now," Krebs said. "And what that means is, there's a lot of old antiquated, legacy IT systems that are hard to defend. Plus, the authorities are not in place for teams like CISA to really get out there and aggressively root out adversaries."

Throughout his presidency, Trump has refused to blame Russia for well-documented hostilities, including its interference in the 2016 election to help him get elected. He blamed his predecessor, Barack Obama, for Russia's annexation of Crimea, has endorsed allowing Russia to return to the G-7 group of nations and has never taken the country to task for allegedly putting bounties on U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan.

Klain said the incoming administration was still learning information about the purpose, nature and extent of the hacks and faulted the confused messaging from the Trump administration on who's to blame.

Klain and Mandia spoke on CBS' "Face the Nation," Krebs was on CNN's "State of the Union," and Romney was on CNN and NBC's "Meet the Press."

US airport traffic rising despite holiday travel warnings

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Business Writer

SAN RAMON, Calif. (AP) — More than 1 million people have passed through U.S. airport security checkpoints in each of the past two days in a sign that public health pleas to avoid holiday travel are being ignored, despite an alarming surge in COVID-19 cases.

It marks the first time U.S. airports have screened more than 1 million passengers since Nov. 29. That came at the end of a Thanksgiving weekend that saw far more travel around the country than had been hoped as the weather turned colder and COVID-19 cases were already spiking again.

Now, hospitals in many areas are being overwhelmed amid the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in the U.S. since March, when most Americans were ordered to stay home and avoid interactions with other households.

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.

Although lockdowns are no longer in effect in many parts of the country, stay-at-home orders have returned in some areas in effort to contain the virus. Nearly 99% of California's population of roughly 40 million people, for instance, has been told to remain at home except for essential work, shopping and exercise.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has issued an advisory declaring "postponing travel and staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19."

Nevertheless, about 1.07 million people passed through the security checkpoints at U.S. airports on

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Friday and again on Saturday, according to the Transportation Security Administration. Saturday's volume was down 57% from the same time last year, the smallest year-over-year decline in daily traffic at U.S. airports since Nov. 22 as people began their Thanksgiving getaways.

If that early trend continues, U.S. public health officials fear it will lead to more superspreader events as people unwittingly transmit the virus to family and friends while gathering indoors for holiday celebrations. Health officials note the upcoming holiday period from Christmas to New Year's Day covers a longer timespan than the Thanksgiving break.

Even more travel is expected as Christmas draws closer. AAA projects about 85 million people will travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 3, most of them by car. 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.

In Georgia, Warnock brings faith and activism to the arena

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — In 2008, when Barack Obama was under fire for a sermon his former pastor delivered years earlier, the aspiring president distanced himself from the preacher's fiery words that channeled Black Americans' anger over racism.

The Rev. Raphael Warnock defended Jeremiah Wright. "When preachers tell the truth, very often it makes people uncomfortable," he said on Fox News.

Now Warnock is the politician running for office and the one under attack for his sometimes impassioned words from the pulpit. And once again, he is not backing down. Warnock, 51, says his run for U.S. Senate in Georgia — one of two races on Jan. 5 that will determine control of the Senate — is an extension of his years of progressive activism as head of the church where the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. preached.

Warnock is calling for bail reform and an end to mass incarceration; a living wage and job training for a green economy; expanded access to voting and health care, and student loan forgiveness. It's an unabashedly liberal platform that may galvanize the Democrats he needs to turn out to vote in the runoff election.

But it also carries risks. His opponent, Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler, has blasted his rhetoric and proposals as "radical," socialist and out of step with Georgia residents. Georgia voters are also likely to hear more about that from President Donald Trump, who announced Saturday that he will return to the state on Jan. 4, the eve of the runoff, to rally support for Loeffler and fellow Republican U.S. Sen. David Perdue.

It's a line of attack that could sway moderate suburban voters in a state that hasn't elected a Democrat to the Senate in 20 years.

"I'm a pastor who is running for political office, but I don't think of myself as a politician," he told The Associated Press. "I honestly don't know anything to be other than authentic."

Warnock would join a small group of other ministers in Congress, including at least one other Black pastor, Rep. Emanuel Cleaver. He said his model was King, "who used his faith to activate change in the public square." In high school, he listened to the civil rights icon's sermons and was particularly drawn to "A Knock At Midnight," in which King exhorts churches to serve as the "critic of the state" and fight for peace and economic and racial justice.

Warnock has embraced that mission. In 2007, he warned that the U.S. could "lose its soul" in a speech that condemned President George W. Bush's decision to send more troops to Iraq. At the Georgia Capitol in 2014, he was arrested while protesting the refusal of state Republicans to expand Medicaid. After the killing of George Floyd by police in May, he expounded on the country's struggle with a "virus" he dubbed "COVID-1619" for the year when some of the first slaves arrived in English North America.

His campaign draws heavily from his early life. Warnock grew up poor in public housing in Savannah, Georgia. He cites his father's small business hauling old cars to a local steel yard to push back on attacks he is against free enterprise.

He attended Morehouse College and earned a Ph.D. in theology from Union Theological Seminary, funding his education with help from student loans and federal grants. His older brother Keith, one of 11 siblings, served more than 20 years in prison for a first-time, drug-related offense, and Warnock has used his case

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to argue for criminal justice reform.

"He knew what it is to struggle. He knew what it is to go without," Bishop Reginald T. Jackson, a leader of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Georgia, said of Raphael Warnock, whom he supports. "He's able to speak to where a lot of people are."

Warnock knew early on that he wanted to enter the ministry. His father was also a preacher, and enlisted his son at a young age to help him read the small print in a biblical reference book because he refused to get prescription glasses. Warnock recalled giving his first sermon, "It's Time I be about My Father's Business," at 11.

His social activism is part of a tradition of resistance in many Black churches that developed from the fight against racial inequality. Black pastors have called out the country's troubled racial history using terms that can be discomfiting to outsiders.

In his much-scrutinized sermon, Wright decried the country's mistreatment of Blacks with the exclamation, "God damn America." Loeffler has used the clip in an ad that accuses Warnock of defending Wright's "hatred."

Loeffler has also used snippets of Warnock's own sermons to argue that he is against police and the military. In one clip, Warnock says that nobody can serve "God and the military." Warnock, who has two brothers who are veterans and whose father served in World War II, has said he was preaching from a biblical text and trying to impart a lesson about prioritizing God and laying a moral foundation for life.

Loeffler has used another clip to accuse Warnock of denigrating police. But his remark about "police power showing up in a kind of gangster and thug mentality" in that sermon was a specific reference to police practices in Ferguson, Missouri, that the U.S. Justice Department investigated after a white police officer fatally shot Michael Brown, a Black teenager, in 2014.

"He has actually made sure that we know who he is in his own words," Loeffler said at a debate in December. "Those aren't my words."

Warnock accused her of lying "on Jesus."

Cleaver said the attacks on Warnock's sermons using lines with no context are "woefully unfair" and show no understanding of the role of a Black preacher.

"I'm just made sick over what they're trying to do," he said.

At the debate in December, Loeffler also questioned Warnock about his arrest in 2002 on suspicion of obstructing a child abuse investigation at a camp in Maryland run by the Baltimore church he headed at the time. Warnock said he was trying to make sure young people had lawyers or family present when questioned by authorities. The charges were dropped.

Warnock's estranged wife accused him earlier this year of running over her foot during an argument, but police said they found no visible signs of injury, and they did not charge Warnock with a crime.

The effort to paint Warnock as a radical is similar to the strategy Republicans used with some success against other Democrats in down-ballot races this year. But it also echoes the attacks that segregationists leveled against King and supporters of the civil rights movement. That could help turn out the state's large African American population to vote in next month's runoff.

Warnock is right to keep focusing on his platform of a living wage, expanded health care options and voting rights, said the Rev. William Barber II, president of the Repairers of the Breach, a nonprofit group that fights poverty and discrimination.

"You don't win by being Republican lite," Barber said. "You win by lifting up people from the bottom."

Amid freed Nigeria schoolboys' joyful reunions, fear lingers

By LEKAN OYEKANMI and SUNDAY ALAMBA Associated Press

KANKARA, Nigeria (AP) — Nigeria's freed schoolboys have reunited with their joyful parents after being held captive for nearly a week by gunmen allied with jihadist rebels in the country's northwest.

Relieved parents hugged their sons tightly on Saturday in Kankara, where more than 340 boys were abducted from the Government Science Secondary School on the night of Dec. 11. Other families met

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their sons in Ketare, about 25 kilometers (15 miles) away. More boys went to their homes further away in Katsina state.

"When I heard our boys were freed, I was full with joy and happiness because I couldn't sleep, I couldn't eat," Murjanatu Rabi, a mother of one of the boys, said.

"We were crying, not knowing the condition that they were in," she said. "When we saw them, we were so happy even though they came back with wounds ... and very hungry."

Amid the celebrations, however, many of the schoolboys expressed worry about returning to school, saying their captors threatened them with death if they went back to classes. Nigeria's Boko Haram jihadist rebels claimed responsibility for the abductions, saying they attacked the school because they believe Western education is un-Islamic.

"Fear gripped me when they said if they ever see us in school again, that they will kill us," said freed Kankara student, Usman Mohammad Rabi. "I was seriously afraid."

The 13-year-old boy told how the students were forced at gunpoint to trek several miles through the bush, without food or water. His feet had sores from the hike across the tough terrain. He said his feet were so painful that he couldn't walk and he was helped by an older boy who carried him on his back. He said he does not want to go back to school.

"The reason why I'll not go back to school is because I am thinking if I go back to school the bandits will kill me and then I'll not see my parents again," said Usman. "That's the reason why I will not go back again."

After being released by their captors, the schoolboys were bused to Katsina, the provincial capital, where they met with Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari on Friday. The president appeared to minimize the traumatic abduction, telling the boys they should not be deterred in life by "this little difficulty."

Another abduction of more than 80 students happened Saturday night in an area nearby, but the pupils were quickly rescued by security forces after a fierce gun battle, police announced Sunday.

Saturday night's attempted kidnapping took place in Dandume, about 64 kilometers (40 miles) from Kankara, the town where the earlier kidnapping of schoolboys occurred.

Aide: Biden won't talk about son Hunter with AG candidates

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden's incoming press secretary said Sunday that Biden would not discuss the investigation of his son with any prospective candidates for attorney general.

A federal investigation into the finances of Biden's son, Hunter, will likely be a major point of contention during Senate confirmation hearings for Biden's nominee to lead the Justice Department. Some Republicans are already calling for the appointment of a special counsel to deter the role of politics in an investigation.

Biden spokeswoman Jen Psaki told "Fox News Sunday" that Biden is looking for somebody who is at "the highest level of integrity" to oversee the Justice Department.

"And that person, whomever it is, will be overseeing whatever investigations are happening at the Department of Justice," she said.

Psaki also said the topic of Hunter Biden would not come up in interviews. "He will not be discussing it with anyone he is considering for the role and he will not be discussing it with a future attorney general," she said. "It will be up to the purview of a future attorney general in his administration to determine how to handle any investigation."

The president-elect himself is not a subject of the investigation.

Sen. Doug Jones, D-Ala., and Merrick Garland, a federal appeals court judge, have emerged as the leading contenders to serve as attorney general, The Associated Press has learned. But dynamics could shift, as any Biden choice now will be scrutinized for any perceived loyalty to the president-elect and bias in any investigation of his son.

Racism targets Asian food, business during COVID-19 pandemic

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By CHRISTINE FERNANDO and CHEYANNE MUMPHREY Associated Press

As the coronavirus spread throughout the U.S., bigotry toward Asian Americans was not far behind, fueled by the news that COVID-19 first appeared in China.

Some initial evidence suggested the virus began in bats, which infected another animal that may have spread it to people at one of Wuhan, China's "wet markets." Such markets sell fresh meat, fish and vegetables, and some also sell live animals, such as chickens, that are butchered on site to ensure freshness for consumers.

The information quickly got distorted in the U.S., spurring racist memes on social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters responsible for spreading the virus, and reviving century-old tropes about Asian food being dirty. Fueling the fire, President Donald Trump repeatedly referred to COVID-19 as "the China virus."

"That old-school rhetoric that we eat bats, dogs and rats — that racism is still alive and well," said Clarence Kwan, creator of the anti-racist cooking zine "Chinese Protest Recipes." The speed with which such false stereotypes resurfaced during the pandemic is "a reflection of how little progress we've made," Kwan said.

In the Wuhan market where the virus is believed to possibly have originated, vendors also advertised wildlife for sale. Of the 33 samples from the market that tested positive for the coronavirus, officials say 31 were from the area where wildlife booths were concentrated. But wildlife and other "exotic" animals are not part of the modern mainstream Asian diet, either in Asian countries or in the U.S.

All of the misinformation has had serious consequences.

Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition of Asian American advocacy groups, issued a report in August stating that it had received more than 2,500 reports of hate and discrimination across the country since the group was founded in March, around the time the outbreak began to seriously worsen in the U.S. The group said it received data from 47 states, with 46% of the incidents taking place in California, followed by 14% in New York.

In addition, Asian American small businesses have been among the hardest hit by the economic downturn during the pandemic. While there was a 22% decline in all small business-owner activity nationwide from February to April, Asian American business-owner activity dropped by 26%, according to a study by the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Many businesses that survived have been subject to stigmatization, Kwan said. "Restaurants have been vandalized. As if the pandemic wasn't hard enough, there's this added threat to Asian businesses of this lingering hate."

Conversations about the stigmatization of Asian food reached a crescendo this month when Philli Armitage-Mattin, a contestant on "MasterChef: The Professionals," used the phrase "Dirty Food Refined" and the hashtag #prettydirtyfood in her Instagram bio, which described her as an Asian food specialist.

"In a year where Chinese and East Asian communities have essentially been blamed for the pandemic and chastised as 'dirty,' this type of narrative is completely unacceptable," Kwan wrote on Instagram.

Armitage-Mattin's bio has since been changed and the London-based chef apologized on Instagram, while also insisting that she had never meant to insult anyone.

"The way I mean food to be 'dirty' is indulgent street food; food that comforts you as in, 'going out for a dirty burger,'" she wrote.

But Kwan said especially in the current climate, such phrases can be dangerous.

"It was a very flippant, ignorant, tone-deaf way of talking about Asian food," he said.

Racist rhetoric referring to Asian food as dirty or disease-laden dates back to the 1850s, said Ellen Wu, a history professor at Indiana University. Wu said the false notion that Chinese people eat rat or dog meat is rooted in the xenophobic fears of white workers who used Chinese immigrant workers as a scapegoat for their economic woes.

"To white Americans, these new immigrants were different in a threatening way, and there is fear of the 'other,' of difference," said Wu, who is Asian American.

English professor Anita Mannur of Miami University said the current crisis reminds her of racist cartoons

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from the late 1800s that advertised for rat poison by picturing a Chinese man about to eat one of the rodents.

Mannur, who is Indian American, said other persistent false narratives such as that Chinese American neighborhoods or Chinatowns are dens of vice send the message that Asian people are less civilized, and do "very immediate damage."

"People have had their houses graffitied with things like 'Dog eaters live here,'" she said. "People are beaten up and spat on. People are told to go back to China."

Benny Yun, owner of the Yang Chow restaurant in Los Angeles' Chinatown district and two other locations in Southern California, said even though his businesses have survived the pandemic, they get prank calls almost daily asking if they have dog or cat on the menu or impersonating a thick Asian accent.

"The worst part is if they realize you speak perfect English, then they just give you a random order and we prepare it and they don't even come to pick it up. Waste of time and money," Yun said.

For years, health inspectors have been accused of docking points from Chinese restaurants for employing traditional cooking and presentation methods, such as hanging roast duck in the front window. The common yet scientifically disproven claim that MSG causes illness made the Chinese food flavor enhancer highly unpopular in the 1970s, forcing many Asian American restaurants to eliminate it from their kitchens.

Kwan said it is important for Asian Americans to protest the way they are being treated; to push back against the latest onslaught of bias and racism by continuing to unabashedly celebrate their food and culture.

"We don't have to change," he said. "We can live, breathe and eat exactly the way we do without having to adapt to white supremacy, to the white gaze, to whiteness. We can be proud of our culinary heritage."

Fernando reported from Carmel, Indiana, and Mumphrey reported from Phoenix. Fernando is an intern with The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/christinfern>.

Arizona migrant border deaths on track for record amid heat

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

DOUGLAS, Ariz. (AP) — Heat exposure killed 19-year-old Cesar de la Cruz on an Arizona trail in July during his trek up from southern Mexico. The body of Juan Lopez Valencia, another young Mexican man, was discovered Aug. 3 along a dry wash on Native American land.

After the hottest, driest summer in state history, authorities have recovered close to a 10-year record in the number of bodies of people who crossed from Mexico into Arizona's deserts, valleys and mountains. It's a reminder that the most remote paths to enter the U.S. can be the deadliest.

Enforcement efforts in neighboring states over the years have helped drive people into Arizona's difficult terrain, and some officials and activists believe stepped-up construction of President Donald Trump's border wall this year, largely in Arizona, also could be pushing migrants into dangerous areas without easy access to food and water.

De la Cruz and Lopez Valencia were among 214 confirmed or suspected migrants whose deaths at the Arizona border were documented from January to November by the nonprofit Humane Borders and the Pima County Medical Examiner's Office, which together map recoveries of human remains.

"There's no doubt in my mind that the high temperatures have had a lot to do with it," said Mike Kreyche, Humane Borders' mapping coordinator.

The highest annual number that the project documented was 224 in 2010. It wasn't clear if 2020 would exceed that once December is factored in.

The Border Patrol keeps its own statistics, counting the remains of suspected migrants it learns about in the course of its duties, according to its parent agency, Customs and Border Protection. CBP said that if another agency recovers remains and doesn't notify the Border Patrol, it won't be included in its tally.

For the first nine months of 2020, the Border Patrol listed 43 deaths in the Yuma and Tucson sectors that make up the Arizona border area. The mapping project tracked 181 deaths over the same period.

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During the 2019 calendar year, the federal government listed 70 deaths in Arizona, while the mapping project counted 144.

Federal statistics show that search and rescue operations near Arizona's border inexplicably dipped to 213 during a record-hot July and August, from 232 in July and August 2019. But early fall figures indicate rescues across the Southwest were trending up.

Hess told the Pima County Board of Supervisors in October that high temperatures and dry weather were apparently the reason more bodies were found this year. While recoveries included skeletons, many deaths were recent.

The National Weather Service in Phoenix says the average high temperature was nearly 110 degrees (43 degrees Celsius) in July and nearly 111 in August, helping make it the hottest summer in history. Phoenix's highs tend to be roughly the same as those in Arizona's Sonoran Desert just north of the boundary with Mexico, forecasters say.

The weather service said July and August also were the state's driest summer months on record.

Hess told county supervisors that he didn't detect any major changes in where people crossed.

Still, some officials and activists working near the Arizona border believe wall construction could be sending migrants into riskier places. The Trump administration expects some 450 miles (725 kilometers) of border wall to be done by year's end, much of it in Arizona.

"The wall has sent a lot of people to rough terrain in our area," said Santa Cruz County Sheriff Tony Estrada, whose jurisdiction includes Nogales, Arizona. "It's like driving livestock into a canyon where they ultimately die."

The remains of more than 3,000 migrants have been found near the Arizona border in the two decades since heightened enforcement in San Diego and El Paso, Texas, began driving people into Arizona's deserts and mountains.

Authorities have been able to identify about two-thirds. Most came from Mexico and Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

"It is important to remember that these are human beings, not just numbers," said Tony Banegas, CEO of the Tucson-based Colibri Center for Human Rights, which works with the medical examiner's office to help identify the bodies. "The only thing we can be sure of is there are a lot more people who died out there that we don't even know about."

It's not just in Arizona. Mass graves of border-crossers began turning up in South Texas over the last decade after large numbers of migrants began trekking through isolated ranches to avoid the official checkpoint by the small town of Falfurrias.

Brooks County Sheriff Benny Martinez said his Texas department has seen an increase this year in distress calls by border-crossers, but the bodies of suspected migrants found in the county dropped to 33 by the end of November, compared with 45 in the same 11-month period last year.

"We've been putting up placards on fixed objects like poles, cattleguards, railroad crosses telling them to dial 911 for help," Martinez said.

In southern Arizona, No More Deaths and similar humanitarian groups leave water jugs and other provisions in remote places. The group gained national attention when one of its members was tried and acquitted last year of harboring migrants.

Estrada, the Santa Cruz County sheriff, said he's worried officials may see higher numbers of deaths next year if big groups of migrants surge to the border, hoping Joe Biden's administration is more welcoming.

"These people will keep coming because most of them have nothing back home," Estrada said.

Follow Anita Snow on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/asnowreports>

Strained health agencies push do-it-yourself contact tracing

By TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

When Eileen Carroll's daughter tested positive for the coronavirus, Rhode Island health officials called with the results, then told her to notify anyone her daughter might have been around. Contact tracers,

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she was told, were simply too overwhelmed to do it.

That's also why tracers didn't call to warn the family that it had been exposed in the first place, said Carroll, of Warwick, Rhode Island. Luckily, she said, the relative with COVID-19 they had been around at Thanksgiving already alerted them.

"They said, 'We have 500 people a day and we cannot keep up with this,'" Carroll said.

It's the same story across the U.S., as state and local health departments ask people who test positive to warn friends, family and co-workers themselves because a catastrophic surge in infections has made it difficult or impossible to keep up with the calls considered critical to controlling outbreaks.

Health officials say do-it-yourself tracing is not ideal, but as infections and hospitalizations soar, it's likely the most effective way to reach people who may be at risk.

Over 16.5 million people in the U.S. have been infected and more than 300,000 have died, and officials fear transmission will only get worse as people gather for the holidays.

Some health departments aren't being informed of infections for several days, making it impossible to call at least 75% of a person's contacts within 24 hours of a positive test, which experts say is necessary to control outbreaks. What's more, many people won't pick up the phone or refuse to answer questions when tracers call. Sometimes, there are simply too many positive tests to call everyone.

"If you don't have the bandwidth to keep up, then you have to make strategic decisions ... and I think it's a smart move," Emily Gurley, an infectious disease epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, said of asking people to warn their own contacts.

North Dakota's health department curtailed much of its contact tracing among the general public in October as the virus surged, limiting efforts to health care facilities, schools and universities, and workplaces. Tracers still call people who test positive, but no one outside their households, said Brenton Nesemeier, who manages COVID-19 case managers and field epidemiologists.

"We realized that we needed to prioritize positive cases because they were ... the ones who were potentially out in the community, and they're the ones with the most questions," Nesemeier said.

"In turn, they're able to reach their contacts faster than we are because (people) will more likely answer a phone call from a friend," he said.

Nesemeier said there is no way to know if people are following through, but when North Dakota was doing full-fledged contact tracing, those who were willing to share information about their contacts often had already told them anyway.

Pennelope Denson, a 19-year-old from Riverview, Michigan, near Detroit, said that when her boyfriend's mother and brother got sick and tested positive about two months ago, she got tested and advised everyone she had been around to do the same.

It took nine days to find out she had contracted the virus, and two days after that, she got a call from a contact tracer at the Wayne County Health Department. The tracer took only her father's information, Denson said, and told her to call anyone else she might have been around.

She said her boyfriend's mother and brother never got a call from a tracer after they tested positive, "so nobody told me to quarantine, but I did it myself."

In Cole County, Missouri, which includes the capital of Jefferson City, when someone is tested, they're given a packet that includes information on reaching out to their own contacts if the results come back positive.

Kristi Campbell, director of the county health department, announced the do-it-yourself effort last month, saying it was taking officials five to seven days to learn of positive tests and that tracers weren't always getting the information necessary to call people.

"It is imperative that we get past the barriers of traditional contact tracing," Campbell said in the televised announcement. "This will eliminate wait time and hopefully stop people from unknowingly spreading the virus."

In Indiana, the health department recently said it would no longer ask for a detailed list of symptoms and would encourage people to call their own contacts. Tracers still try to collect contact information, but

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"we recognize that this can be quicker and that many people are reluctant to answer a text or call from an unknown number," spokeswoman Megan Wade-Taxter said by email.

Testing and tracing is a bedrock of the public health response to disease outbreaks, but both got a slow start in the U.S. when the pandemic took hold. Underfunded health departments had to hire and train enough people to do the tracing, then often met with resistance and suspicion.

Now, there simply aren't enough tracers to keep up.

Gurley, the Johns Hopkins epidemiologist, said that even if contact tracing programs are incomplete and slow, they are having an impact because many people need to know how to effectively isolate and where to get help with food, housing and rent.

"It could be a lot worse if we did not have these programs," Gurley said. But she added that it could be much better if health departments had more resources.

"From the beginning, the conversation in public health has sort of been, 'Here's the resources we're giving you, do the best you can.' But they don't have the bandwidth to keep up," Gurley said.

"I think it's a really frustrating, heartbreaking example of how we haven't prioritized this, and one of the reasons we are in the place we are today," she said.

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Webber reported from Fenton, Michigan.

Mississippi churches face difficult decisions at Christmas

By LEAH WILLINGHAM Associated Press/Report for America

RIDGELAND, Miss. (AP) — It always feels special for Pastor Jay Richardson when his congregation at Highland Colony Baptist Church gathers during the holidays — but this year, that's even more true because of time they've spent apart.

The church temporarily shut down at the start of the pandemic, and again three months ago, when 25 worshipers became infected with coronavirus during an outbreak. Richardson, 70, was hospitalized with double pneumonia caused by the virus.

As hard as it was dealing with an outbreak, in many ways the isolation it caused has been worse, Richardson said.

"I've made the decision here that unless it's a very, very unique situation, we're not going to shut this church down anymore," Richardson said, explaining that not being able to worship together has hurt members emotionally and spiritually.

Mississippi is the center of the Bible Belt, where residents consider themselves the most religious in the entire country, according to Pew Research Center. At the same time, most of the state falls into the high-risk category for coronavirus because of a high rates of conditions like hypertension and diabetes.

Houses of worship have faced difficult decisions during the pandemic and those challenges have been exacerbated as new cases peak during Christmastime, with thousands of Americans dying from the virus every day.

State Health Officer Dr. Thomas Dobbs described churches as a "powder keg" for virus infections and deaths. State health data have shown that church services have caused a significant number of outbreaks in Mississippi.

"From a public health perspective, we don't need to go to church," Dobbs said during a virtual conversation about the approaching holiday.

Meanwhile, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves says restrictions can't be placed on worship because religious freedom is a constitutional right.

Reeves has set limits on the number of people who can gather at one time — currently 10 people indoors and 50 outdoors, without social distancing — but those regulations have never applied to religious institutions.

The topic has been the subject of debate in the courts. In 5-4 vote last month, the conservative-led Supreme Court barred New York from enforcing certain limits on attendance at churches and synagogues

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in areas hit hard by the virus.

"God is bigger than government," Reeves wrote on Facebook after the court's ruling. "The right to freely practice your faith must never be infringed."

As Mississippi has seen a recent rapid increase in virus cases, both the Mississippi United Methodist Conference Pandemic Task Force and the Episcopal Diocese of Mississippi called for an end to in-person services.

"It breaks my heart to make this direction, especially now, during Advent," the state's Episcopal bishop, the Rt. Rev. Brian R. Seage, wrote in a Dec. 3 letter.

But many have kept their routines. For now, Highland Colony — a majority-white church in a Jackson suburb — is still holding in-person services.

"God has built a certain rhythm into our lives as Christians, and part of that rhythm is meeting together on a real regular basis," Richardson said. "If you get to where you're not doing that, your whole life gets out of rhythm."

Richardson, who was hospitalized for five days, was the most severely ill member of the church during the outbreak at Highland Colony.

Church leaders believe the outbreak started at a singing group's rehearsal, then spread at a Sunday service.

Afterward, they canceled small group meetings and created more space for singers. They had already added a second Sunday service to limit crowds, spaced out seating and added sanitizing stations and temperature checks.

Richardson this year doesn't expect more than 300 attendees combined during the two Christmas Eve services. The church seats 750.

Joy Sartain, 89, was wearing a mask sitting in a section of seats roped off for vulnerable populations as she attended a recent Highland Colony service.

"I have trouble understanding why some people will go to a restaurant and eat, the grocery store or the mall to shop, but they are afraid to come to church? That doesn't make sense to me," she said. "We can do this safely, and it's so important to us."

Every church's approach has been informed by its experience with the virus.

At Anderson United Methodist, a predominantly African-American church in Jackson, the Rev. Joe May said he's seen the toll of COVID-19 firsthand. He said 10 members of his church have died during the pandemic.

Anderson has not returned to in-person worship, instead doing virtual services and daily prayer calls. Once a month, the church hosts a drive-in service that attracts around 400 people. Before the pandemic, up to 1,000 people attended.

May has noticed persistent anxiety among members about the virus, and that's something he's tried to respect. He said he thinks it's a reflection of how the pandemic has hit Black people especially hard.

"Now is a very dangerous time with numbers tripling and quadrupling. I think it is a very, very unsafe method," he said of in-person worship. "It's horribly bad in terms of people letting down their guard."

Even while taking precautions, May said five members of the church's praise band had recently tested positive for COVID-19.

"A church is not just a building, a church is people," he said. "We can still keep our people connected. You can worship God without having to congregate in a building."

Leah Willingham 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

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Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 21, the 356th day of 2020. There are 10 days left in the year. Winter arrives at 5:02 a.m. Eastern time.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 21, 1620, Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower went ashore for the first time at present-day Plymouth, Massachusetts.

On this date:

In 1864, during the Civil War, Union forces led by Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman concluded their "March to the Sea" as they captured Savannah, Georgia.

In 1913, the first newspaper crossword puzzle, billed as a "Word-Cross Puzzle," was published in the New York World.

In 1914, the U.S. government began requiring passport applicants to provide photographs of themselves.

In 1940, author F. Scott Fitzgerald died in Hollywood, California, at age 44.

In 1942, the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Williams v. North Carolina*, ruled 6-2 that all states had to recognize divorces granted in Nevada.

In 1945, U.S. Army Gen. George S. Patton, 60, died in Heidelberg, Germany, 12 days after being seriously injured in a car accident.

In 1968, Apollo 8 was launched on a mission to orbit the moon.

In 1969, Vince Lombardi coached his last football game as his team, the Washington Redskins, lost to the Dallas Cowboys, 20-10.

In 1988, 270 people were killed when a terrorist bomb exploded aboard a Pam Am Boeing 747 over Lockerbie, Scotland, sending wreckage crashing to the ground.

In 1991, eleven of the 12 former Soviet republics proclaimed the birth of the Commonwealth of Independent States and the death of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

In 1995, the city of Bethlehem passed from Israeli to Palestinian control.

In 2012, the National Rifle Association said guns and police officers were needed in all American schools to stop the next killer "waiting in the wings," taking a no-retreat stance in the face of growing calls for gun control after the Newtown, Connecticut, shootings that claimed the lives of 26 children and school staff.

Ten years ago: The Census Bureau announced that the nation's population on April 1, 2010, was 308,745,538, up from 281.4 million a decade earlier. A divided Federal Communications Commission approved, 3-2, new rules known as "net neutrality" meant to prohibit broadband companies from interfering with Internet traffic flowing to their customers. The No. 1-ranked Connecticut women's basketball team topped the 88-game winning streak by John Wooden's UCLA men's team from 1971-74, beating No. 22 Florida State 93-62. Chip Kelly, in just his second season leading Oregon, was voted AP Coach of the Year.

Five years ago: A Taliban attacker rammed a bomb-laden motorcycle into a joint NATO and Afghan patrol near the Bagram Airfield, killing six Americans in the deadliest attack on foreign troops since the previous August. The nation's three-decade-old ban on blood donations from gay and bisexual men was formally lifted, but major restrictions continued to limit who could give blood in the U.S. Clemson's Dabo Swinney was named The Associated Press college football coach of the year.

One year ago: Joseph Segel, founder of the home-shopping network QVC, died in Pennsylvania; he was 88. Six people died and 13 others were injured in a fire at an apartment building in downtown Las Vegas. French fashion designer Emanuel Ungaro, known for his use of vibrant color, mixed prints and elegant draping, died in Paris at the age of 86.

Today's Birthdays: Talk show host Phil Donahue is 85. Actor Jane Fonda is 83. Actor Larry Bryggman is 82. Singer Carla Thomas is 78. Musician Albert Lee is 77. Conductor Michael Tilson Thomas is 76. Actor Josh Mostel is 74. Actor Samuel L. Jackson is 72. Rock singer Nick Gilder is 70. Movie producer Jeffrey Katzenberg is 70. Actor Dennis Boutsikaris is 68. International Tennis Hall of Famer Chris Evert is 66. Actor Jane Kaczmarek is 65. Country singer Lee Roy Parnell is 64. Former child actress Lisa Gerritsen is 63. Actor-comedian Ray Romano is 63. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin is 58. Country singer Christy Forester

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(The Forester Sisters) is 58. Rock musician Murph (The Lemonheads; Dinosaur Jr.) is 56. Actor-comedian Andy Dick is 55. Rock musician Gabrielle Glaser is 55. Actor Michelle Hurd is 54. Actor Kiefer Sutherland is 54. Actor Karri Turner is 54. Actor Khrystyne Haje is 52. Country singer Brad Warren (The Warren Brothers) is 52. Actor Julie Delpy is 51. Contemporary Christian singer Natalie Grant is 49. Actor Glenn Fitzgerald is 49. Singer-musician Brett Scallions is 49. World Golf Hall of Famer Karrie Webb is 46. Rock singer Lukas Rossi (Rock Star Supernova) is 44. Actor Rutina Wesley is 42. Rock musician Anna Bulbrook (Airborne Toxic Event) is 38. Country singer Luke Stricklin is 38. Actor Steven Yeun is 37. Actor Kaitlyn Dever is 24.