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Last Night Games

Girls' Basketball

Varsity: Redfield 50, Groton Area 28

JV: Groton Area 31, Redfield 28



We will be live-streaming the Boys C and JV games starting at 5 p.m.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Johnson Praises House Passage of COVID-19 Relief Bill

Washington, D.C. – Today, U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-S.D.) issued a statement following the bipartisan U.S. House passage of a COVID-19 relief package, an effort Johnson has spearheaded with the Problem Solvers Caucus since September.

“Congress finally got its act together. I was proud to vote in support of a tailored COVID-19 relief package that supports our small businesses, schools, and hurting American families,” said Johnson. “It wasn’t a perfect bill, but it’s a good one. While it took far too long to get here, we got a good bill across the finish line. The Problem Solvers Caucus was instrumental in getting this done, and I am grateful I had the chance to be a part of historic bipartisan efforts that serve America.

This is an extraordinary measure that meets an extraordinary challenge. With the distribution of a vaccine, there is light at the end of the tunnel. I’m pleased this bill repurposes funds from previous legislation appropriating only an additional \$325 billion. As we turn the corner, Congress needs to prioritize an orderly budget process and fund the government in a fiscally sustainable way.”

The relief package, included in the end of the year omnibus spending deal, includes the following Johnson priorities:

- Provides \$325 billion to support struggling businesses, including an additional \$284 billion for the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). During the first round of PPP 23,469 South Dakota businesses received a loan which allowed them to keep their employees on payroll.
- Allows expenses paid by the PPP loan to be tax deductible in 2020 and streamlines forgiveness for loans under \$150,000. These requests came from dozens of South Dakota small businesses.
- Provides \$20 billion for increased testing across the country, \$20 billion to ensure vaccine is available to all at no cost, and \$8 billion for vaccine distribution.
- Provides \$82 billion for schools, including tribal schools and colleges.
- Provides \$13 billion to support our farmers and ranchers and gives direction to USDA to provide a supplemental payment to livestock producers as partial compensation for disparities between CFAP 1 and CFAP 2. Additionally, biofuels will be eligible for assistance under CFAP, a change of policy under the CARES Act.
- Provides indemnities for producers who had to depopulate livestock due to supply chain delays and makes needed investments in small and medium meat processors.
- Provides \$600 in direct payments to individual Americans and \$600 per dependent for individuals making less than \$75,000 or married couples making \$150,000.
- Provides a one-year extension for state & local & tribal funding provided in the CARES Act, a priority of the South Dakota delegation.
- Includes Johnson led language to invest \$250 million in telehealth.

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Spotlight on Groton Area Staff



Name: Kyle Gerlach

Occupation: Special Education Paraprofessional

Length of Employment: 2018-2020

Kyle Gerlach is a relatively new staff member at Groton Area High School. He has been working as both a Paraprofessional in the Learning Lab and an Assistant Boys' Basketball Coach. Kyle Gerlach has only lived in Brown County for about 3 years. Before coming to Brown County, he attended Mount Vernon High School and graduated in 2003. After graduating from high school, he obtained his degree in Physical Education from Oklahoma Wesleyan University in 2008.

As part of his work as a resident Assistant Coach for the Boys' Basketball team of Groton, Kyle often has to coordinate with his students and learn about their personal dynamics. Mr. Gerlach has always had a love for sports and enjoys teaching students and decided to combine his passions when he started working towards completing his college education. His favorite sport is Basketball, coinciding with the sport he trains students to compete in as a coach. Mr. Gerlach is looking forward to hopefully seeing his team succeed in the upcoming season!

- Benjamin Higgins

Highway 37 James River Bridge Reduced Speed

HURON, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation is advising motorists driving over the newly constructed Highway 37 bridge north of Huron to expect a reduced speed limit and some "bumps" at the bridge.

Due to seasonal limitations, the final lift of asphalt was not able to be placed this year and will be done in the Spring. It was important to get the bridge open to traffic, which was done on Dec. 11.

Because of the final lift of asphalt was unable to be placed, temporary ramps were placed on both sides of the bridge, thus creating "bumps". Crews have placed advanced warning and reduced speed limit signs to indicate the location of the temporary bumps.

As soon as the weather allows in 2021, the contractor will remove the temporary ramps and place the final lift of asphalt. Traffic will be controlled with a flagger and pilot car and motorists can expect short delays while work is being completed.

Duininck, Inc. will complete grading operations near the river, and removal of the temporary work platform.

All traffic shall use caution while traveling through this area.

For complete road construction information, visit <https://sd511.org> or dial 511.

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#302 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We have Monday numbers, still low-ish. I mean, they're horrible, but in terms of what we've been seeing lately, they've an improvement. Sad state of affairs.

We had 185,100 new cases reported today, increasing yesterday's total by 1.0% to 18,061,400. Yep, we broke the 18 million mark today, right on schedule, as fast as we've ever done it. Here's the list of damages from the top:

April 28 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days

Hospitalizations fell off again today—third consecutive day. That's good news. We are now at 113,601 people in the hospital with Covid-19. There were 1753 deaths reported today. We are at 319,541, 0.6% over yesterday's total. We will get a better idea tomorrow what things really look like.

We've been hearing about a "mutant strain" of this virus circulating in England and scaring folks; I've been waiting for something more definitive from the scientists before weighing in on it—no point stirring people up until we see what we have here. And now I have a little information for you.

We've talked about mutations before—a lot. If you missed that or wish to brush up, check out my Update #46 posted April 9 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3496698997013148> for the basics about mutations and just what they might mean to the virus and Update #275 posted November 24 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4202064716476569> for some discussion of mutations that might increase the virus's competitive fitness and what that might mean to us.

First thing we should clear up is that the term "mutant strain" should be retired; it is unnecessarily frightening and not very specific. What we're talking about here is a viral variant, one that is genetically distinguishable from other variants. Variants may or may not be functionally distinguishable from one another, that is, they may or may not operate differently in the world. Most of them do not. Now we've been watching carefully for variants that do operate differently in a way of interest to us, ones that enhance some aspect of this virus's characteristics in a way that could be problematic for humans. We talked a while back about one such variant which appears to be more infectious, that is, better able to transmit and establish infection, than the wild-type virus which initially emerged in Wuhan. It seems likely this variant's increased infectious ability is what caused this pandemic to blossom the way it has. We talked about another one that showed up in mink in Denmark which was thought to be antigenically different in a way that might render vaccines less effective; this was a pretty scary thought, and the response was large, to cull millions of the animals. (Turns out this may have been an error; it is possible the variant seen in those mink was not as scary as first thought and the mink died in vain. There's been a fair amount of

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political turmoil about this in Denmark, as you can imagine, considering the numerous livelihoods, in fact, an entire industry wiped out by the cull.)

Something we should understand, though, is that it is quite unlikely we're going to see a single mutation show up in this virus that changes everything, especially when we think about a mutation that would allow the virus to escape human immunity—and that's the thing most folks worry about. The reason this is unlikely is that this sort of antigenic change in a virus is most often the result, not of a single mutation, but of the steady accumulation of a series of mutations which collectively create the antigenic change that enables escape. For example, the influenza virus changes sufficiently every year that we do best to develop a new vaccine for each flu season; it changes in just the way I've described, by accumulation of changes. Thing is, that virus engages in a strategy for genetic change which is a faster process, a strategy not likely to be available to this coronavirus because of the dissimilar structure of its genetic material; that means the coronavirus is not likely to change as fast as influenza virus does. So time will tell, but epidemiologists and molecular geneticists are not greatly concerned at this point about a single escape mutation as a sudden event. Any antigenic change of interest in this virus is likely to develop more gradually. Given we don't even know for sure how long immunity to this virus lasts under genetically stable conditions, it's probably too soon to panic.

We are now hearing about another perhaps functionally-different variant that has turned up in England. This one appears to enhance infectiousness, but like the earlier variant with this enhanced infectious capability, does not appear to be better able to damage tissue or to cause severe disease. The jury's still out on just what it represents. While this variant appears to be becoming more frequent (something they'd know in England because they're doing a whole lot more genomic tracking than we are), it is not yet clear whether that increased frequency is due to happenstance or to a characteristic of the virus. A similar variant has shown up in South Africa with a similar transmission pattern, but there, human behavioral factors are confounding any sort of understanding what's going on with that one too.

Some variants become more common simply because they emerge into particularly auspicious circumstances for viral spread; but it is also possible for this to happen because, under conditions of selection pressure, the virus has better fitness to the circumstances it finds itself in. So in conditions which make it difficult for the virus to transmit and infect new hosts (selection pressure), if a new variant happens to emerge which is better at overcoming those difficulties (competitive fitness), in that situation the frequency of that variant is likely to grow as it finds and infects hosts and reproduces in them more successfully than the competing variants. We do expect this coronavirus will, over time, gain useful mutations that make it easier for it to spread or that help it escape detection by the immune system.

This new British variant has about 20 mutations, several having to do with binding to human cells. That could make it more easily transmissible. Modeling says it will be, but there is no experimental evidence to support the modeling yet. It remains to sort out the human behavioral effects on transmission from the genetic ones, and the lab is the place to do that. In the meanwhile, where does that leave us? We're not sure. One panel of British scientists has said they have only "moderate confidence" this variant is more transmissible; another is playing it safer and upgrading its evaluation of the risk. According to the New York Times, "scientists, noting that viruses commonly shift shape over time, have urged the public not to overreact to the new variant." I'm going to say it's too late for that; the government pulled the fire alarm, and everyone is having a large reaction. It's smart to try to limit spread while we assess just how widespread and how problematic this variant is, but I worry about the effects of panic as people rush to get out of the country ahead of a lockdown: A rush for the borders spreads virus too; we saw that in Italy in the spring.

There was also talk that one or two of the alterations this variant exhibits might render antibodies less effective against the virus, but experts are saying it would take years for this virus to accumulate enough mutations to be able to escape our immune response to a vaccine. Jesse Bloom, evolutionary biologist at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, said, "No one should worry that there is going to be a single catastrophic mutation that suddenly renders all immunity and antibodies useless." He explains "it's not going to be like an on-off switch," but rather a process of accumulated mutations, the kind of

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thing we talked about above.

A mutation of interest here, called a 69-70 deletion, has turned up in those Danish mink, again now in England, and also in one patient who became less sensitive to convalescent plasma. The mutation is at the spike protein, which is an important location, and since it has arisen independently in various locations, there's a reasonable chance this is a mutation useful to the virus. It is looking like this sort of mutation can evolve to avoid recognition by a single monoclonal antibody (those lab-made and highly purified concoctions of just one kind of antibody), a cocktail of two monoclonal antibodies, and even convalescent plasma. It is not at all likely it will lead to immune escape. The thing is, a drug or even convalescent plasma administered to a patient is static; it's not going to adapt or change or respond to anything, whereas your immune response is layered, complex, and fluid. You produce a large, varied, and evolving repertoire of antibodies in response to any stimulus, and a single viral mutation isn't much defense against all of these different antibody specificities. And that's before we even start to talk about innate and cell-mediated responses, whole other arrays of defenses. Escape from immunity requires a series of alterations, each one avoiding another and yet another strand of the immune response until the old protections are no longer protective. That can happen, but it doesn't typically happen suddenly or even quickly. Even influenza virus, one of the most successful little shifters we deal with, takes five to seven years to completely escape immunologic recognition; we top off the protection every year in order to give people the best possible coverage, but that old version of immunity still carries a lot of protective effect in subsequent seasons. Cold viruses do the same sort of thing, but they take much longer than influenza; the reason you can get a cold every year isn't mutation; it is that there are, conservatively, a zillion different viruses that cause colds. (OK, I exaggerated; it's more like a couple hundred of them, but still a lot.)

We talked a few weeks ago about how the scale of infections and the frequency of transmission in this pandemic is likely to more quickly generate genetic diversity in this virus; but the second half of the equation is selection pressure sufficient to give a competitive advantage to a new variant. When it comes to immune escape, the selection pressure would be exerted by having a lot of immune people such that an escape-capable virus would have such an advantage. We're nowhere near that anywhere in the world. This whole issue could become a lot more relevant as we vaccinate on a large scale, so it's something to watch. According to Emma Hodcroft, molecular epidemiologist at the University of Bern in Switzerland, we can minimize the chances of an immune escape by immunizing about 60 percent of the population over about a year and keeping the number of cases down while we do that.

Experts suggest we monitor this virus for mutations the same way we monitor influenza virus for genetic change; they envision a process whereby we revaccinate everyone on a regular basis with a new vaccine adapted to changes spotted in the virus. The mRNA vaccines, in particular, are more easily updated than any we've used before because they're completely synthetic, not grown up in cultures as with traditional platforms. These vaccines generate huge responses, which will make it tougher for the virus to outrun us, so there is hope, despite the real phenomenon of mutation. But first, we have to get through this thing we're in. I hope we can do that.

I couldn't believe the story tag in the Washington Post: "How a Utah sports reporter accidentally raised \$55,000 to help people during the holidays." How the hell do you accidentally raise \$55,000?

Here's how: Guy writes for the Salt Lake Tribune, Andy Larson by name; covers the Jazz. His mom called him and asked him to come take away an old SpongeBob box she'd found in his former room; it was where he'd tossed his spare change all through school, so there was a fair amount in it. She said, "There must be 60 bucks worth of quarters and nickels in here." So he picked it up and took the box to the bank where they ran it through one of those cool change counters, and—surprise!—there was more like \$165 in there.

Larson considered it a windfall, so he decided to find some families on Twitter who needed a little boost for Christmas and give it away. He figured he'd find one or two families, ship the money out, and be done.

Not so fast, Mr. Larson.

There were responses from some families in need and some folks nominating families who didn't ask for themselves; but there was something else too. The first one of those said, "Andy, I'd like to help—shoot me your Venmo and put me down for \$150." That sparked something: People started to retweet and fol-

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low suit, and by the next day, he had \$55,000 from 992 people. Really!

He set about verifying every story of people needing help and figuring out how to leverage this money to do the most good for the most people, and then he wrote a story explaining how he disposed of every dollar. There were direct payments to families who needed help for Christmas, with rent, to fix the car or pay utility bills, for groceries. There were a lot of requests for help with medical debt, more than he could cover, so he sent \$200 to each of those families, then gave \$10,000 to an outfit that buys medical debt from collection agencies for pennies on the dollar and then forgives it (which I'm just going to say is brilliant). His donation there will pay off the bills of 400 to 500 Utahns, some \$1 million in all. And there was still money left for local charities who've been helping people during the pandemic.

Ordinary guy, simple idea, small seed. There's an old Christmas song that comes to mind: "Lo, how a rose e'er blooming." That's how I see this story, as a Christmas rose blooming in the darkest part of winter.

Be well. Bloom. We'll talk again.

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December 21st COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota: Community Spread for week of Dec. 21:

Substantial: Stanley upgraded from Moderate to Substantial.

Moderate: Bennett, Buffalo, Faulk, Hanson, Mellette, Miner, Potter, Sanborn all downgraded from substantial to moderate.

Minimal: Harding, Sully downgraded from moderate to minimal.

None: Jones downgraded from minimal to none.

Positive: +347 (95,074 total) Positivity Rate: 10.8%

Total Tests: 3206 (719,491 total)

Hospitalized: +18 (5429 total). 344 currently hospitalized -1)

Avera St. Luke's: 11 (-1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 3 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 9 (+1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (+1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +20 (1381 total)

Females: 12 Males: 8

50s+=1, 70s+=8, 80+=11

Counties: Brookings-4, Brown-2, Codington-2, Custer-1, Day-1, Dewey-1, Gregory-1, Haakon-1, Lincoln-1,

Meade-1, Minnehaha-4, Spink-1.

Recovered: +224 (85,320 total)

Active Cases: +103 (8373)

Percent Recovered: 89.7%

Beadle (34) +0 positive, +1 recovered (109 active cases)

Brookings (28) +12 positive, +5 recovered (232 active cases)

Brown (53): +35 positive, +18 recovered (318 active cases)

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

Clay (11): +8 positive, +1 recovered (115 active cases)

Codington (68): +7 positive, +15 recovered (416 active cases)

Davison (52): +1 positive, +5 recovered (148 active cases)

Day (19): +1 positive, +5 recovered (53 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +0 positive, +3 recovered (46 active cases)

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

Grant (21): +2 positive, +0 recovered (90 active cases)

Hanson (3): +2 positive, +0 recovered (22 active cases)

Hughes (25): +2 positive, +2 recovered (158 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +10 positive, +7 recovered (223

active cases)

Lincoln (61): +62 positive, +15 recovered (639 active cases)

Marshall (4): +0 positive, +0 recovered (32 active cases)

McCook (21): +3 positive, +1 recovered (43 active cases)

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

Minnehaha (251): +84 positive, +47 recovered (2085 active cases)

Pennington (123): +38 positive, +47 recovered (1066 active cases)

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

Roberts (26): +3 positive, +2 recovered (119 active cases)

Spink (22): +2 positive, +1 recovered (76 active cases)

Walworth (14): +6 positive, +0 recovered (71 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 21:

- 6.0% rolling 14-day positivity
- 78 new positives
- 1,447 susceptible test encounters
- 158 currently hospitalized (+2)
- 2,655 active cases (-140)
- 1,233 total deaths (+2)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	399	367	754	8	Substantial	27.59%
Beadle	2459	2316	5034	34	Substantial	7.63%
Bennett	347	319	1071	8	Moderate	8.22%
Bon Homme	1446	1375	1845	22	Substantial	13.89%
Brookings	2827	2567	9694	28	Substantial	7.36%
Brown	4224	3873	10881	53	Substantial	19.47%
Brule	624	588	1669	6	Substantial	19.35%
Buffalo	406	385	842	10	Moderate	13.33%
Butte	836	761	2781	16	Substantial	15.91%
Campbell	110	103	202	3	Minimal	15.38%
Charles Mix	1070	978	3495	10	Substantial	14.81%
Clark	301	273	830	2	Substantial	5.26%
Clay	1569	1443	4403	11	Substantial	21.05%
Codington	3285	2875	8163	68	Substantial	17.47%
Corson	445	408	881	7	Substantial	41.67%
Custer	654	588	2341	9	Substantial	22.22%
Davison	2648	2448	5616	52	Substantial	15.99%
Day	505	433	1498	19	Substantial	16.05%
Deuel	395	334	974	6	Substantial	29.85%
Dewey	1232	1046	3456	11	Substantial	12.50%
Douglas	364	310	813	7	Substantial	36.00%
Edmunds	322	272	871	4	Substantial	13.13%
Fall River	427	376	2236	10	Substantial	20.80%
Faulk	307	281	582	10	Moderate	6.25%
Grant	806	694	1888	21	Substantial	30.60%
Gregory	475	425	1058	26	Substantial	26.09%
Haakon	222	167	459	6	Substantial	28.57%
Hamlin	577	500	1478	32	Substantial	13.60%
Hand	310	293	693	2	Moderate	10.34%
Hanson	304	279	588	3	Moderate	26.53%
Harding	88	76	150	0	Minimal	16.67%
Hughes	1930	1747	5455	25	Substantial	4.90%
Hutchinson	678	601	1995	14	Substantial	16.19%

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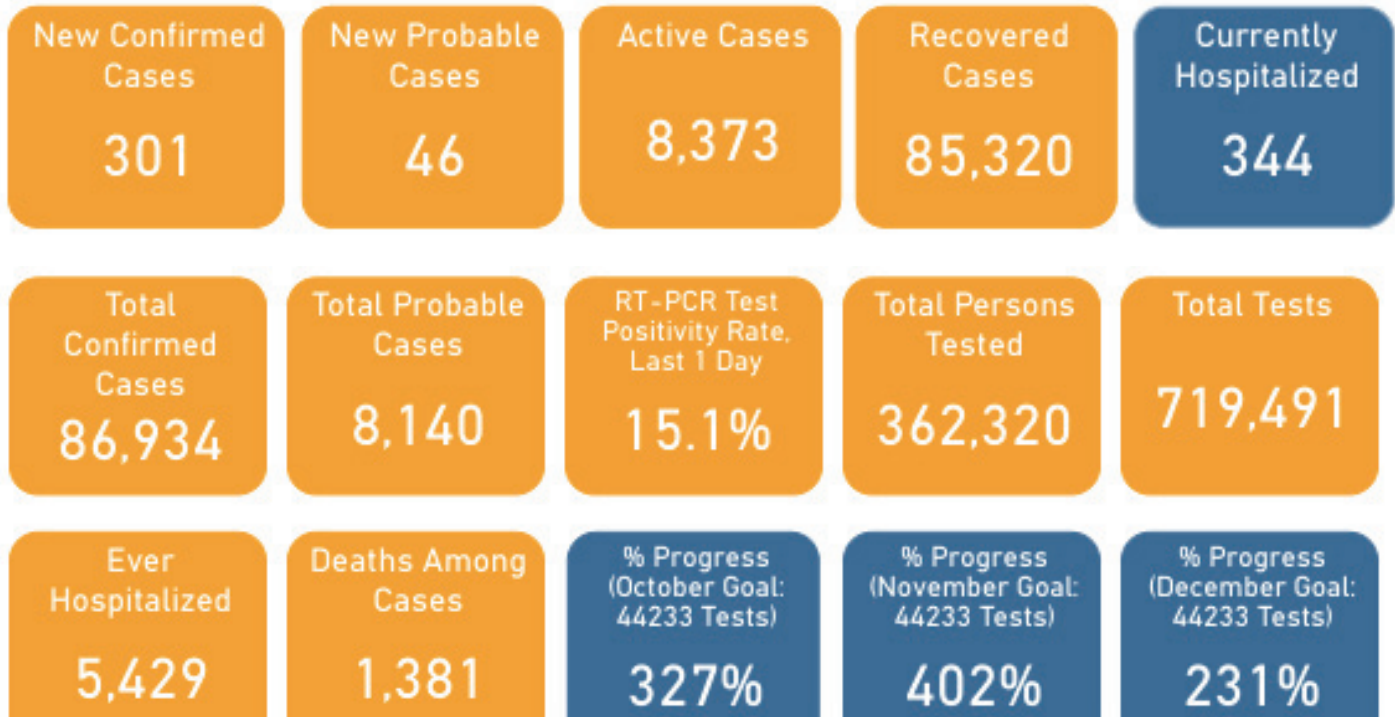
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Hyde	130	126	356	0	Minimal	15.38%
Jackson	257	214	854	8	Substantial	14.71%
Jerauld	258	229	484	15	Moderate	18.18%
Jones	63	63	180	0	None	0.00%
Kingsbury	508	456	1382	13	Substantial	16.85%
Lake	984	891	2713	13	Substantial	21.74%
Lawrence	2433	2194	7451	27	Substantial	19.06%
Lincoln	6472	5772	16895	61	Substantial	20.67%
Lyman	509	477	1672	9	Substantial	11.59%
Marshall	249	213	975	4	Substantial	20.83%
McCook	653	589	1378	21	Substantial	24.00%
McPherson	173	156	492	1	Moderate	0.75%
Meade	2119	1902	6538	22	Substantial	20.20%
Mellette	213	193	646	2	Moderate	23.53%
Miner	218	194	491	6	Moderate	26.32%
Minnehaha	24064	21728	66099	251	Substantial	15.75%
Moody	520	442	1562	14	Substantial	28.57%
Oglala Lakota	1870	1661	6142	33	Substantial	22.40%
Pennington	10543	9354	32928	123	Substantial	23.06%
Perkins	262	213	648	9	Substantial	26.15%
Potter	292	285	702	2	Moderate	4.44%
Roberts	912	767	3688	26	Substantial	21.60%
Sanborn	300	283	595	3	Moderate	4.00%
Spink	685	585	1818	22	Substantial	12.64%
Stanley	261	239	750	2	Substantial	6.67%
Sully	103	93	240	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1124	1035	3741	17	Substantial	25.00%
Tripp	611	551	1302	10	Substantial	10.71%
Turner	930	803	2323	47	Substantial	18.75%
Union	1518	1332	5206	30	Substantial	18.30%
Walworth	600	515	1597	14	Substantial	25.33%
Yankton	2365	2038	8057	23	Substantial	14.39%
Ziebach	283	226	694	7	Substantial	13.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1951	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	3515	0
10-19 years	10483	0
20-29 years	17440	3
30-39 years	15748	12
40-49 years	13588	22
50-59 years	13492	70
60-69 years	10758	173
70-79 years	5651	295
80+ years	4399	806

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	49704	673
Male	45370	708

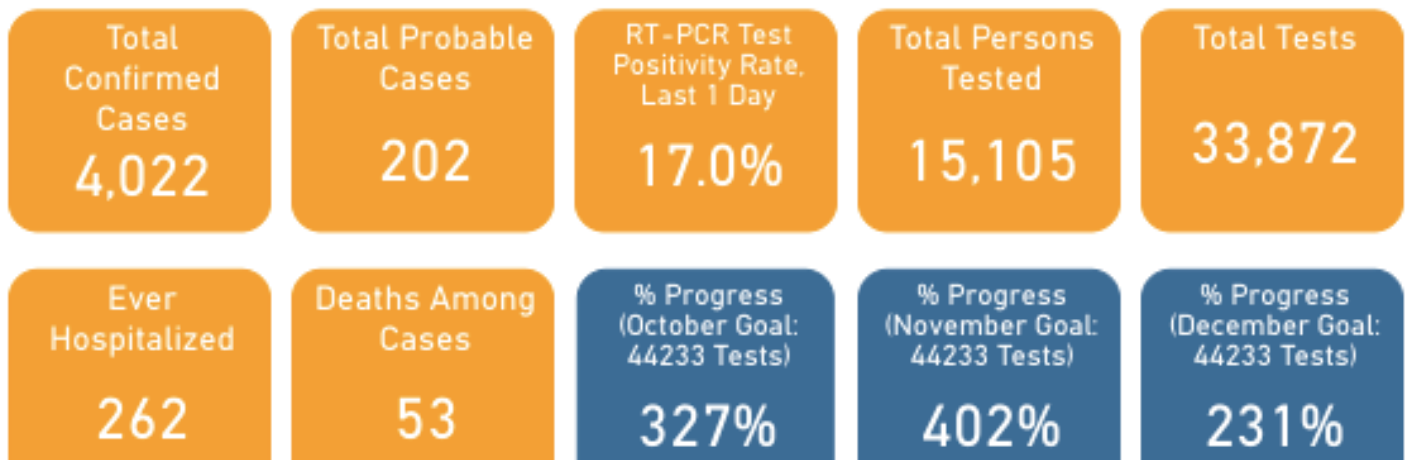
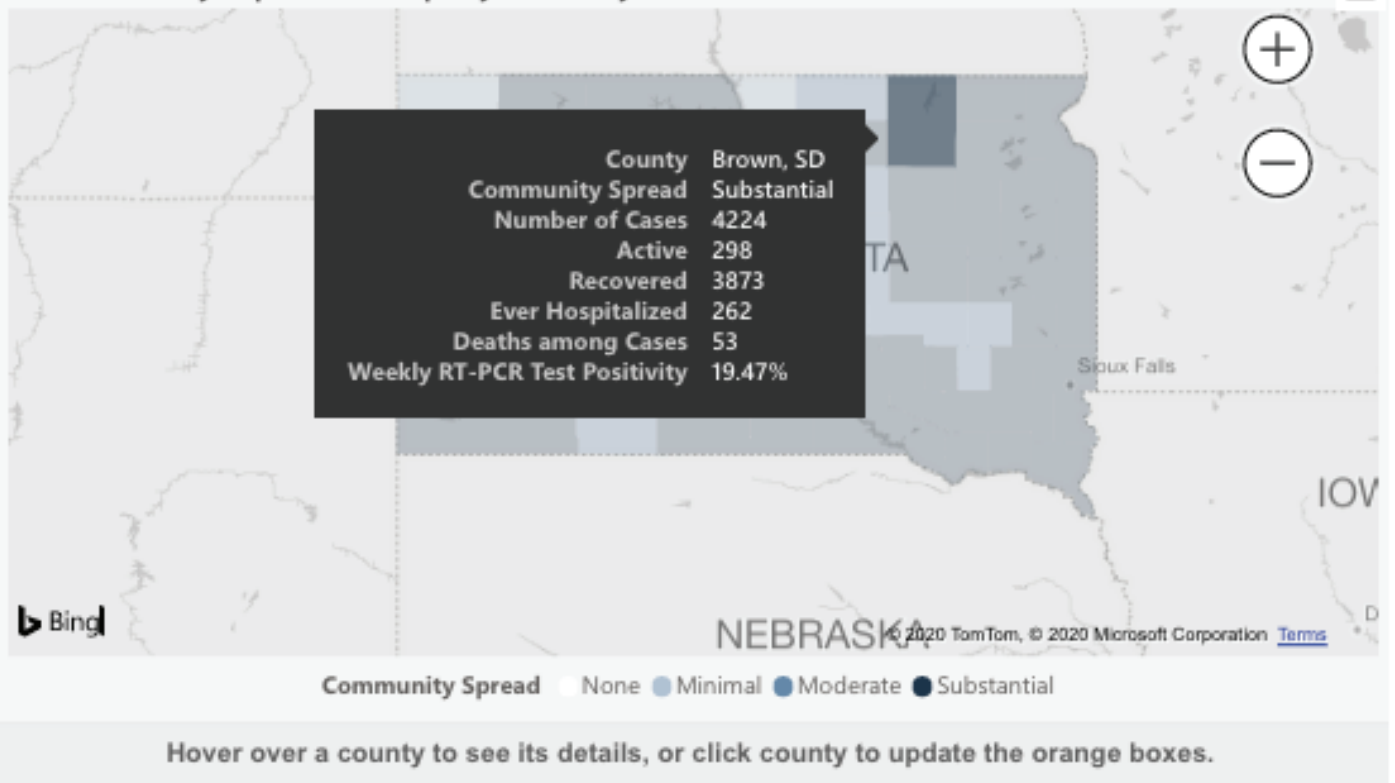
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



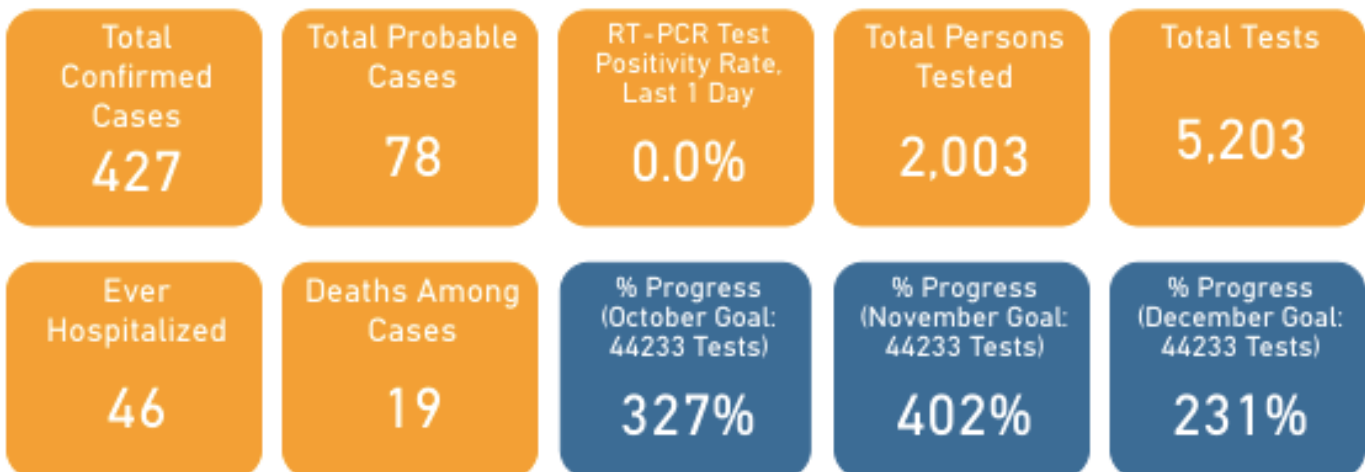
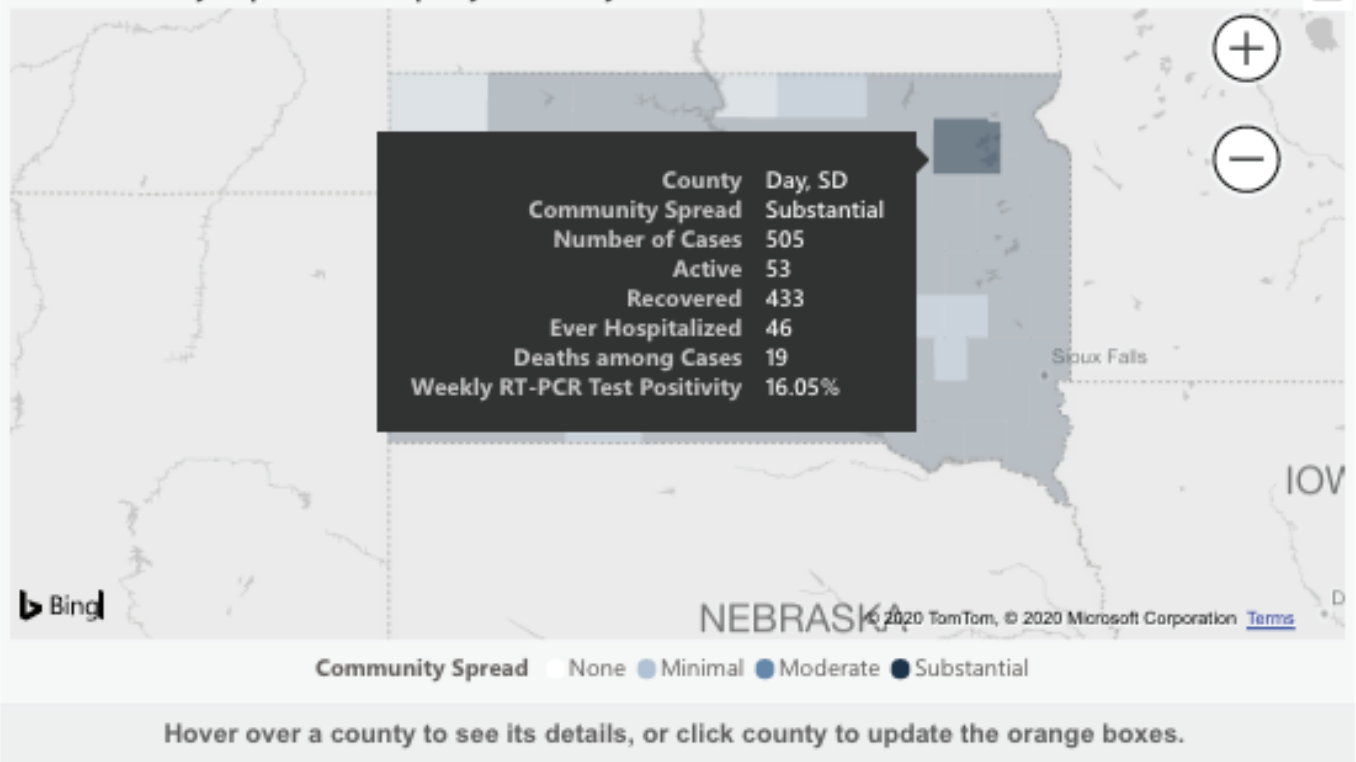
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Day County



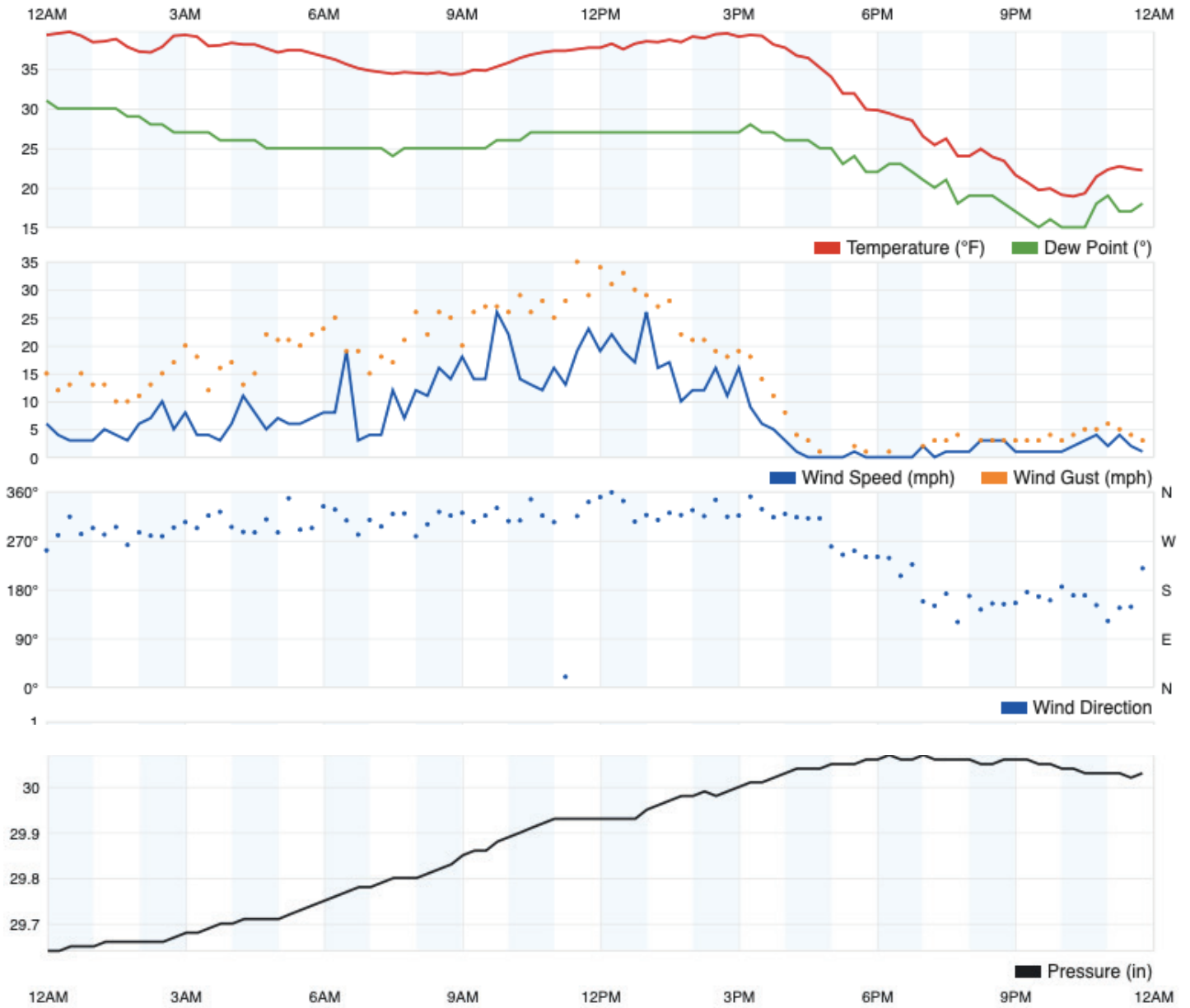
Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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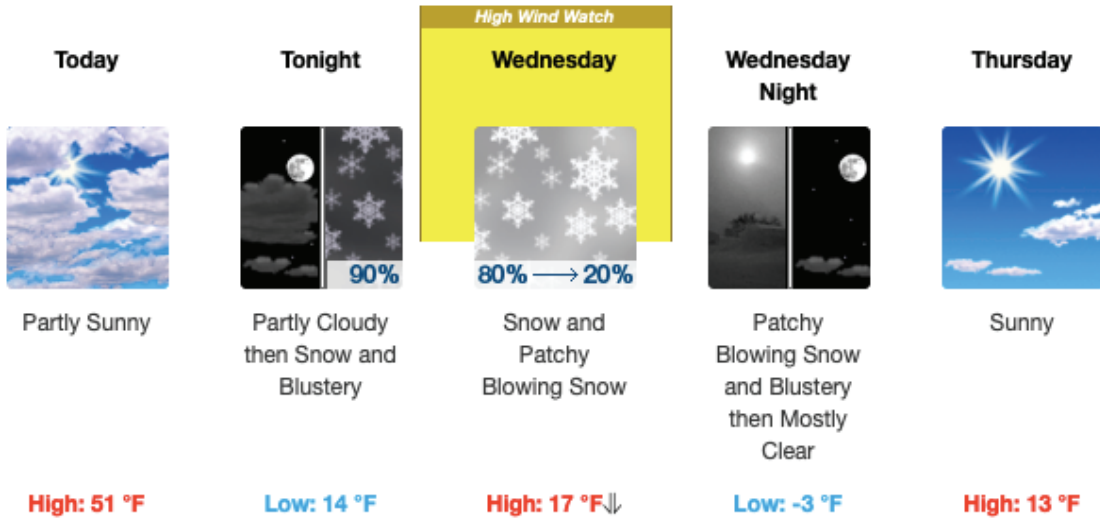
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



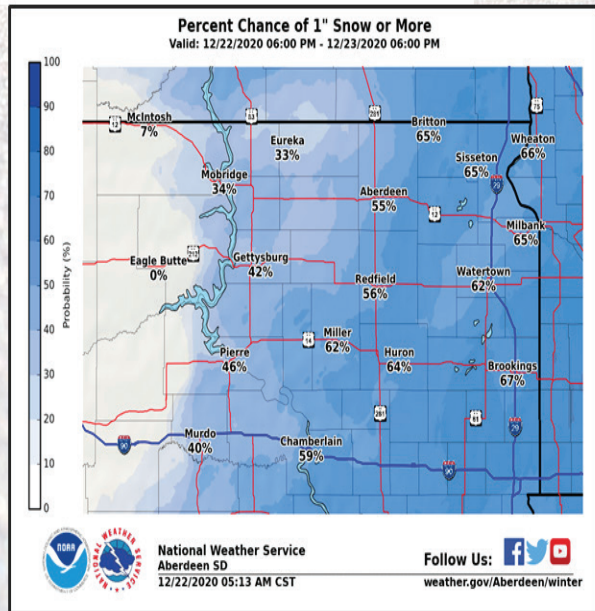
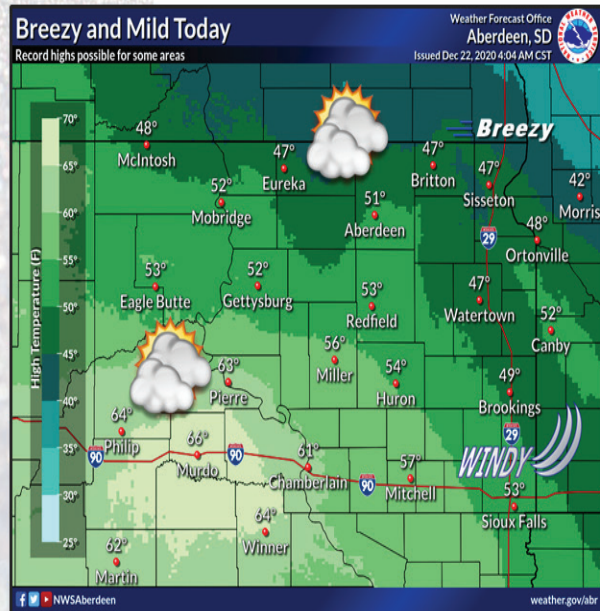
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Autumn Turns To Winter

-Unseasonably Mild Across the Region Today
-Big Changes Move in Late Tonight with Snowfall & Strong Winds



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast Updated: 12/22/2020 5:43 AM CT NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

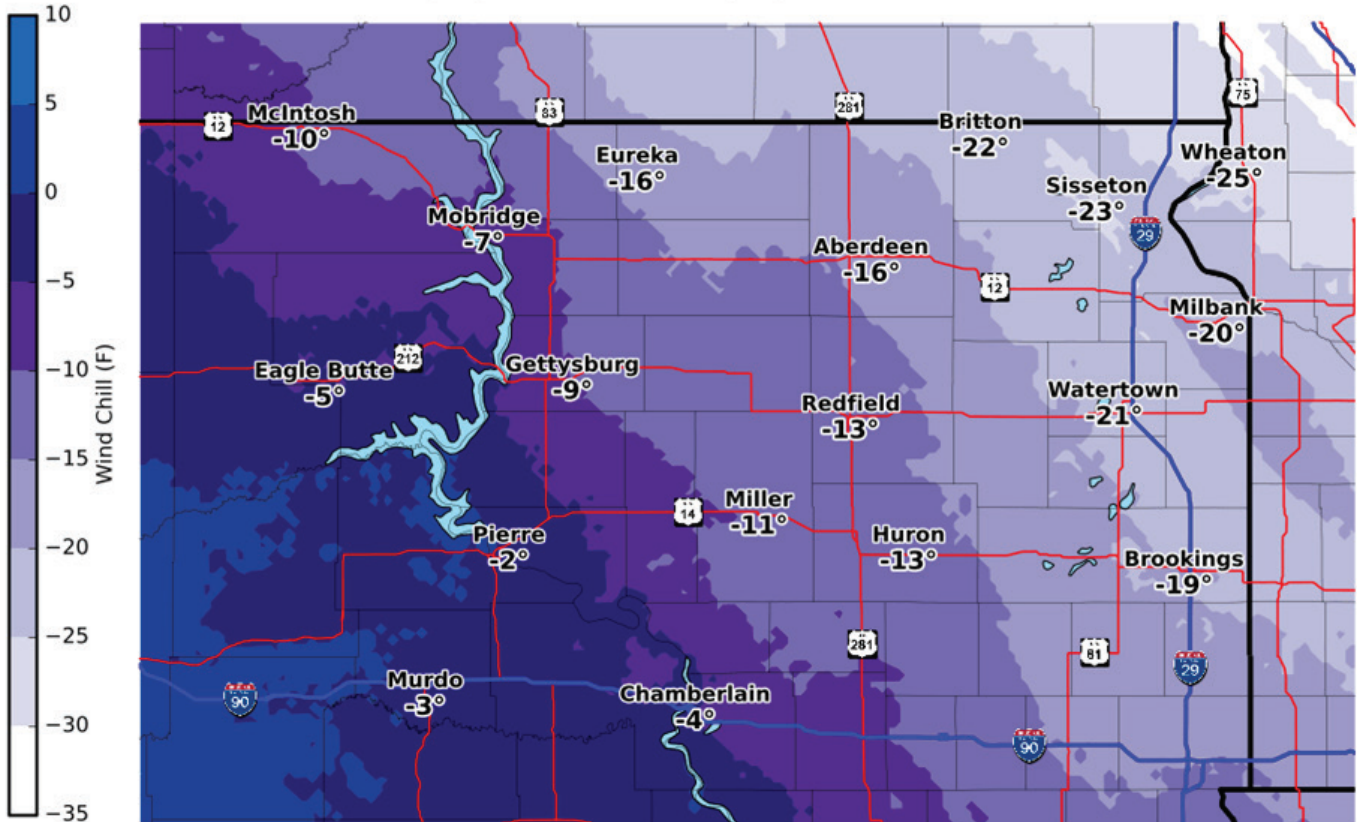
Our region will be out ahead of a storm system during the daytime hours today. Southerly winds and mild temperatures are expected. In fact, some areas could set new record highs by day's end today. Enjoy today's, rather rare weather conditions as reality will be setting in late tonight into Wednesday. Low pressure will move through the Dakotas and into Minnesota during that time and generate a fair amount of strong winds and some snowfall. A thin coating up to a couple of inches of snow could be possible. The strong winds combined with the falling snow will create hazardous conditions during the day on Wednesday.

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Coldest Wind Chill

Valid: 12/23/2020 06:00 PM - 12/24/2020 06:00 PM CST



National Weather Service
Aberdeen SD
12/21/2020 03:30 PM CST

Follow Us:   
[weather.gov/Aberdeen](https://www.weather.gov/Aberdeen)

As mentioned in forecasts and social media posts, the much advertised big changes for Tuesday night through Wednesday night will bring cold, wind, and light snow. Here is a graphic highlighting the forecast coldest wind chill readings Wednesday night through Thursday. Most areas will fall to 5 below zero to 25 below zero during this time.

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Today in Weather History

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds, combined with air temperatures below zero, created wind chills from -40 to -65 degrees over west-central Minnesota early in the day on the 22nd. Air temperatures were generally in the -20 to -25 degree range, with afternoon highs around 15 below zero.

December 22, 1990: Strong northwest winds gusted to 35 miles per hour and caused near-whiteout conditions over a wide area of southwest and west-central Minnesota during the late afternoon on the 21st into the early morning of the 22nd. Several car accidents ensued. A 30-year old man was killed when he lost control of his truck and slid into a ditch in the near-blizzard conditions.

1989: The most significant cold spell of the century for the Deep South occurred from the 22 to the 26. New Orleans experienced 64 consecutive hours at or below 32 degrees Fahrenheit and a total of 81 out of 82 hours below freezing. A total of 15 hours was below 15 degrees with the lowest reading of 11 degrees on the morning of the 23rd. A low temperature of 8 degrees was recorded at Baton Rouge. Snow and sleet paralyzed transportation systems where as much as two to four inches of snow accumulated in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes. Snow and ice-covered the ground in New Orleans. The most significant impact was the breaking of water pipes in homes and businesses. Over 100 fires resulted in the New Orleans area within 24 hours due to a loss of water pressure and improperly utilized heating sources. Ice formed over shallow lakes and waterways where commercial fishing took heavy losses. Five weather-related deaths occurred in the service area during this rare Arctic outbreak.

1989: Between December 22 and December 24, 1989, deepening low pressure pulled a frigid arctic air mass into the southeastern United States. This sequence of events produced a historic snowstorm and a rare white Christmas across the region. At Charleston, South Carolina, the storm deposited 8 inches of snow – the greatest snowfall in modern history. At Savannah, Georgia, the storm total accumulation of 3.6 inches tied the greatest snowfall in modern history.

2002: Heavy rains prompted flooding in the mountain city of Teresopolis, located about 90 km north of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. A mudslide was responsible for 9 deaths and 50 injuries.

2004: Tremendous snows occurred in the Ohio Valley. The following cities set new records for their most significant snowstorm ever: Evansville, Indiana 22.3 inches, Dayton, Ohio 16.4 inches, and Paducah, Kentucky 14.2 inches. Other big snowfall totals were 31 inches at Liberty, Indiana, 28 inches at Buena Vista, Indiana, 24 inches at Greenville, Ohio, and 23 inches at Mansfield, Ohio.

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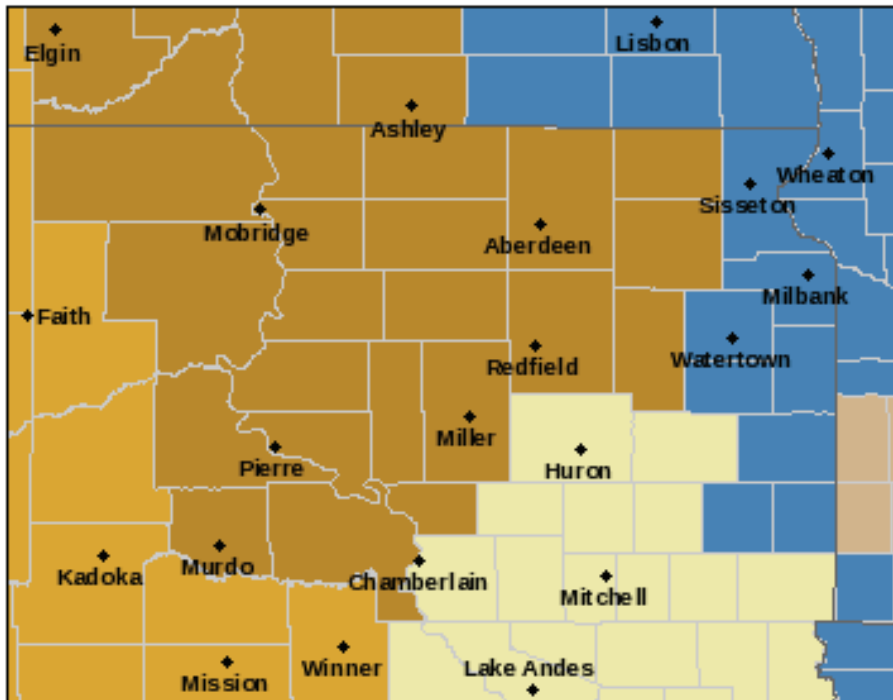
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 40 °F at 12:33 AM
Low Temp: 18 °F at 10:09 PM
Wind: 35 mph at 11:23 AM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 59° in 1893
Record Low: -28° in 1990
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.34
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.54
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:54 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:12 a.m.



[Watches, Warnings & Advisories](#)

Zoom Out

High Wind Warning	
Wind Advisory	
Winter Storm Watch	
High Wind Watch	
Hazardous Weather Outlook	

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PROPHESIES FROM ISAIAH

“ Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin will be with child and bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel – God with us!

“The people who walk in darkness

Will see a great light;

Those who live in a dark land,

The light will come to them.

For a child will be born to us, a

son given to us;

And the government will rest on

His shoulders!

And His name will be called:

Wonderful!

Counselor!

Mighty God!

Eternal Father!

Prince of Peace!

There will be no end to the increase

of His government or of His peace.

“The spirit of the LORD will rest on Him,

The spirit of wisdom and understanding.

The spirit of counsel and strength,

The spirit of knowledge and

the fear of the Lord.”

Prayer: Thank You, God, for keeping Your word! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Isaiah 7:14; Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Isaiah 11:2-3

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News from the Associated Press

Monday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Alcester-Hudson 34, Bon Homme 19
DeSmet 69, Dell Rapids St. Mary 33
Howard 89, Freeman Academy 14
Lead-Deadwood 56, Bennett County 51
Lemmon 67, Newell 22
Sioux Valley 64, Sisseton 46
Sully Buttes 49, Aberdeen Roncalli 46
Waverly-South Shore 66, Iroquois 23
Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D. 55, Wilmot 22

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 58, Sully Buttes 31
Arlington 68, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 23
Corsica/Stickney 60, Gayville-Volin 25
Dell Rapids St. Mary 48, DeSmet 34
Hanson 52, Avon 45
Highmore-Harrold 40, Faulkton 39
Howard 50, Freeman 41
Newell 54, Lemmon 36
North Central Co-Op 61, Strasburg-Zeeland, N.D. 40
Redfield 50, Groton Area 28

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

Girl's Basketball Polls

By The Associated Press

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

Class AA

1. O'Gorman (15)	2-0	83	1
2. Washington (2)	2-0	68	2
3. Harrisburg	3-0	48	3
4. Brandon Valley	3-0	34	4
5. Aberdeen Central	3-0	22	5

Others receiving votes: None.

Class A

1. St. Thomas More (12)	3-0	78	1
2. West Central (5)	3-0	67	5
3. Winner	3-1	53	1
4. Tea Area	1-0	36	4
5. Hamlin	2-1	12	3

Others receiving votes: Sioux Falls Christian 7, Dakota Valley 1, Garretson 1.

Class B

1. Corsica-Stickney(17)	3-0	85	1
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2. Castlewood	4-0	67	2
3. Ethan	4-0	47	4
4. White River	2-0	28	5
5. Viborg-Hurley	3-0	11	RV

Others receiving votes: De Smet 10, Bridgewater-Emery 3, Waubay/Summit 2, Newell 1, Waverly-South Shore 1.

Boy's Basketball Polls

By The Associated Press

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

Class AA

1. Brandon Valley (14)	3-0	80	3
2. Washington (2)	2-0	63	4
3. Roosevelt (1)	2-1	51	1
4. Yankton	2-1	38	2
5. Harrisburg	3-0	18	5

Others receiving votes: Mitchell 4, O'Gorman 1.

Class A

1. Dakota Valley (14)	3-0	85	1
2. SF Christian (2)	3-1	62	2
3. Dell Rapids (1)	3-0	52	3
4. Sioux Valley	2-0	35	5
5. Vermillion	2-0	11	RV

Others receiving votes: Tea Area 9, Mobridge-Pollock 1.

Class B

1. De Smet (16)	2-0	84	1
2. Platte-Geddes (1)	2-0	67	3
3. Viborg-Hurley	3-0	44	4
4. White River	2-1	27	2
5. Dell Rapids St. Mary	2-0	25	5

Others receiving votes: Canistota 4, Howard 3, Potter County 1.

South Dakota reports 20 more COVID-19 deaths, 347 new cases

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials reported Monday that an additional 20 people have died from COVID-19, bringing the total number of deaths in the state to 1,381.

Health officials also reported 347 new cases of the coronavirus. Since the pandemic began, there have been more than 95,074 COVID-19 infections in the state.

As of Monday, 344 people were hospitalized with COVID-19 in South Dakota, and of that number, 70 were receiving intensive care and 31 were on ventilators.

According to the COVID Tracking Project, the seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in South Dakota has decreased over the past two weeks, going from 886.43 new cases per day on Dec. 5 to 561.29 new cases per day on Dec. 19.

Data from Johns Hopkins University says South Dakota ranks 16th in the country for new cases per capita, with 1,023.8 new cases per 100,000 people over the past two weeks. One in every 225 people in South Dakota tested positive for the virus in the past week.

The state reported that 224 additional people recovered from the disease, bringing the total of people who have recovered to 85,320. Another 1,205 people received their first vaccine dose, bring the number of total vaccinations in the state to 7,516.

South Dakota businesses adapt to stay afloat during pandemic

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — From offering take-and-bake food options to mask-making, South Dakota businesses have been getting creative to stay afloat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Sioux Falls, food trucks are offering delivery, retailers are selling their wares on Facebook Live, and some stores are reserving private shopping time for customers.

Sanaa Abourezk, who owns Sanaa's Gourmet restaurant, has had an empty dining room since the pandemic reached South Dakota. She began offering carry-out and signed up with a delivery service, but she worried it wasn't enough to make ends meet, the Argus Leader reported. However she found a way to stay afloat by using social media more, packaging her sauces for individual sale and selling prepared meals that people can take home and cook.

"Take-and-bake is my lifesaver. It's my lifeline right now," Sanaa said. "Our lunch traffic is suffering, but the take-and-bake is making me sleep at night."

Melissa Johnson, who owns Oh My Cupcakes, sold flour, milk and eggs when they were in short supply earlier in the pandemic. She added vegetable and fruit bundles when grocery stores were low on those and has continued to modify her business as the pandemic persists.

"That's the key to making this year not only survivable but successful is to continue to innovate and be creative," Johnson said. "It's a different world than it was a year ago. I don't think we can operate out of that same playbook."

Businesses including Juna Sleep Systems began making cloth masks, Juniper Apothecary made its own hand sanitizer, and DaDa Gastropub has been selling bottled cocktails to go.

Matt Paulson, an entrepreneur, said innovation is necessary to keep businesses alive and thriving.

"If you aren't changing and improving your business over time, someone else will improve theirs," Paulson said. "Without constantly looking for better and new ways to do things, inertia is going to kill your business."

Though Abourezk found a way to make sales, she realized she wasn't interacting with customers like she's used to. So she met them over social media — offering cooking lessons on Facebook, teaching a belly dancing class and more. It grabbed people's attention and reminded them that she and her business were still there.

"I want people to laugh this year, and it's something people look forward to. It makes me close to them, and they feel like they're part of my restaurant," she said.

Paulson said many businesses will resume normal operations after the pandemic, but some of the changes seen in 2020 will likely stick around.

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

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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."

National isolation: UK strives to end French ban on trucks

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Stranded Europe-bound truckers hoped Tuesday to receive the green light to get out of Britain soon, after some of the most dramatic travel restrictions of the pandemic were imposed on the country following the discovery of a potentially more contagious strain of the coronavirus.

More than 1,500 trucks snaked along a major highway in southeast England near the country's vital Channel ports or crowded into a disused airport, illustrating the scale of Britain's isolation after countries

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from Canada to India banned flights from the U.K. and France barred the entry of its trucks for 48 hours beginning Sunday night.

For a country of islands that relies heavily on its commercial links with France, that's potentially very serious — and raised concerns of food shortages if the restrictions weren't lifted by Wednesday.

Home Secretary Priti Patel told BBC radio that the British government is "speaking constantly" with France to get freight moving again. France has said it wants to lift the ban as soon as possible and is looking at ways of testing drivers on their arrival.

"It's in both our interests, both countries to ensure that we have flow, and of course there are European hauliers right now who want to be going home," she said.

While the French ban does not prevent trucks from entering Britain, many vehicles that carry cargo from the country to the continent return laden with goods. The fear is that will fall off — reducing deliveries to Britain at a time of year when the U.K. produces very little of its food and relies heavily on produce brought from Europe by truck.

Also, some drivers or their employers might decide against entering Britain for fear they won't be able to get back home.

The restrictions were creating a feeling of isolation in Britain akin to what the residents of Hubei province in China at the start of the year or those in northern Italy must have experienced a few months later.

Given that around 10,000 trucks pass through the Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the country's trade in goods, retailers are getting increasingly concerned if there is no resolution soon.

Andrew Opie, director of food and sustainability at the British Retail Consortium, warned of potential shortages of food like lettuce, vegetables and fresh fruit after Christmas if the borders are not "running pretty much freely" from Wednesday.

The problem, he explained, is the empty trucks sitting in England can't get pick up new deliveries for Britain.

"They need to get back to places like Spain to pick up the next consignment of raspberries and strawberries, and they need to get back within the next day or so, otherwise we will see disruption," he said.

Over the weekend, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed strict lockdown measures in London and neighboring areas amid mounting concerns over the new variant to the virus, which early indications show might be 70% more transmissible.

As a result, Johnson scrapped a planned relaxation of rules over Christmastime for millions of people and banned indoor mixing of households. Only essential travel will be permitted.

Amid questions about whether vaccines being rolled out now would work against the new strain, the chief executive of BioNTech — the German pharmaceutical company behind one of those shots — said he was confident it would be effective, but further studies are need to be completely sure.

Ugur Sahin said Tuesday that "we don't know at the moment if our vaccine is also able to provide protection against this new variant" but because the proteins on the variant are 99% the same as the prevailing strains BioNTech has "scientific confidence" in the vaccine.

There are mounting concerns that the whole of the U.K. will be put into a national lockdown after Christmas as new infections soar, including in Wales where 90 soldiers from the British Army will be reenlisted to drive vehicles from Wednesday to support health teams responding to emergency calls.

The British government's chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, warned Monday that measures "may need to be increased in some places, in due course, not reduced." For many, that was code for another national lockdown.

While the new variant is being assessed, countries were trying to limit contact with Britain, even though there is evidence of the strain elsewhere already.

In Switzerland, for example, authorities are trying to track an estimated 10,000 people who have arrived by plane from Britain since Dec. 14 — and has ordered them to quarantine for 10 days.

Switzerland was one of the 40-odd countries to ban flights from the U.K. over concerns about the new variant.

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The quarantine order is likely to affect thousands of Brits who may have already headed to Swiss ski resorts. Unlike many of its neighbors, Switzerland has left most of its slopes open, attracting enthusiasts from around Europe.

The virus is blamed for 1.7 million deaths worldwide, including about 68,000 in Britain, the second-highest death toll in Europe, behind Italy's 69,000.

The chaos at the border comes at a time of huge uncertainty for Britain, less than two weeks before it completes its exit from the EU and frees itself from the bloc's rules. Talks on a post-Brexit trade relationship between the two sides are deadlocked.

Associated Press writer Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

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

\$900B COVID relief bill passed by Congress, sent to Trump

By ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress passed a \$900 billion pandemic relief package Monday night that would finally deliver long-sought cash to businesses and individuals and resources to vaccinate a nation confronting a frightening surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths.

Lawmakers tacked on a \$1.4 trillion catchall spending bill and thousands of pages of other end-of-session business in a massive bundle of bipartisan legislation as Capitol Hill prepared to close the books on the year. The bill goes to President Donald Trump for his signature, which is expected in the coming days.

The relief package, unveiled Monday afternoon, sped through the House and Senate in a matter of hours. The Senate cleared the massive package by a 92-6 vote after the House approved the COVID-19 package by another lopsided vote, 359-53. The tallies were a bipartisan coda to months of partisanship and politicking as lawmakers wrangled over the relief question, a logjam that broke after President-elect Joe Biden urged his party to accept a compromise with top Republicans that is smaller than many Democrats would have liked.

The bill combines coronavirus-fighting funds with financial relief for individuals and businesses. It 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, restaurants, and theaters and money for schools, health care providers and renters facing eviction.

The 5,593-page legislation — by far the longest bill ever — came together Sunday after months of battling, posturing and postelection negotiating that reined in a number of Democratic demands as the end of the congressional session approached. 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 in the fall.

"This deal is not everything I want — not by a long shot," said Rules Committee Chairman Jim McGovern, D-Mass., a longstanding voice in the party's old-school liberal wing. "The choice before us is simple. It's about whether we help families or not. It's about whether we help small businesses and restaurants or not. It's about whether we boost (food stamp) benefits and strengthen anti-hunger programs or not. And whether we help those dealing with a job loss or not. To me, this is not a tough call."

The Senate, meanwhile, was also on track to pass a one-week stopgap spending bill to avert a partial government shutdown at midnight and give Trump time to sign the sweeping legislation.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, a key negotiator, said on CNBC Monday morning that the direct payments would begin arriving in bank accounts next week.

Democrats promised more aid to come once Biden takes office, but Republicans were signaling a wait-and-see approach.

The measure would fund the government through September, wrapping a year's worth of action on an-

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nual spending bills into a single package that never saw Senate committee or floor debate.

The legislation followed a tortured path. Democrats played hardball up until Election Day, amid accusations that they wanted to deny Trump a victory that might help him prevail. Democrats denied that, but their demands indeed became more realistic after Trump's loss and as Biden made it clear that half a loaf was better than none.

The final bill bore ample resemblance to a \$1 trillion package put together by Senate Republican leaders in July, a proposal that at the time was scoffed at by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., as way too little.

Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., took a victory lap after blocking far more ambitious legislation from reaching the Senate floor. He said the pragmatic approach of Biden was key.

"The president-elect suggesting that we needed to do something now was helpful in moving both Pelosi and Schumer into a better place," McConnell told The Associated Press. "My view about what comes next is let's take a look at it. Happy to evaluate that based upon the needs that we confront in February and March."

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris, D-Calif., came to the Senate to cast her vote for the bill. "The American people need relief and I want to be able to do what I can to help them," she said.

On direct payments, the bill provides \$600 to individuals making up to \$75,000 per year and \$1,200 to couples making up to \$150,000, with payments phased out for higher incomes. An additional \$600 payment will be made per dependent child, similar to the last round of relief payments in the spring.

"I expect we'll get the money out by the beginning of next week — \$2,400 for a family of four," Mnuchin said. "So much needed relief just in time for the holidays."

The \$300 per week bonus jobless benefit was half the supplemental federal unemployment benefit provided under the \$1.8 billion CARES Act in March. That more generous benefit and would be limited to 11 weeks instead of 16 weeks. The direct \$600 stimulus payment was also half the March payment.

The CARES Act was credited with keeping the economy from falling off a cliff during widespread lockdowns in the spring, but Republicans controlling the Senate cited debt concerns in pushing against Democratic demands.

"Anyone who thinks this bill is enough hasn't heard the desperation in the voices of their constituents, has not looked into the eyes of the small-business owner on the brink of ruin," said Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, a lifelong New Yorker who pushed hard for money helping his city's transit systems, renters, theaters and restaurants.

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 hardline positions.

"At times we felt like we were in the wilderness because people on all sides of the aisle didn't want to give, in order to give the other side a win," said freshman Rep. Elssa Slotkin, D-Mich. "And it was gross to watch, frankly."

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.

The sweeping bill also contains \$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 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 Pentagon would receive \$696 billion. Democrats and Senate Republicans prevailed in a bid to use bookkeeping maneuvers to squeeze \$12.5 billion more for domestic programs into the legislation.

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, such

as one for craft brewers, wineries and distillers.

It also would carry numerous clean-energy provisions sought by Democrats with fossil fuel incentives favored by Republicans, \$7 billion to increase access to broadband, \$4 billion to help other nations vaccinate their people, \$14 billion for cash-starved transit systems, \$1 billion for Amtrak and \$2 billion for airports and concessionaires. Food stamp benefits would temporarily be increased by 15%.

The Senate Historical Office said the previous record for the length of legislation was the 2,847-page tax reform bill of 1986 — about one-half the size of Monday's behemoth.

Air Force: Black people more often investigated, punished

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Black service members in the Air Force are far more likely to be investigated, arrested, face disciplinary actions and be discharged for misconduct, according to a new report that looked at racial disparities across the service.

The report by the Air Force inspector general, released Monday, said Black members of the Air Force and Space Force are less likely to be promoted to higher enlisted and officer ranks, and one-third of them believe they don't get the same opportunities as their white peers. And it concluded that "racial disparity exists" for Black service members, but that the data did not explain why it happens.

The report comes as the Pentagon struggles with a broader effort to expand diversity within the ranks. The Defense Department last week endorsed a new slate of initiatives to more aggressively recruit, retain and promote a more racially and ethnically diverse force. And it called for a plan to crack down on participation in hate groups by service members and draft proposed changes to the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

The Air Force IG report outlined data for racial inequities that have long been suspected. It said that a large number of Black service members reported experiences with bias and racism. And while those reports were difficult to validate within the study, the review concluded that it was "reasonable to conclude that individual acts of racism have occurred in the Department of the Air Force."

One Black squadron commander who was interviewed, for example, said the only mentoring he received throughout his career was from other Black leaders. And he said at times Black service members make one mistake, and it ends their career.

"You might get left behind if you don't have someone that looks like you helping to propel you," he said. "Black service members need to work twice as hard and you can't mess up."

Discrimination beliefs cut across the ranks. As many as half of the Black survey respondents said they had been discriminated against because of their race. And 45 percent of Black general officers — they include one-star to four-star generals — said they had experienced discrimination. In contrast, 94% of the white general officers said they didn't face discrimination based on their race.

Senior Air Force and Space Force leaders asked for updates within 60 days on how to address a number of the issues, including the disparity in discipline and the fact that 60% of the Black service members surveyed said they don't get the same benefit of the doubt as their white peers if they get into trouble.

Gen. Charles Brown Jr., chief of staff of the Air Force, said service leaders must rebuild trust with their force.

"Racial disparity isn't an easy topic and something we don't traditionally talk about much throughout our levels of command," said Brown, the first Black man to lead the Air Force. "Now we must all move forward with meaningful, lasting, and sustainable change."

Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett added that leaders will take appropriate actions to remove barriers and expand mentorship and other programs to encourage diversity.

The IG review examined the military justice process data going back to 2012, looked at promotion rates and other opportunities given to service members, conducted interviews, and received more than 123,000 responses to a survey. Officials said it focused solely on Black service members to get the review done quickly, but subsequent changes would be applied more broadly to other minority groups.

Specifically, the review found that enlisted Black service members were 57% more likely than whites

to face courts-martial and 72% more likely to get nonjudicial punishment as a result of an investigation. Black troops were twice as likely to be apprehended by security and young Black enlisted members were twice as likely to be involuntarily discharged for misconduct. Black troops also are investigated and found guilty of sexual harassment more often.

The report noted, however, that recruits who join the force with a moral waiver — whether they are Black or white — are more likely to face discipline problems. Recruits with previous criminal convictions such as assault, drunk driving or marijuana use require a moral waiver to enlist.

Consumer relief: COVID bill to end 'surprise' medical bills

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — People with private health insurance will see the nasty shock of "surprise" medical bills virtually gone, thanks to the coronavirus compromise passed by Congress.

The charges that can run from hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars come from doctors and hospitals that are outside the network of a patient's health insurance plan. It's estimated that about 1 in 5 emergency visits and 1 in 6 inpatient admissions will trigger a surprise bill.

Although lawmakers of both parties long agreed that the practice amounted to abusive billing, a lobbying war between doctors and insurers had thwarted a compromise, allowing the impasse to become a symbol of dysfunction in Washington.

"This has been a profoundly distressing pocketbook issue for families for years," said Karen Pollitz, a health insurance expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "Some of these bills are onerous, and they all strike people as completely unfair."

The compromise would take patients and their families out of the financial crosshairs by limiting what they can be billed for out-of-network services to a fee that's based on in-network charges. The amount consumers pay would get counted toward their in-network annual deductible.

Insurers and service providers would submit their billing disputes to an independent dispute resolution process, which will follow certain guidelines. The main provisions of the legislation would take effect Jan. 1, 2022.

"Generally speaking, keeping the consumer out of it and forcing the providers to be the ones to settle is a positive," said Eagan Kemp, a policy expert with Public Citizen, a liberal advocacy group. Although states have been moving to curb surprise billing, federal action was needed because states do not have jurisdiction over large employer plans that cover tens of millions of workers and their families.

Key elements of the legislation would:

— Hold patients harmless from surprise bills stemming from emergency medical care. That would apply if the patient is seen at an out-of-network facility, or if they are treated by an out-of-network clinician at an in-network hospital. In either case, the patient could only be billed based on their plan's in-network rate.

— Protect patients admitted to an in-network hospital for a planned procedure when an out-of-network clinician gets involved. This can happen when a surgeon is called in to assist in the operating room, or if the anesthesiologist on duty is not part of the patient's plan.

— Generally require out-of-network service providers to give patients 72-hour notice of their estimated charges. Patients would have to agree to receive out-of-network care for the hospital or doctor to then bill them.

— Bar air ambulance services from sending patients surprise bills for more than the in-network cost sharing amount. Air ambulance charges have become a bigger problem in states where patients have to travel long distances to get to the best hospitals. However, ground ambulance services will not face the same restrictions, and the legislation only calls for more study of their billing practices.

The compromise legislation involved two years of work from dozens of lawmakers of both parties and key committees, including Energy and Commerce and Ways and Means in the House, and Health, Education, Labor and Pensions in the Senate.

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Surprise bills hit patients and their families when they are most vulnerable — after a medical emergency or following a complex surgical procedure. Often patients are able to negotiate lower charges by working with their insurers and the medical provider. But the process usually takes months, adding stress and anxiety. Sometimes it doesn't work out and the bills are sent to collection agencies.

"Our constituents have done everything right at the doctor's office or hospital yet still found themselves stuck with surprise medical bills, sometimes to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars," said Sens. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., and Bill Cassidy, R-La. "And frequently, they have to fight these bills at the same time they are facing a medical crisis."

According to the Kaiser Foundation, 18% of emergency visits lead to at least one out-of-network charge for people covered by large employers, as do 16% of in-network inpatient admissions. New York and Texas have among the highest rates.

The problem is a direct result of high health care costs. To try to keep premiums in check, insurers set up networks of hospitals and doctors who agree in advance on payment levels. But some high-demand clinicians, such as emergency room doctors and anesthesiologists, have an incentive to stay out of at least some networks, trying to maximize their earning power. That dynamic has grown more complicated as profit-seeking investors buy out medical practices that have greater billing leverage.

Insurers were cool to the compromise, saying the structure of the dispute resolution process could lead to higher payouts that then feed premium increases. Some Democrats had advocated using a predetermined price list to resolve billing disputes, but that struck Republicans and other Democrats as too close to government rate setting.

"Our for-profit health care system really allows companies to make money in the different gaps of the system," said Kemp, the health care advocate from Public Citizen. "This is a hopeful day. I thought between the insurers and the providers, there wasn't going to be surprise billing legislation passed."

Public programs like Medicare and Medicaid prohibit or restrict such billing practices.

Kushner joins Israelis on landmark visit to Morocco

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

BEN-GURION INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT, Israel (AP) — Senior White House adviser Jared Kushner led a delegation from Israel to Morocco on Tuesday on the first known direct flight since the two countries agreed to establish full diplomatic ties earlier this month as part of a series of U.S.-brokered normalization accords with Arab countries.

Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law, has overseen the diplomatic push that saw the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco normalize relations with Israel in historic agreements that also brought them major favors from Washington.

As part of the deal, Morocco, which is home to a small but centuries-old Jewish community and has long welcomed Israeli tourists, secured U.S. recognition of its 1975 annexation of the disputed region of Western Sahara, which is not recognized by the United Nations.

The U.S. decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara has drawn criticism from the U.N. as well as American allies in Africa and beyond. African observers have said it could destabilize the broader region, already struggling against Islamist insurgencies and migrant trafficking. Former U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, who served as U.N. envoy to the Western Sahara, has called it "an astounding retreat from the principles of international law and diplomacy."

Israel has traditionally backed the U.N. position and has not said whether it will join the U.S. in recognizing Moroccan control over the area.

Joining Kushner was the head of Israel's delegation, National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat. Both men were expected to meet with Morocco's King Mohammed VI and other top officials.

The delegations were expected to restore low-level relations between Israel and Morocco that existed in the 1990s and sign several cooperation agreements, including the establishment of direct flights, said Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Lior Haiat.

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"The goal is to move the relationship from a low level to full diplomatic relations," he said. He said there was no firm timeline for this process.

Before Israel's establishment in 1948, Morocco was home to a large Jewish population, many of whose ancestors migrated to North Africa from Spain and Portugal during the Spanish Inquisition.

Today, hundreds of thousands of Israeli Jews trace their lineage to Morocco, and a small community of Jews, estimated at several thousand people, continues to live there.

During the 1990s, Israel and Morocco established low-level diplomatic relations, but Morocco closed its representative office in Tel Aviv after the eruption of the second Palestinian uprising in 2000. Even so, the two countries have maintained good behind-the-scenes contacts, and some 30,000 to 50,000 Israelis continue to visit Morocco each year.

On the tarmac in Israel, Kushner said that he hopes the delegation's visit will "pave the way for another warm peace between Israel and Morocco," pointing to the emerging ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates.

Ben-Shabbat, whose family immigrated to Israel from Morocco, said that "history is being written before our eyes."

Israelis of all backgrounds have celebrated the normalization accords after decades in which their country was shunned by the Arab world over its still-unresolved conflict with the Palestinians. Saudi Arabia, a regional power with close ties to Morocco, has given its tacit support for the normalization accords and could be next.

The agreements, billed as the "Abraham Accords" after the biblical patriarch revered by Muslims and Jews, were a major foreign policy achievement by the Trump administration. President-elect Joe Biden has welcomed the agreements even as he has vowed to pursue different policies in the region, including returning the U.S. to Iran's nuclear deal with world powers.

But the agreements are all with countries that are geographically distant from Israel and have played a minor role, if any, in the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Critics say they came at a steep price. The agreement with the UAE paved the way for the controversial U.S. sale of F-35 stealth fighter jets to the Gulf country. Sudan was removed from the U.S. list of terrorism sponsors, paving the way for much-needed U.S. and international aid but dividing the Sudanese as they negotiate a fragile transition to democracy.

The agreement with Morocco deals a major setback to those in Western Sahara who have fought for independence and want a referendum on the territory's future. The former Spanish colony the size of Colorado, with a population estimated at 350,000 to 500,000, is believed to have considerable offshore oil deposits and mineral resources.

The accords have also contributed to the severe isolation and weakening of the Palestinians by eroding a longstanding Arab consensus that recognition of Israel should only be given in return for concessions in the peace process.

The Trump administration has given unprecedented support to Israel by moving the U.S. Embassy to contested Jerusalem, abandoning U.S. opposition to West Bank settlements and recognizing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, which it seized from Syria in the 1967 war.

The Trump Mideast plan, authored by Kushner, overwhelmingly favored Israel and would have allowed it to keep nearly all of east Jerusalem and up to a third of the West Bank. Israel seized both territories in the 1967 war, and the Palestinians want them for their future state — a position with wide international support.

Critics say the U.S. recognition of Israeli control over the Golan and Moroccan control of Western Sahara undermine a bedrock principle of international law — the prohibition against seizing territory by force. Supporters say the accords recognize the reality on the ground and seek to banish age-old enmities to the past.

Biden is opposed to annexation and has vowed to adopt a more even-handed approach to the Mideast conflict, including restoring aid to the Palestinians and pressing for renewed negotiations.

Vaccine injury claims could face bureaucratic 'black hole'

By BERNARD CONDON and MATT SEDENSKY Associated Press

Lost in the U.S. launch of the coronavirus vaccine is a fact most don't know when they roll up their sleeves: In rare cases of serious illness from the shots, the injured are blocked from suing and steered instead to an obscure federal bureaucracy with a record of seldom paying claims.

Housed in a nondescript building in a Washington, D.C., suburb, the Countermeasures Injury Compensation Program has just four employees and few hallmarks of an ordinary court. Decisions are made in secret by government officials, claimants can't appeal to a judge and payments in most death cases are capped at \$370,376.

George Washington University law professor Peter Meyers has followed the program for years and bluntly calls it a "black hole," obtaining federal documents this summer showing it has paid fewer than 1 in 10 claims in its 15-year history.

Vaccines historically provide broad protection with little risk but come with side effects just as any other drugs. Few unexpected adverse effects have been reported in the early days of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine distribution in the U.S., though an Alaska health worker suffered a severe allergic reaction that included shortness of breath.

But experts are concerned that with the sheer volume of people expected to get coronavirus vaccines in the U.S. — more than 200 million — even a successful rollout with relatively few ill effects could be enough to swamp the program.

"It would need to be ramped up for sure," said Dr. Vito Caserta, who oversaw the countermeasures program from its creation until his retirement in 2014. "They may get overwhelmed very, very quickly."

Asked about that possibility, David Bowman, a spokesman for the Health Resources and Services Administration that oversees the program, said it is "planning to process the potential influx of COVID-19 claims. ... Additional staff and contractors will be hired as needed."

Unlike the more established federal vaccine court, which decides cases of injury from most childhood vaccines and other common inoculations, the Countermeasures Injury Compensation Program was created by a 2005 law specifically to deal with vaccines developed under emergency authorization. The idea was to allow pharmaceutical companies and government entities the freedom to develop and distribute vaccines to meet urgent public health needs without the threat of being overrun with expensive liability lawsuits. Under the program, drug makers can only be sued for "willful misconduct."

Several senators objected at the time, with the late Massachusetts Democrat Edward M. Kennedy calling it a "Christmas present to the drug industry and a bag of coal to everyday Americans."

The vast majority of the claims under the program have stemmed from the H1N1 swine flu vaccine a decade ago. And the low number of people awarded money — 29 out of 499— reflects its design.

Most claims have to be filed within a year of getting a vaccine, regardless of when side effects show up, and the program does not pay fees for lawyers or expert witnesses. It provides little opportunity for those filing claims to participate. And the awards do not pay for suffering or damages.

"It's illusory," said Sarasota, Florida-based vaccine lawyer Anne Carrion Toale. "No one is going to actually get compensation in that program."

By contrast, vaccine court allows for claims within three years, pays for lawyers and witnesses, grants awards for pain and suffering, and permits appeals all the way to the Supreme Court.

The difference is reflected not only in the number of awards but their size. The countermeasures program has paid out \$6 million, for an average award of about \$200,000 a claim. The vaccine court has not only paid out in 7 of 10 cases in recent years, but its average per claim — \$570,000 — is more than two and half times larger, totaling \$4.4 billion in its three-decade history.

Law professor Meyers, who obtained the data on the compensation court through a Freedom of Information Act request, described the 29 awards so far as "shockingly low" and called for the program to be overhauled.

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He also expressed concern that it could discourage people from taking vaccines in the midst of a pandemic that has so far infected more than 75 million and killed nearly 1.7 million people worldwide.

"It is a great argument for the antivaxxers to say, 'Oh, my God, this is dangerous and if something happens to you, the program is ... going to turn their back to you,'" said Meyers, former chair of a government advisory group for the vaccine court.

Meyers said it would be helpful to know specifically why each claim was approved or rejected in the compensation program but it doesn't release even the most basic details such as the kinds of sicknesses people claim they got from vaccines.

Vaccine lawyer Toale believes one of the biggest reasons for rejection is the one-year filing deadline. She recalled receiving dozens of calls from people saying they had been sickened by H1N1 vaccines a decade ago, some complaining of possible symptoms from Guillain-Barre syndrome, a rare immune system disorder that can result in paralysis or death.

"They were all way too late," she said. "There was nothing we could do."

That was the case for Christina Grim of Littlestown, Pennsylvania, who said she filed a claim about a year after learning from her mother's doctor that an H1N1 vaccination had likely triggered the Guillain-Barre syndrome that killed the 76-year-old day-care worker.

"The clock started ticking but she didn't show any symptoms. I didn't know what was happening to her," said Grim, whose mom, Verl, racked up \$25,000 in hospital bills after she was found crawling down a hallway at home, her legs limp, a few days before she died in 2010. "I didn't know the vaccine could do this to her."

No one is sure just how many of the more than 200 million Americans expected to receive coronavirus vaccines are likely to develop severe side effects and not everyone who does will file a claim. Only one in a million people who got the measles, mumps and rubella vaccines first administered a half century ago suffered severe reactions, but other vaccines had higher ratios.

Using the 25-per-million who suffered severe side effects from the H1N1 vaccine, for example, would put the number of such cases from the coronavirus vaccines at more than 5,000. That's more than 10 times what the countermeasures program has received in its entire history.

Meyers said one solution is to shift coronavirus claims to vaccine court, formally known as the National Vaccine Injury Compensation Program, but that court itself is trying to work through a backlog of its own cases, with its eight judges currently taking more than five years to resolve claims.

Another problem is funding. Unlike claims in vaccine court, which is financed from a 75-cent excise tax on every vaccine shot, the countermeasures program relies on Congress for its budget. A \$30 billion allocation by Congress to buy vaccines and finance other efforts to fight the coronavirus allows some of that money to be transferred to a fund to pay claims, but none has been transferred yet.

HRSA spokesman Bowman said those requests will be made as the need for funding arises.

Former Justice Department vaccine lawyer Richard Topping, now chief legal officer for health insurer CareSource, said that's not good enough.

"We've essentially got no plan, no coverage," he said.

Condon reported from New York, Sedensky from Philadelphia.

US public school enrollment dips as virus disrupts education

By KALYN BELSHA and GABRIELLE LaMARR LeMEE of Chalkbeat, and LEAH WILLINGHAM and LARRY FENN of The Associated Press Chalkbeat and Associated Press

Fearful of sending her two children back to school as the coronavirus pandemic raged in Mississippi, Angela Atkins decided to give virtual learning a chance this fall.

Almost immediately, it was a struggle. Their district in Lafayette County didn't offer live instruction to remote learners, and Atkins' fourth grader became frustrated with doing worksheets all day and missed interacting with teachers and peers. Her seventh grader didn't receive the extra support he did at school

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through his special education plan — and started getting failing grades.

After nine weeks, Atkins switched to home schooling.

“It got to the point where it felt like there was no other choice to make,” she said. “I was worried for my kids’ mental health.”

By taking her children off the public school rolls, Atkins joined an exodus that one state schools chief has warned could become a national crisis. An analysis of data from 33 states obtained by Chalkbeat and The Associated Press shows that public K-12 enrollment this fall has dropped across those states by more than 500,000 students, or 2%, since the same time last year.

That is a significant shift considering that enrollment overall in those states has typically gone up by around half a percent in recent years. And the decline is only likely to become more pronounced, as several large states have yet to release information. Chalkbeat and AP surveyed all 50 states, but 17 have not released comparable enrollment numbers yet.

The data, which in many states is preliminary, offers the clearest picture yet of the pandemic’s devastating toll on public school enrollment — a decline that could eventually have dire consequences for school budgets that are based on headcounts. But even more alarming, educators say, is that some of the students who left may not be in school at all.

“I would like to hope that many of them are from homes where their parents have taken responsibility on their own to provide for their education,” said Pedro Noguera, the dean of the University of Southern California’s Rossier School of Education, adding that affluent families will have an easier time doing that. “My fear is that large numbers have simply gotten discouraged and given up.”

So far, many states have held off on making school budget cuts in the face of enrollment declines. But if enrollment doesn’t rise, funding will be hit.

“We’ve been trying to scream from the hilltops for quite some time that this is happening,” Kirsten Baesler, North Dakota’s schools superintendent, said of the enrollment declines. “And it could be a national crisis if we don’t put some elbow grease into it.”

The declines are driven by a combination of factors brought on by the pandemic. Fewer parents enrolled their children in kindergarten, and some students left public schools for other learning environments. At the same time, students who are struggling to attend classes, as many are right now, may have been purged from public school rolls for missing many days in a row. That is a typical practice, though there is some more flexibility now.

The Chalkbeat/AP analysis shows that a drop in kindergarten enrollment accounts for 30% of the total reduction across the 33 states — making it one of the biggest drivers of the nationwide decline. Kindergarten is not required in over half of states, and many parents have chosen to skip it.

Some aren’t sure it would be worth it for their children to learn virtually, while others don’t want their kids’ first experience with school to include wearing a mask.

It’s difficult to say how much of the decline is due to students leaving public schools for private schools and home schooling — as parents sought learning environments that might adapt better to the unusual year — because not all states track that. In states that do, those are contributing factors but don’t account for the full decline.

Massachusetts, for example, saw its K-12 enrollment fall by 3%, or nearly 28,000. Almost half of that was attributable to a big jump in students being home-schooled or switching to private schools, but about 7,000 students still are unaccounted for, state officials said. The year before, the state’s enrollment declined by less than half a percent.

Kira Freytag’s first grader, Landon, was among the Massachusetts students who transferred into a private school this fall. He was enrolled in public kindergarten in Newton this spring, but struggled with remote learning. When it looked like that virtual setup would continue, Freytag and her husband applied to a Catholic school with in-person instruction.

“There’s a lot of independence that comes with those years,” Freytag said. “It’s really hard to teach that over Zoom.”

Some states have gone to great lengths to try to figure out where students are. When the schools su-

perintendent in Mississippi, Carey Wright, saw that K-12 enrollment had plummeted by 4.8%, or nearly 22,000 students, she asked officials to track down every student who'd been enrolled the previous year. They mailed letters, placed calls and even made home visits.

They found that kindergarten enrollment fell by 4,400 students and 6,700 more students enrolled in home schooling than usual — an increase of 36%. More students than usual also moved out of state. And some 2,300 students transferred to private school. That left the state with around 1,100 students it could not account for, though it's still trying.

"We could not afford to have kids just at home, doing nothing," Wright said.

Many states haven't been able to track down all the students who left. Some students may be getting home-schooled, but their state doesn't require families to register them. Some may have moved across state lines and haven't transferred their records. Others may have stopped attending school because they are experiencing homelessness, lack a stable internet connection, are working to support their families or are caring for siblings — and then were dropped from their district's rolls.

Renee Smith, who helps low-income families navigate school options through her work at the parent advocacy group Memphis Lift, said some families in her city have turned to Khan Academy, a source of free online lessons, as an alternative to the local district's virtual learning option, but others "have just disappeared."

One open question is whether students who exited the public school system will return when instruction gets closer to normal. Many educators believe young learners who sat out kindergarten will return, but they're worried about older students.

And many state superintendents and education advocates say there needs to be more done by school districts, state officials, and social service agencies to find the missing students.

"The things which make the difference are not cheap," said the Rev. Larry Simmons, who's involved in an effort to reduce chronic absenteeism in Detroit. "Human beings reaching out to other human beings, saying: 'We miss you, we want you at school.'"

Collin Binkley of the AP and Caroline Bauman of Chalkbeat contributed to this report.

In South Africa, child homicides show violence 'entrenched'

By GERALD IMRAY and BRAM JANSSEN Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — At night, Amanda Zitho worries her little boy is shivering and cold in his coffin and yearns to take him a blanket. She knows Wandi's dead and gone and it's senseless, but that doesn't stop the ache.

Wandi was 5 when he was killed in April, allegedly strangled with a rope by a Johannesburg neighbor — another dead child in a land where there are too many.

According to official figures, around 1,000 children are murdered every year in South Africa, nearly three a day. But that statistic, horrific as it is, may be an undercount.

Shanaaz Mathews thinks many more children are victims of homicides that are not investigated properly, not prosecuted or completely missed by authorities. The official figures are "just the tip of the iceberg," said Mathews, the director of the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town and probably the country's leading expert on child homicides.

In a country where more than 50 people are murdered every day, children are not special and are not spared.

"Violence has become entrenched" in the psyche of South Africa, Mathews said.

"How do we break that cycle?" she asked.

In 2014, she embarked on a research project to uncover the real extent of those child deaths. She did it by getting forensic pathologists to put the dead bodies of hundreds of newborn babies, infants, toddlers and teenagers on examination tables to determine exactly how they died.

Child death reviews are common in developed countries but had never been done in South Africa before

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Mathews' project. As she feared, the findings were grim.

Over a year, the pathologists examined the corpses of 711 children at two mortuaries in Cape Town and Durban and concluded that more than 15% of them died as a result of homicides. For context, Britain's official child death review last year found 1% of its child deaths were homicides. Mathews' research showed homicide was the second most common cause of death for children in those two precincts.

"And the numbers are not going down," she said. "If anything, they are going up."

There are two patterns in South Africa. Teenagers are being swallowed up in the country's desperately high rate of violent street crime. But also, large numbers of young children aged 5 and under are victims of deadly violence meted out not by an offender with a gun or a knife on a street corner, but by mothers and fathers, relatives and friends, in kitchens and living rooms, around dinner tables and in front of TVs.

Fatal child abuse is where the justice system often fails and cases are "falling through the cracks," Mathews said.

There was, she says, the case of a 9-month-old child who had seizures after being dropped off at day care. Though rushed to the hospital, the child died.

Doctors found severe head injuries and told the mother to go to the police, but no one followed up. The mother never reported the death. When investigators tried to revive the case nearly two years later, the baby had long been buried and the evidence was cold.

Joan van Niekerk, a child protection expert, recounts numerous cases tainted by police ineptitude and corruption.

"I sometimes go through stages when I am more angry with the system than I am with the perpetrators and that's not good," she said. She said justice for children in South Africa is unacceptably "hard to achieve."

And failures of justice sometimes lead to more deaths.

The neighbor originally charged with killing Wandi Zitho was released and the case provisionally dropped because the police didn't deliver enough evidence, possibly because of a backlog in analyzing forensic evidence, according to one policeman working the case. Months later, the woman was arrested again and charged with murdering two other children.

Then there was the case of Tazne van Wyk.

Tazne was 8 when her body was found in February dumped in a drain near a highway nearly two weeks after she disappeared. She had been abducted, raped and murdered, police said.

Tazne's parents blame the correctional system for paroling the man charged with their daughter's murder despite a history of violent offenses against children. He'd already violated his parole once. They also fault police for failing to act on a tip that might have saved Tazne in the hours after her disappearance.

The case was high profile. The Minister of Police spoke at Tazne's funeral and admitted errors. "We have failed this child," he conceded, pointing at Tazne's small white coffin, trimmed in gold. South African President Cyril Ramaphosa visited the van Wyk home and promised meaningful action.

Nine months later, Tazne's parents feel it was all lip service.

"How many children after Tazne have already passed away? Have been kidnapped? Have been murdered? Still nothing is happening," said her mother, Carmen van Wyk.

She sheds no tears. Instead, anger bubbles inside her and her community. Houses connected with the suspect and members of his family were set on fire in the wake of Tazne's killing.

It's not just on the police to stop the abuse, said Marc Hardwick, who was a policeman for 15 years, 10 of them as a detective in a child protection unit.

He recalls one case, from 20 years ago. A 6-year-old girl was beaten to death by her father because she was watching cartoons and, distracted as any 6-year-old would be, wasn't listening to him.

When they arrested the father and took him away — he was later sentenced to life in prison — the victim's 9-year-old cousin approached Hardwick and said: "I think you stopped my bad dreams today."

Clearly, children in that household had been living a nightmare, and the other adults had remained silent, said Hardwick: "The reality is that child abuse is not a topic people want to talk about."

Janssen reported from Johannesburg.

California desperately searches for more nurses and doctors

By DAISY NGUYEN Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Since the coronavirus pandemic took hold in the U.S., Sara Houze has been on the road — going from one hospital to another to care for COVID-19 patients on the brink of death.

A cardiac intensive care nurse from Washington, D.C., with expertise in heart rhythm, airway and pain management, her skills are in great demand as infections and hospitalizations skyrocket nationwide. Houze is among more than 500 nurses, doctors and other medical staff California has brought in and deployed to hospitals that are running out of capacity to treat the most severe COVID-19 cases.

Her six-week assignment started Monday in San Bernardino, about 60 miles (97 kilometers) east of Los Angeles, and she anticipates working 14-hour shifts with a higher-than-usual caseload. San Bernardino County has 1,545 people in hospitals and more than 125 are in makeshift “surge” beds, which are being used because regular hospital space isn’t available.

“I expect patients to die. That’s been my experience: they die, I put them in body bags, the room gets cleaned and then another patient comes,” Houze said.

Much of California has exhausted its usual ability to staff intensive care beds, and the nation’s most populated state is desperately searching for 3,000 temporary medical workers to meet demand. State officials are reaching out to foreign partners in places like Australia and Taiwan amid a shortage of temporary medical workers in the U.S., particularly nurses trained in critical care.

Gov. Gavin Newsom said the state has relationships with countries that provide aid during crises such as wildfires.

“We’re now in a situation where we have surges all across the country, so nobody has many nurses to spare,” said Dr. Janet Coffman, a professor of public policy at the University of California, San Francisco.

California hospitals typically turn to staffing agencies during flu season, when they rely on travel nurses to meet patient care needs. It is the only state in the nation with strict nurse-to-patient ratios requiring hospitals to provide one nurse for every two patients in intensive care and one nurse for every four patients in emergency rooms, for example.

However, those ratio requirements are being waived at many hospitals as virus cases surge.

But the pool of available travel nurses is drying up as demand for them jumped to 44% over the last month, with California, Texas, Florida, New York and Minnesota requesting the most extra staff, according to San Diego-based health care staffing firm Aya Healthcare. It is one of two companies contracted by California to fulfill hospitals’ staffing requests.

“We are hiring like crazy and working insane hours,” said Sophia Morris, vice president of account management at Aya Healthcare.

Dr. Mark Ghaly, California’s Health and Human Services secretary, said the state is “lucky to get two-thirds” of its requests for travel nurses fulfilled right now.

It’s a sharp contrast from the spring, when Newsom ordered the nation’s first stay-at-home order. As infection rates slowed and hospitals voluntarily suspended elective surgeries for weeks, health care providers from California flew to New York to help their overworked colleagues.

This time, many hospitals are postponing procedures that are not emergencies, said Jan Emerson-Shea, a spokeswoman for the California Hospital Association. California also has opened alternative care facilities for people with less serious illnesses to save hospital beds for the sickest patients.

That also means hospitals have fewer nurses to deploy to ICUs from other units, Coffman said. And many health workers became infected or have had to quarantine because they were exposed to someone with COVID-19 during the surge, she said.

Another factor is the dip in the number of nurses 60 and older. In a survey of the state’s 320,000 registered nurses, many older nurses told researchers at UCSF’s Healthforce Center that they stopped working out of concern for their or their family’s health, said Joanne Spetz, the center’s associate director of research.

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Houze, 50, said she's able to travel to work because her twin sons are in college but not without contracting a mild case of COVID-19 somewhere along the way.

On Monday, more than 17,000 people were hospitalized with confirmed COVID-19 infections — more than double the previous peak reached in July — and a state model that uses current data to forecast future trends shows the number could reach nearly 100,000 by January.

More than 3,600 COVID-19 patients were in intensive care units.

Dr. Marc Futernick, an emergency room physician in Los Angeles who is on the board of the California chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians, helped set up a Los Angeles surge hospital last spring. Now, he's fielding texts and phone calls asking when it will reopen.

"The surge hospital is not going to open again. There would be no way to staff it," he said.

Ghaly, head of state Health and Human Services, said entire areas of California may run out of room even in surge capacity units "by the end of the month and early in January." It's trying to avoid that by opening makeshift hospitals in places like gymnasiums, tents and a vacant NBA arena, and sending patients to parts of the state with empty beds.

Newsom this spring sought to reinforce fatigued medical workers by creating a paid volunteer California Health Corps, and he touted the many thousands who signed up. But with cases skyrocketing now, just 28 members are working at 13 facilities.

The number has dwindled even after Newsom made repeated appeals for more retired medical professionals to sign up.

The state is updating its planning guide for how hospitals would ration care if everyone can't get the treatment they need.

A document recently circulated among doctors at the four hospitals run by Los Angeles County calls for them to shift strategy: instead of trying everything to save a life, their goal during the crisis is to save as many patients as possible. That means those less likely to survive won't get the same kind of care offered in normal times.

Houze said her online community of nurses is offering webinars about moral distress because many of them have had to change the way they care for patients.

"The patients that aren't yet intubated, and even the ones intubated, aren't getting the kind of nursing care that I want to give them because our resources are so limited and time is taxed," she said. "It's really disheartening."

Associated Press writer Don Thompson in Sacramento contributed to this report.

Senator: Treasury Dept. email accounts compromised in hack

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Dozens of email accounts at the Treasury Department were compromised in a massive breach of U.S. government agencies being blamed on Russia, with hackers breaking into systems used by the department's highest-ranking officials, a senator said Monday after being briefed on the matter.

Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., provided new details of the hack following a briefing to Senate Finance Committee staff by the IRS and Treasury Department.

Wyden said that though there is no indication that taxpayer data was compromised, the hack "appears to be significant," including through the compromise of dozens of email accounts and access to the Departmental Offices division of the Treasury Department, which the senator said was home to its highest-ranking officials. In addition, the breach appears to involve the theft of encryption keys from U.S. government servers, Wyden said.

"Treasury still does not know all of the actions taken by hackers, or precisely what information was stolen," Wyden said in a statement.

It is also not clear what Russian hackers intend to do with any emails they may have accessed.

A Treasury Department spokeswoman declined to comment on Wyden's statement.

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Treasury was among the earliest known agencies reported to have been affected in a breach that now encompasses a broad spectrum of departments. The effects and consequences of the hack are still being assessed, though the Department of Homeland Security's cybersecurity arm said in a statement last week that the intrusion posed a "grave" risk to government and private networks.

In the Treasury Department's case, Wyden said, the breach began in July. But experts believe the overall hacking operation began months earlier when malicious code was slipped into updates to popular software that monitors computer networks of businesses and governments.

The malware, affecting a product made by U.S. company SolarWinds, gave elite hackers remote access into an organization's networks so they could steal information.

It wasn't discovered until the prominent cybersecurity company FireEye determined it had been hacked.

Tech giant Microsoft, which has helped respond to the breach, revealed last week that it had identified more than 40 government agencies, think tanks, nongovernmental organizations and IT companies infiltrated by the hackers. Microsoft notified the Treasury Department that dozens of email accounts were compromised, Wyden said.

President Donald Trump sought to downplay the severity of the hack last week, tweeting without any evidence that perhaps China was responsible. At least two Cabinet members, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Attorney General William Barr, have stated publicly that they believe Russia was to blame, the consensus of others in the U.S. government and of the cybersecurity community.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Court case in Texas shows DACA program remains under peril

JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A Tuesday court hearing over a U.S. program shielding immigrants brought to the country illegally as children highlights the peril the program still faces even under an incoming Democratic president who has pledged to protect it.

A federal judge in Houston will hear arguments from Texas and eight other states seeking to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which provides limited protections to about 650,000 people. Defending the program is a group of DACA recipients represented by the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. A ruling was not expected during the hearing.

The U.S. Supreme Court previously ruled President Donald Trump's attempt to end DACA in 2017 was unlawful. A New York judge in December ordered the Trump administration to restore the program as enacted by former President Barack Obama in 2012.

But the Houston case directly targets DACA's original terms, as Texas and the other states argue it violated the Constitution by going around Congress' authority on immigration laws.

President-elect Joe Biden has pledged to protect DACA. But a ruling against DACA could limit Biden's ability to keep the program or something similar in place.

"DACA has to be replaced by a legislative approach," said MALDEF President Thomas Saenz.

While DACA is often described as a program for young immigrants, many recipients have lived in the U.S. for a decade or longer after being brought into the country without permission or overstaying visas. The liberal Center for American Progress says roughly 254,000 children have at least one parent relying on DACA. Some recipients are grandparents.

In a court filing, the states suing to end DACA said the program represents a "limitless notion of executive power that, if left unchecked, could allow future Presidents to dismantle other duly enacted laws." Suing alongside Texas are Alabama, Arkansas, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, South Carolina, and West Virginia.

MALDEF argues Obama had the authority to institute DACA and the states lack the standing to sue.

U.S. District Judge Andrew Hanen, who is hearing the case, rejected Texas' request in 2018 to stop the program through a preliminary injunction.

But Hanen has said he believes DACA as enacted by Obama is unconstitutional.

Hanen in 2015 ruled Obama could not expand DACA protections or institute a program shielding their parents.

"If the nation truly wants to have a DACA program, it is up to Congress to say so," Hanen wrote in 2018.

Congress has not acted since, with proposals falling short amid disputes between the Democratic-controlled House and Republican-controlled Senate.

But Saenz, of MALDEF, said the U.S. Supreme Court's June ruling stopping Trump from ending the program should provide guidance.

"If I were any judge, I would look at the Supreme Court and say to myself, 'If this were an unlawful program in the view of the Supreme Court majority, why would they have simply not said that?'" Saenz said.

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office did not respond to a request for comment prior to the hearing.

Associated Press writer Nomaan Merchant in Houston contributed to this report.

Follow Juan A. Lozano on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/juanlozano70>

Trump, House lawmakers plot futile effort to block Biden win

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump hosted several House Republican lawmakers at the White House on Monday to discuss an ultimately futile effort to block Congress from affirming President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the November election.

The meeting underscored Trump's refusal to accept the reality of his loss and his willingness to entertain undemocratic efforts to overturn the will of the majority of American voters. Biden will be sworn in as president on Jan. 20.

With no credible legal options remaining and the Electoral College having confirmed Biden's victory earlier this month, Trump is turning his attention to Jan. 6. That's when Congress participates in a count of the electoral votes, which Biden won 306-232.

The count, required by the Constitution, is generally a formality. But members can use the event to object to a state's votes.

Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Ala., said he organized Monday's session with about a dozen House Republicans who are willing to challenge the results.

"President Trump is very supportive of our effort," Brooks said in an interview late Monday.

With Democrats holding the House majority and several Republican senators now acknowledging Biden's victory, any effort to block congressional approval of the election appears sure to fail. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has warned his members against taking such a step.

Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican, urged lawmakers to remember that an effort to block the election results in Congress was "just not going anywhere."

"I mean, in the Senate, it would go down like a shot dog," Thune told CNN. "I just don't think that it makes a lot of sense to put everybody through this when you know what the ultimate outcome is gonna be."

Still, Trump has continued to dangle the possibility of congressional intervention.

Brooks said Monday's White House meeting was originally scheduled for about an hour, but lasted for three hours, with Trump participating for much of it. Other attendees including Trump's personal lawyer, Rudy Giuliani, who has spent the weeks since the election promoting false claims of voter fraud.

Brooks said he also met with Vice President Mike Pence. As president of the Senate, Pence is to preside over the Jan. 6 session and declare the winner.

Brooks said the group is making plans to challenge the election results from Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Georgia and Nevada, all battleground states Biden carried. Brooks in particular has raised questions about the way state elections were conducted this year, with some having made changes to ballots and procedures during the pandemic. While the new procedures may have led to confusion in some states,

state and federal officials have said there was no credible evidence of widespread fraud.

Still, Trump's top aides, including chief of staff Mark Meadows, continued on Monday to push false claims of election malfeasance, without providing any evidence.

A range of nonpartisan election officials and Republicans have confirmed that there was no fraud in the November contest that would change the results of the election. That includes Attorney General William Barr, who on Monday said he saw no reason to appoint a special counsel to look into the president's claims about the 2020 election. Trump has discussed doing so with some of his advisers.

Trump and his allies have filed roughly 50 lawsuits challenging election results, and nearly all have been dismissed or dropped. He's also lost twice at the U.S. Supreme Court.

With no further tenable legal recourse, Trump has been fuming and peppering allies for options as he refuses to accept his loss.

On Jan. 6, a lawmaker can object to a state's votes on any grounds. The objection will not be heard unless it is in writing and signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

If there is such a joint request, then the joint session suspends and the House and Senate go into separate sessions to consider it. For the objection to be sustained, both chambers must agree to it by a simple majority vote. If they disagree, the original electoral votes are counted.

The last time such an objection was considered was 2005, when Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones of Ohio and Sen. Barbara Boxer of California, both Democrats, objected to Ohio's electoral votes by claiming there were voting irregularities. Both chambers debated the objection and rejected it. It was only the second time such a vote had occurred.

McConnell has told Senate Republicans that a dispute over the results in January would yield a "terrible vote" for Republicans. They would have to choose whether to back Trump or publicly buck him.

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Congress takes aim at climate change in massive relief bill

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The huge pandemic relief and spending bill includes billions of dollars to promote clean energy such as wind and solar power while sharply reducing over time the use of potent coolants in air conditioners and refrigerators that are considered a major driver of global warming.

The energy and climate provisions, supported by lawmakers from both parties, were hailed as the most significant climate change law in at least a decade.

"Republicans and Democrats are working together to protect the environment through innovation," said Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

"This historic agreement includes three separate pieces of legislation that will significantly reduce greenhouse gases," Barrasso said, citing measures that promote technologies to "capture" and store carbon dioxide produced by power and manufacturing plants; reduce diesel emissions in buses and other vehicles; and authorize a 15-year reduction of hydrofluorocarbons, or HFCs, that are used in everything from cars to air conditioners. HFCs are considered a major driver of global warming and are being targeted worldwide.

"All three of these measures will protect our air while keeping costs down for the American people," Barrasso said.

The sprawling legislation also extends tax credits for solar and wind power that are a key part of President-elect Joe Biden's ambitious plan to generate 100 percent "clean electricity" by 2035.

Sen. Tom Carper of Delaware, the top Democrat on the environment panel, said the bill would cut pollution from school buses, air conditioners, refrigerators and more, while creating thousands of American jobs and helping "save our planet from the climate crisis."

"Make no mistake," he said, the new legislation "will soon be some of the most significant climate solutions to pass out of Congress to date."

The bill won praise across the political spectrum, as environmental groups and major business organiza-

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tions hailed an agreement years in the making.

"While much more remains to be done" to address climate change, the bipartisan agreement "ramps up clean-energy research and development programs, bolsters energy efficiency, reauthorizes a critical EPA program to reduce diesel pollution, advances a new DOE program to transition to electric school buses ... and rebukes (President Donald) Trump's last attempts to slash environmental programs across the board," said Matthew Davis, legislative director of the League of Conservation Voters.

Marty Durbin, a senior vice president at the Chamber of Commerce, called the package — the first major energy bill in more than a decade — "truly historic" and among the most significant action Congress has ever taken to address climate change.

"This package demonstrates the progress that is possible when businesses, environmental groups, labor and policymakers work together to find solutions on difficult issues," Durbin said. The bill will not only address climate change, but also "promote American technological leadership and foster continued economic growth," Durbin said.

The dramatic if gradual reduction of HFCs in particular "will bring significant climate relief relatively quickly," said Matt Casale, director of environment campaigns for the U.S. Public Interest Research Group. He called the bill "a step forward" in a range of areas that will serve as a building block for the incoming Biden administration.

Much of the sweeping energy package — long promoted as a "down payment" on fighting climate change — was agreed to earlier this year, but the package fell apart in March over a dispute among Senate Republicans on the HFC provision.

Carper and Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., pushed for a measure they said would give U.S. companies the certainty needed to produce "next generation" coolants as an alternative to HFCs. Both men represent states that are home to companies that produce the alternative refrigerants.

The Kennedy-Carper amendment was supported by dozens of senators, including 17 Republican co-sponsors. But the amendment was opposed by Senate GOP leadership, including Barrasso and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

Barrasso said he worried the measure could add a layer of new federal rules onto a patchwork of current or future state rules regarding HFCs. He pushed for language ensuring that states would not impose stricter requirements than the federal rule. In the end, lawmakers agreed to prevent state and local governments from regulating HFCs for at least five years.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski, the Alaska Republican who chairs the Senate Energy Committee, said the energy package "will foster innovation across the board on a range of technologies that are critical to our energy and national security, our long-term economic competitiveness and the protection of our environment."

In a separate development, the bill also includes nearly \$10 billion to reauthorize the Water Resources Development Act to pay for flood control, environmental restoration, coastal protection, harbor improvements and other projects.

Fox, Newsmax shoot down their own aired claims on election

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Two election technology companies whose names have come up in President Donald Trump's false charges of widespread voter fraud in the presidential election are fighting back, prompting unusual public statements from Fox News and Newsmax.

The statements, over the weekend and on Monday, came after the companies Smartmatic and Dominion raised the prospect of legal action for reporting what they said was false information about them.

Both companies were referenced in the campaign's suggestion that vote counts in swing states were manipulated to the advantage of President-elect Joe Biden. The companies deny several statements made about them, and there is no evidence any voting system switched or deleted votes in the 2020 election.

A nearly two-minute pre-taped segment was aired over the weekend on a Fox Business Network program hosted by Lou Dobbs and Fox News Channel shows with Maria Bartiromo and Jeanine Pirro.

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That came days after Smartmatic sent a letter threatening legal action to Fox and two other networks popular with Trump supporters, Newsmax and One America News Network.

The two-minute Fox segments aired in the form of a question-and-answer session between an offscreen voice and Eddie Perez, a voting technology expert at the nonpartisan Open Source Election Technology Institute.

"I have not seen any evidence that Smartmatic software was used to delete, change or alter anything related to vote tabulations," Perez said.

The company says its only work that involved the 2020 U.S. election came in Los Angeles. Trump lawyer Rudolph Giuliani has falsely claimed that Smartmatic was founded in Venezuela by former dictator Hugo Chavez for the goal of fixing elections. Smartmatic was started in Florida in 2000. Its founder is Venezuelan, but the company said Chavez was never involved, and its last work in Venezuela came in 2017 when its software found the government had reported false turnout numbers.

After the segment aired Sunday on Bartiromo's show, she said, "So that is where we stand right now. We will keep investigating."

Perez also said there was no apparent business relationship between Smartmatic and Dominion; Trump's lawyers have claimed with no evidence that Dominion's vote counting system used at some locations in the U.S. elections had used Smartmatic's software.

Asked Monday about the segments, Smartmatic's lawyer, J. Erik Connolly, said the company "cannot comment on the recent broadcast by Fox News due to potential litigation."

The network did not comment beyond the on-air segments aired over the weekend.

A statement aired by Newsmax anchors on Monday, and also printed on the company website, was much broader and concerned both Smartmatic and Dominion.

In the statement, Newsmax said there were "several facts our viewers and readers should be aware," among them the lack of a business relationship between the two companies or that Dominion had any ownership relationship with George Soros, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and others.

"No evidence has been offered that Dominion or Smartmatic used software or reprogrammed software that manipulated votes in the 2020 election," Newsmax said.

Company spokesman Anthony Rizzo said Newsmax itself had never made a claim of impropriety, but that others had appeared on the network to raise questions about Smartmatic.

"As any major media outlet, we provide a forum for public concerns and discussion," he said.

There was no immediate response to a request for comment from OANN.

Dominion has not specifically targeted any news organization. Instead, last week its lawyers sent a letter to Sidney Powell, demanding the Trump supporter retract several of the "wild and reckless" allegations she has made about them. The company said some of its employees have been stalked, harassed and received death threats.

Powell, an appellate lawyer from Texas, was part of the president's legal team immediately after the election but was disavowed after making accusations of a scheme to manipulate voting machines.

In its letter to Powell, Dominion lawyers Thomas Clare and Megan Meier said that the company had no ties "to the Chinese government, the Venezuelan government, Hugo Chavez, (British politician) Malloch Brown, George Soros, Bigfoot or the Loch Ness Monster."

Powell did not immediately return a request for comment.

Clare said Dominion's immediate focus is on Powell for what she has been saying about the company.

"Moving forward, we will certainly be taking a close look at others who have participated directly in the defamatory campaign, as well as those who have recklessly provided a platform for these discredited allegations," he said.

Cut off: Britain hit with travel bans over new virus strain

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Trucks waiting to get out of Britain backed up for miles and people were left stranded

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at airports Monday as dozens of countries around the world slapped tough travel restrictions on the U.K. because of a new and seemingly more contagious strain of the coronavirus in England.

From Canada to India, one nation after another banned flights from Britain, while France barred the entry of trucks from Britain for 48 hours while the strain is assessed.

The precautions raised fears of food shortages in Britain if the restrictions drag on.

After a conversation with French President Emmanuel Macron, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he understood the reason for the new measures and expressed hope for a swift resumption in the free flow of traffic between the U.K. and France, perhaps within a few hours.

He said officials from both countries were working "to unblock the flow of trade as fast as possible." Macron said earlier that France was looking at establishing systematic testing of people for the virus on arrival.

Over the weekend, Johnson imposed strict lockdown measures in London and neighboring areas where Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the new strain is "out of control." Experts said the early evidence indicates the strain is not more lethal, and they expressed confidence that the vaccines now being rolled out would still be effective against it.

After France announced Sunday night that it was closing its borders to trucks from Britain, hundreds of vehicles, mainly operated by drivers from continental Europe, became stranded outside the English Channel port of Dover. The lines shrank over the course of the day from 500 trucks to about 175 before rising again in the evening to 945, authorities said. Vehicles are being redirected to the disused Manston Airport nearby, which is being prepared to accommodate up to 4,000 trucks.

Around 10,000 trucks pass through the port of Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the country's trade in goods.

Meanwhile, the European Union gave the go-ahead to the coronavirus vaccine developed by Pfizer and BioNTech, setting the stage for the first COVID-19 shots across the 27-nation bloc to begin just after Christmas.

"This is a very good way to end this difficult year and to finally start turning the page on COVID-19," said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen.

The approval came just hours after the EU's drug regulatory agency said the vaccine meets safety and quality standards. It is already being dispensed in Britain and the U.S.

The virus is blamed for 1.7 million deaths worldwide, including about 68,000 in Britain, the second-highest death toll in Europe, behind Italy's 69,000.

While the French ban does not prevent trucks from entering Britain, the move stoked worries about shortages at a time of year when the UK produces very little of its food and relies heavily on produce delivered from Europe by truck.

Many trucks that carry cargo from the U.K. to the continent return laden with goods for Britain's use. The fear is that the ban will lead to a drop in such deliveries. Also, some drivers or their employers might decide against entering Britain for fear they won't be able to get back home.

Supermarket chain Sainsbury's warned that some products, such as lettuce, cauliflower, broccoli and citrus fruits, could soon be in short supply if the crisis not resolved in the coming days.

Canada, India, France, Germany, Italy, Spain and Sweden were among the countries that suspended flights from Britain for various lengths of time.

In the United States, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who has been calling on the U.S. to halt flights as well, said he asked airlines flying into his state from the U.K. to make all passengers take a coronavirus test before boarding. He said at least one carrier, British Airways, agreed to do so.

At Germany's Berlin and Frankfurt airports, passengers arriving from Britain had to spend Sunday night in the terminals as they awaited test results.

Eurotunnel, the rail operator that carries passengers and freight between Britain and mainland Europe, also suspended service out of the U.K.

Sophie Taxil, a Frenchwoman who lives in London, caught a train back home from Paris and urged everyone in Britain to follow the rules.

"I live there and I need to go back there; my family is there," she said. "I think that phlegmatic British

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nature suits these COVID times: Stay calm and carry on, fair play.”

Over the weekend, Johnson said early indications are that the variant is 70% more transmissible and is driving the rapid spread of infections in the capital and surrounding areas.

As a result, he scrapped a planned relaxation of rules over Christmastime for millions of people and imposed other tough new restrictions in the affected zone. No indoor mixing of households will be allowed, and only essential travel will be permitted. Stores selling nonessential goods were ordered closed, putting a crimp in Christmas shopping.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control said that while preliminary analysis suggests the new variant is “significantly more transmissible,” there is no indication that infections are more severe. Still, experts have stressed that more infections will lead to more hospitalizations and deaths.

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

With the rollout of coronavirus vaccines set to pick up speed in early 2021, countries are clearly worried about the new variant.

“I think the vaccine will be fine,” said Dr. Julian Tang, a clinical virologist at the University of Leicester. But the new strain “is spreading so fast we may not be able to reach the vulnerable population, the elderly, in time with the vaccine before the virus does.”

The chaos at the border comes at a time of huge uncertainty for Britain, less than two weeks before it completes its exit from the EU and frees itself from the bloc’s rules. Talks on a post-Brexit trade relationship between the two sides are deadlocked.

The retail industry played down fears of food shortages in the short term but warned of problems if the travel bans last for a while and if Britain and the EU fail to reach a trade deal. Trade association Logistics U.K. urged people to stay calm and resist panic-buying in supermarkets.

“If freight gets moving again today, then the overall impact on fresh produce arriving to supermarkets should be fairly minimal,” said Kevin Green, the association’s director of marketing and communications

Associated Press writers Frank Jordans and Geir Moulson in Berlin, Thomas Adamson in Paris and Susie Blann in London contributed to this report.

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

Barr undercuts Trump on election and Hunter Biden inquiries

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Undercutting President Donald Trump on multiple fronts, Attorney General William Barr said Monday he saw no reason to appoint a special counsel to look into the president’s claims about the 2020 election or to name one for the tax investigation of President-elect Joe Biden’s son.

Barr, in his final public appearance as a member of Trump’s Cabinet, also reinforced the belief of federal officials that Russia was behind a massive hack of U.S. government agencies, not China as the president has suggested.

Barr is leaving the Justice Department this week, having morphed from one of Trump’s most loyal allies to one of the few members of the Cabinet willing to contradict the president openly. That’s been particularly true since the election, with Barr declaring in an interview with The AP that he had seen no evidence of widespread voting fraud, even as Trump continued to make false claims about the integrity of the contest.

The president has also grown particularly angry that Barr didn’t announce the existence of a two-year-old investigation of Hunter Biden before the election. On Monday, Barr said that investigation was “being handled responsibly and professionally.”

“I have not seen a reason to appoint a special counsel and I have no plan to do so before I leave,” he said, adding that there was also no need for a special counsel to investigate the election.

A special counsel would make it more difficult for Biden and his yet-to-be-named attorney general to

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close investigations begun under Trump. Such an appointment could also add a false legitimacy to baseless claims, particularly to the throngs of Trump supporters who believe the election was stolen because Trump keeps wrongly claiming it was.

Barr's comments came at a press conference to announce additional criminal charges in the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103, which killed 190 Americans, an issue he had worked on in his previous stint as attorney general in the early 1990s. He'll step down on Wednesday and be replaced by acting Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen.

Barr's statements on the special counsel may make it easier for Rosen to resist pressure from the White House to open any special counsel investigation.

In his 2019 confirmation hearing for deputy attorney general, Rosen said he was willing to rebuff political pressure from the White House if necessary. He told legislators that criminal investigations should "proceed on the facts and the law" and prosecutions should be "free of improper political influences."

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

Trump and his allies have filed roughly 50 lawsuits challenging election results and nearly all have been dismissed or dropped. He's also lost twice at the U.S. Supreme Court.

With no further tenable legal recourse, Trump has been fuming and peppering allies for options as he refuses to accept his loss.

Among those allies is Rudy Giuliani, who during a meeting Friday pushed Trump to seize voting machines in his hunt for evidence of fraud. The Homeland Security Department made clear, however, that it had no authority to do so. It is also unclear what that would accomplish.

For his part, Barr said he saw no reason to seize them. Earlier this month, Barr also told AP that the Justice Department and Homeland Security had looked into the claims "that machines were programmed essentially to skew the election results" and ultimately concluded that "we haven't seen anything to substantiate that."

Trump has consulted on special counsels with White House chief of staff Mark Meadows, White House counsel Pat Cipollone and outside allies, according to several Trump administration officials and Republicans close to the White House who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Trump was interested both in a counsel to investigate the younger Biden's tax dealings and a second to look into election fraud. He even floated the idea of naming attorney Sidney Powell as the counsel — though Powell was booted from Trump's legal team after she made a series of increasingly wild conspiratorial claims about the election.

Federal law requires that an attorney general appoint any special counsels.

Barr also said Monday the hack of U.S. government agencies "certainly appears to be the Russians."

In implicating the Russians, Barr was siding with the widely held belief within the U.S. government and the cybersecurity community that Russian hackers were responsible for breaches at multiple government agencies, including the Treasury and Commerce departments.

Hours after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a radio interview that Russia was "pretty clearly" behind the hacks, Trump sought to undercut that message and play down the severity of the attack.

He tweeted that the "Cyber Hack is far greater in the Fake News Media than in actuality." He also said China could be responsible even though no credible evidence has emerged to suggest anyone other than Russia might be to blame.

Monday was also the 32nd anniversary of the Pan Am explosion over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed 259 people in the air and 11 on the ground.

The Justice Department announced its case against the accused bombmaker, Abu Agela Masud Kheir Al-Marimi, who admitted in an interview with Libyan officials several years ago that he had built the bomb and worked with two other defendants to carry out the attack, Barr said.

Calling the news conference to announce the charges underscored Barr's attachment to that case. He had announced an earlier set of charges against two other Libyan intelligence officials in his capacity as

acting attorney general nearly 30 years ago, vowing the investigation would continue.

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

VIRUS TODAY: Congress prepares to vote on relief package

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

—Congress is preparing to vote on a long-awaited \$900 billion pandemic relief package, delivering long-sought cash to businesses and individuals as well as resources to vaccinate a nation confronting a frightening surge in COVID-19 cases and deaths. The package would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit and a \$600 direct stimulus payment to most Americans.

—California's overwhelmed hospitals are setting up makeshift extra beds for coronavirus patients, and a handful of facilities in hard-hit Los Angeles County are drawing up emergency plans in case they have to limit how many people receive life-saving care.

—President-elect Joe Biden received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations are safe. The president-elect took a dose of Pfizer's vaccine at a hospital not far from his Delaware home.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. increased over the pasts two weeks from 2,190 on Dec. 6 to 2,625 on Dec. 20, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The U.S. death toll stands at 317,858 people, about 5,000 more than the population of Stockton, California.

QUOTABLE: "The prisoners feel so helpless because they can't control it and they can't stop it. They feel like they're sitting ducks — and they are." — Matt Tjapkes of Humanity for Prisoners, a nonprofit dedicated to inmates' medical rights in Michigan. A survey conducted by The Marshall Project and The Associated Press found that most states have lifted restrictions on transferring prisoners that were imposed earlier this year to limit spread of the virus.

ICYMI: Companies are testing drugs that mimic the way the body fights COVID-19, hoping they can fill a key gap as vaccines remain months off for most people. One company tested more than 3,300 antibodies before choosing two for its drug, which has gone into the arm of a U.S. president and others fighting COVID-19.

ON THE HORIZON: A second vaccine, produced by Moderna, is due to start arriving in states. It joins Pfizer's in the nation's arsenal against the COVID-19 pandemic.

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

Biden gets COVID-19 vaccine, says 'nothing to worry about'

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEWARK, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden on Monday received his first dose of the coronavirus vaccine on live television as part of a growing effort to convince the American public the inoculations are safe.

The president-elect took a dose of Pfizer vaccine at a hospital not far from his Delaware home, hours after his wife, Jill Biden, did the same. The injections came the same day that a second vaccine, produced by Moderna, will start arriving in states. It joins Pfizer's in the nation's arsenal against the COVID-19 pandemic, which has now killed more than 317,000 people in the United States and upended life around the globe.

"I'm ready," said Biden, who was administered the dose at a hospital in Newark, Delaware. The president-elect rolled the left sleeve of his turtleneck all the way up to his shoulder, then declined the option to count to three before the needle was inserted into his left arm.

"You just go ahead anytime you're ready," he told the nurse practitioner who administered the shot.

Biden emphasized the safety of the vaccine, and said President Donald Trump's administration "deserves

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some credit" for getting the vaccine distribution process "off the ground."

"I'm doing this to demonstrate that people should be prepared when it's available to take the vaccine," he added. "There's nothing to worry about."

He noted, however, that distributing the vaccine is "going to take time," and urged Americans to take precautions during the holiday season to avoid the spread of the virus, including wearing masks.

"If you don't have to travel, don't travel," he said. "It's really important."

Biden also thanked health care workers, and offered praise and an elbow bump to Tabe Mase, the nurse practitioner who administered his first dose of the vaccine.

Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and her husband are expected to receive their first shots next week.

Other top government officials have been in the first wave of Americans to be inoculated against COVID-19 as part of the largest largest vaccination campaign in the nation's history.

Vice President Mike Pence, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., and other lawmakers were given doses Friday. They chose to publicize their injections as part of a campaign to convince Americans that the vaccines are safe and effective amid skepticism, especially among Republicans.

President Donald Trump is discussing with his doctors the timing for taking the vaccine, the White House has said. He tweeted earlier this month that he was "not scheduled" to take the vaccine but that he looked "forward to doing so at the appropriate time."

The White House has offered another reason for waiting, saying Trump was showing support for the most vulnerable to get the vaccine first.

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.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious diseases expert, and other experts have recommended that Trump be vaccinated without delay as a precaution.

Colvin reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire in New York contributed to this report.

Virus rules not enforced. Grieving Texas family asks: Why?

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

ABILENE, Texas (AP) — In the weeks that Mark Riggs went from feeling worn down before Thanksgiving to dying of COVID-19 last Monday, only six calls about people not wearing face coverings rolled into the Abilene Police Department.

Even though defiance of Texas' mask mandate is easy to find here.

When Riggs checked into the hospital, a morgue trailer big enough to stack 24 bodies had just arrived out back. A medical field tent sprung up in the parking lot while doctors moved the 67-year-old college professor to a ventilator. He died in an intensive care unit that has been full for weeks and is the largest within roughly 15,000 square miles of pumpjacks and cattle pastures, bigger than Maryland.

Officers responded to three of the calls about face coverings, which have been required since June. No citations were issued.

"I've never been one to call out government or leadership," said Katie Riggs Maxwell, 38, Riggs' daughter. "But it's suddenly extremely personal."

As virus cases and deaths have soared across the nation this fall, pressure has intensified on governors who haven't issued mandates that require people to wear masks indoors and in public places. Health experts consider masks the most effective way of preventing the spread of COVID-19. Most states have statewide orders, and of the roughly dozen that don't, the majority are in the South.

But the debate over mandates and lockdowns — usually fueled by howls of violating individual freedoms

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— often drowns out the reality of whether the restrictions that are enacted are actually enforced to make them effective.

In some states like New York, where COVID cases overflowed hospitals earlier this year and were treated as a crisis, authorities have dispatched police to reports of violations, breaking up parties and even monitoring funerals where gatherings of unmasked people were anticipated. In California, Los Angeles County has issued more than 300 citations since September to churches, businesses and strip clubs for violations of COVID-19 restrictions.

But in many smaller cities, especially in politically conservative parts of the country like Abilene, a state-wide mandate in place may not mean much because the threat of fines is nonexistent.

As families prepare to gather for Christmas, and create prime conditions for spread of the virus, it's unlikely Abilene will punish anyone who doesn't abide by the Texas rules on mask wearing and limiting outdoor gatherings to 10 people, even as overwhelmed doctors here are rejecting transfers from smaller hospitals and the city of 125,000 people struggles to stamp out a worsening outbreak.

On Thursday, Texas smashed a single-day record for new coronavirus cases with more than 16,000. Hospitalizations are at the highest levels since July and rising.

Across the U.S., attempts to vigorously police mask mandates and limits on restaurant seating have been met with defiance, and sometimes, threats of violence. In Tennessee, police officers this month began accompanying inspectors around Memphis after some were confronted with racial slurs. Health department inspectors in Maryland have also been harassed, particularly female inspectors, according to county officials.

There's no conflict in Abilene. Mayor Anthony Williams, who tested positive for the virus this summer, views enforcement as logistically difficult and an economic burden in a city where unemployment spiked tenfold by June. "We don't want to exaggerate the problem," he said.

Hospital leaders say they have not asked the city to reconsider.

"I think it would not be well received either by the typical West Texas native," said Dr. Stephen Lowry, chief of staff of Hendrick Health in Abilene. He described them as "the typical rugged individualist, not wanting to be told what to do."

He and the mayor believe Abilene residents have taken recent appeals to wear masks and avoid gatherings to heart. Churches paused in-person services. Cases are still rising but no longer as quickly in Taylor County overall, where at least 150 people have died, a number that has doubled since Nov. 1.

Still, residents and businesses are left to set their own boundaries, including none at all.

On the cautious end of the spectrum is downtown's Paramount Theatre, which closed indefinitely as cases surged before Thanksgiving even though it could remain open. The theater had sold tickets for a showing of a Christmas classic. Now people strolling past stop and snap photos of an unintentional summation of 2020 on the vintage red-letter marquee: "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE CANCELLED."

Grayson Allred, the theater's technical director, said they noticed that many patrons who entered wearing masks took them off after they were inside.

"Air is going to circulate in here and there's no way getting out of it," he said.

While many schools elsewhere rely on remote learning, the majority of Abilene's 15,000 students returned this fall to their campuses. Hallway traffic was rerouted to one-way and masks were required. One teacher who tested positive for the virus died.

At The Shed Market, a barbecue favorite in Abilene, there are no signs on the door encouraging face coverings or social distancing inside. Orders are rung up by unmasked employees behind the counter. One of owner Byron Stephenson's grandparents died of COVID-19. Stacie Stephenson, his wife and also an owner, is a former registered nurse.

"It's been really tough trying to decide what to do," she said. "The nurse part of my brain thinks one way, and then the business owner part of my brain thinks another way. And so I feel like my my feelings on this changes, you know, once a week."

Mark Riggs took the virus seriously at Abilene Christian University, where he came to finish his career

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after 16 years as a hospital biostatistician.

The desks in his class were spaced six feet apart and crews sanitized the room after every lesson. He and his wife, Debbie, stopped going to church.

He still picked it up. The first signs appeared after a night of hanging Christmas decorations with his grandsons, ages 6 and 3. Doctors put him on an air pump to help his breathing within two days of his hospitalization. When his condition worsened and the only option was a ventilator, his family asked for a video call with him first. His last words: "This is not the end of my story."

He died a week later. On Wednesday, Williams, the mayor, went on Facebook to defend the city's handling of the virus and remind people that vaccines were on the way. It galled Debbie Riggs, who says while he's finding silver linings, she's planning a funeral.

"For the mayor to say there's light at the end of the tunnel, that's not helpful right now," said Debbie Riggs, standing on the campus where her husband of 41 years taught for more than two decades. "That's not taking action."

Scientists urge concern, not alarm over new virus strains

By MARILYNN MARCHIONE AP Chief Medical Writer

Does it spread more easily? Make people sicker? Mean that treatments and vaccines won't work? Questions are multiplying as fast as new strains of the coronavirus, especially the one now moving through England. Scientists say there is reason for concern but that the new strains should not cause alarm.

"There's zero evidence that there's any increase in severity" of COVID-19 from the latest strain, the World Health Organization's emergencies chief, Dr. Michael Ryan said Monday.

"We don't want to overreact," the U.S. government's top infectious disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, told CNN.

Worry has been growing since Saturday, when Britain's prime minister said a new strain, or variant, of the coronavirus seemed to spread more easily than earlier ones and was moving rapidly through England. Dozens of countries barred flights from the U.K., and southern England was placed under strict lockdown measures.

Here are some questions and answers on what's known about the virus so far.

Q: WHERE DID THIS NEW STRAIN COME FROM?

A: New variants have been seen almost since the virus was first detected in China nearly a year ago. Viruses often mutate, or develop small changes, as they reproduce and move through a population — something "that's natural and expected," WHO said in a statement Monday.

"Most of the mutations are trivial. It's the change of one or two letters in the genetic alphabet that doesn't make much difference in the ability to cause disease," said Dr. Philip Landrigan, a former Centers for Disease Control and Prevention scientist who directs a global health program at Boston College.

A more concerning situation is when a virus mutates by changing the proteins on its surface to help it escape from drugs or the immune system, or if it acquires a lot of changes that make it very different from previous versions.

Q: HOW DOES ONE STRAIN BECOME DOMINANT?

A: That can happen if one strain is a "founder" strain — the first one to take hold and start spreading in an area, or because "super spreader" events helped it become established.

It also can happen if a mutation gives a new variant an advantage, such as helping it spread more easily than other strains that are circulating, as may be the case in Britain.

"It's more contagious than the original strain," Landrigan said. "The reason it's becoming the dominant strain in England is because it out-competes the other strains and moves faster and infects more people, so it wins the race."

Moncef Slaoui, the chief science adviser for the U.S. government's COVID-19 vaccine campaign, said scientists are still working to confirm whether the strain in England spreads more easily. He said it's also possible that "seeding" of hidden cases "happened in the shadows" before scientists started looking for it.

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The strain was first detected in September, WHO officials said.

Q: WHAT'S WORRISOME ABOUT IT?

A: It has many mutations -- nearly two dozen -- and eight are on the spike protein that the virus uses to attach to and infect cells. The spike is what vaccines and antibody drugs target.

Dr. Ravi Gupta, a virus expert at the University of Cambridge in England, said modeling studies suggest it may be up to two times more infectious than the strain that's been most common in England so far. He and other researchers posted a report of it on a website scientists use to quickly share developments but it has not been formally reviewed or published in a journal.

Q: DOES IT MAKE PEOPLE SICKER OR MORE LIKELY TO DIE?

A: "There's no indication that either of those is true, but clearly those are two issues we've got to watch," Landrigan said. As more patients get infected with the new strain, "they'll know fairly soon if the new strain makes people sicker."

A WHO outbreak expert, Maria Van Kerkhove, said Monday that "the information that we have so far is that there isn't a change" in the kind of illness or its severity from the new strain.

Q: WHAT DO THE MUTATIONS MEAN FOR TREATMENTS?

A: A couple of cases in England raise concern that the mutations in some of the emerging new strains could hurt the potency of drugs that supply antibodies to block the virus from infecting cells.

"The studies on antibody response are currently under way. We expect results in coming days and weeks," Van Kerkhove said.

One drugmaker, Eli Lilly, said that tests in its lab using strains that contain the most concerning mutation suggest that its drug remains fully active.

Q: WHAT ABOUT VACCINES?

A: Slaoui said the presumption is that current vaccines would still be effective against the variant, but that scientists are working to confirm that.

"My expectation is, this will not be a problem," he said.

United Kingdom officials have said "they don't believe there is impact on the vaccines," Van Kerkhove said. Vaccines induce broad immune system responses besides just prompting the immune system to make antibodies to the virus, so they are expected to still work, several scientists said.

Q: CAN TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS DO ANY GOOD?

A: Landrigan thinks they can.

"If the new strain is indeed more contagious than the original strain, then it's very, very sensible to restrict travel," he said. "It will slow things down. Any time you can break the chain of transmission you can slow the virus down."

CNN quoted Fauci as saying that he was not criticizing other countries for suspending travel to England but that he would not advise the United States to take such a step.

The presence or extent of the new strain in the United States is unknown at this time.

Q: WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE MY RISK?

A: Follow the advice to wear a mask, wash your hands often, maintain social distance and avoid crowds, public health experts say.

"The bottom line is we need to suppress transmission" of all virus strains that can cause COVID-19, said the WHO's director-general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

"The more we allow it to spread, the more mutations will happen."

Associated Press writers Christina Larson in Washington and Candice Choi in New York contributed to this report.

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

Acrobats hurt in circus accident reach \$52.5M settlement

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Eight acrobats severely injured when the rigging suspending them by their hair plummeted to the floor during a circus performance in Rhode Island in 2014 have reached a \$52.5 million settlement with the ownership and management of the arena where the circus was held, their lawyer confirmed Monday.

"It's a great result, it's the right result and it's a just result," Zachary Mandell, an attorney for the eight women, said of the settlement, first reported by The Providence Journal.

A metal clip that held the acrobats 20 feet (6 meters) above the floor of the Dunkin' Donuts Center snapped during the May 2014 performance, causing the women to suffer broken bones and spinal injuries. A ninth worker on the ground was also hurt.

Some of the women still suffer from "life-altering" injuries, according to Mandell, who said he could not get into specifics because of medical privacy laws.

"These clients will now be able to have meaningful recoveries with the assistance of this settlement," he said.

The women in 2016 sued the Rhode Island Convention Center Authority, which owns the arena, and SMG, which manages it. Sean Brousseau, listed as an attorney for both entities, said Monday he could neither confirm nor deny a settlement.

The settlement will be paid by insurers, Mandell said.

According to the lawsuit, SMG agreed to manage all events and maintain safety inside the center, and arranged with Florida-based Feld Entertainment Inc., the parent company of the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, to bring the circus to Providence.

After the accident, which occurred in front of thousands of spectators, the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration concluded circus staff had overloaded a carabiner clip. The clip held up a chandelier-like apparatus from which the women were suspended by their hair.

OSHA cited Feld for a "serious" infraction of industry practice and imposed the maximum possible fine, \$7,000.

Feld Entertainment disputed the finding.

Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus, which closed in 2017, also agreed to take several steps to improve safety.

An email seeking comment was left with Feld.

The holidays could make or break struggling stores

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Clothing stores and specialty retailers are offering big discounts and heavily promoting curbside pickup in hopes of rescuing a lackluster holiday shopping season in which surging coronavirus cases have kept many shoppers at home.

For some, it could be their last chance at survival. And even a last-minute sales boost could be too late to save them.

The holiday season, which accounts for about 20% of the retail industry's annual sales, has always been make-or-break for struggling stores. But it's even more important this year as they look to make up for sales lost since the pandemic forced them to temporarily close locations.

That's a big challenge given that the deadline to order online and get items in time for Christmas has passed. Retailers also can't rely on big crowds of procrastinators because of restrictions on how many people can shop at once.

Big box retailers like Walmart and Target, which have been deemed essential and mostly allowed to remain open throughout the pandemic, have done well by attracting shoppers with safety concerns who don't want to go to multiple stores. Supermarkets, home improvement stores and online retailers have also seen strong sales.

But many clothing and department stores have struggled, especially those in shopping malls, some of

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which were already in trouble even before the coronavirus upended the retail landscape.

"People are spending money. It's just falling in pockets of areas like home improvement and food," said Ken Perkins of RetailMetrics LLC, a retail research firm. "You have to worry about the mall-based retailer. When the dust settles after the fourth quarter, you've got to wonder what kind of position some of these chains are going to be in."

Perkins expects fourth-quarter earnings for the roughly 100 chains he monitors to be down 2.1%, with mall-based retailers down nearly 30% and stores located outside of malls up 3.4%. A recent report from S&P Global highlighted seven publicly traded mall landlords who are facing a brutal winter.

Already, more than 40 U.S. retailers have filed for Chapter 11 since the pandemic started forcing shut-downs in March. And more than 8,600 stores have closed this year, according to Coresight Research. Just in the last month, music chain Guitar Center Inc. and clothier Francesca's Holdings Corp. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy. Meanwhile, retailers like Neiman Marcus and J.C. Penney that emerged from bankruptcy this past fall are looking to regain their footing.

Neiman Marcus is among the companies heavily promoting curbside pickup in the final days before Christmas. The luxury department store chain is offering customers a \$25 gift card if they use the service.

The worst could still be ahead, with COVID-19 cases on the rise in the U.S. and the possibility of more store closures and restrictions in 2021.

"Without this extra boost that they normally get, we are going to see an uptick in bankruptcies and store closures in the first quarter," said Natalie Kotlyar, a national leader of BDO's Retail & Consumer Products practice. "I think many retailers were holding out filing bankruptcy to see how the holiday season is going to go."

Retail sales fell a seasonally adjusted 1.1% in November, according to the U.S. Commerce Department. It was the biggest drop in seven months, with many types of retailers seeing declines. The biggest drop was at department stores, down 7.7%.

There's also other evidence of growing consumer caution: Overall spending from roughly Oct. 30 through Dec. 14 is down 5.4%, from the equivalent period last year, according to JPMorgan Chase, which tracks activity on 30 million of its debit and credit cards.

Still, the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, expects holiday sales to increase between 3.6 percent and 5.2 percent compared to 2019, mostly due to strong sales at the big box stores. Those numbers, which exclude automobile dealers, gasoline stations and restaurants, compare with last year's gain of 4%.

The holiday season is also the time when stores typically get a chance to attract new customers. Nearly 90% of customers polled by America's Research Group in recent years said that when they shop at a new store for the first time, it's during the holidays. That's not happening this year. Shoppers are cutting back the number of stores they visit to four or five, from six to eight, says C. Britt Beemer, chairman of the group.

Liana Pai, who co-owns clothing store Liana in Manhattan, says her family business used to be bustling with customers during the holiday season. But with restrictions and people nervous about shopping, she has just a few people coming in per day. After being forced to close in the spring, Liana reopened in July, but she's only recaptured about one third of her typical sales. She's been on the verge of closing her business three times.

"It's definitely been rough," said Pai, who has been stepping up FaceTime with her customers, marketing her shop on Instagram and offering fat discounts during the final days of the season. She noted that she needed to do well during the holidays because it helps her get through the slow period of January through March.

"We're scraping by," she said.

Others have managed a successful transition to online sales. Camp, a small chain that designed its toy shops to be places kids wanted to play, had to temporarily close all five of its locations in the spring. It regrouped, shifting activities like birthday parties online and launching a holiday gift exchange 10 days ago.

Online sales increased 40% compared with last year and overall sales have tripled. Since stores reopened,

traffic has increased an average of 17% each week. Tiffany Markofsky, Camp's chief marketing officer, says an outdoor location outside of a Manhattan store and ticketed shopping times have helped shoppers feel comfortable.

"We are in a much better place than last year," said Markofsky, noting a strong holiday season. "A lot of this stuff we were thinking about in our minds. But COVID crystalized it."

Follow Anne D'Innocenzio: <http://twitter.com/ADInnocenzio>

Navalny releases recording of call to his alleged poisoner

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny on Monday released a recording of a phone call he said he made to an alleged state security operative, who revealed some details of how the politician was supposedly poisoned and media identified as a member of a team that has reportedly trailed Navalny for years.

The man in the recording indicated that he was involved in cleaning up Navalny's clothes "so that there wouldn't be any traces" after Russian President Vladimir Putin's top critic fell into a coma while on a domestic flight over Siberia. During the recorded call, the man said that if the plane hadn't made an emergency landing, "the situation would have turned out differently."

The man, who was named in a news report last week as an operative from Russia's FSB domestic security agency, pointed to Navalny's underwear as a place where the substance that poisoned the politician may have been planted.

Navalny fell sick during the Aug. 20 flight in Russia and was flown to Berlin while still in a coma for treatment two days later. Labs in Germany, France and Sweden, and tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, established that he was exposed to a Soviet-era Novichok nerve agent.

Russian authorities have vehemently denied any involvement in the poisoning.

Last week, the investigative group Bellingcat released a report alleging that operatives from Russia's FSB domestic security agency followed Navalny during his trips since 2017, had "specialized training in chemical weapons, chemistry and medicine," and some of them were "in the vicinity" of Navalny in the timeframe "during which he was poisoned."

The investigation, conducted by Bellingcat and Russian news outlet The Insider in cooperation with CNN and German news outlet Der Spiegel, identified the supposed FSB operatives after analyzing telephone metadata and flight information.

Navalny, who is convalescing in Germany, said the report proved beyond doubt that FSB operatives tried to kill him on Putin's orders. On Monday, he posted a video on his YouTube channel Monday titled "I called my killer. He confessed."

The video showed him speaking on the phone with one of the alleged operatives. Bellingcat and other media outlets identified the man Navalny said he spoke with as Konstantin Kudryavtsev, a trained chemical-weapons specialist. The investigation alleged that Kudryavtsev traveled to Omsk — the Siberian city where the plane carrying Navalny when he became ill made an emergency landing and where the comatose politician first was hospitalized — several days after Navalny was airlifted to Berlin.

Navalny said he phoned the alleged FSB operative hours before the Bellingcat report was released. Navalny introduced himself as an aide to Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and said he urgently needed to debrief the man on what had happened in another Siberian city, Tomsk, where the politician believes he was poisoned.

The conversation lasted 45 minutes, Navalny said. Bellingcat and The Insider published the full recording and transcripts of it.

The man on the other end of the call indicated that he was involved in the "processing" of Navalny's clothes so "there wouldn't be any traces." The clothes Navalny was wearing when he was hospitalized in a coma have not been returned to him.

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The man acknowledged knowing several other supposed FSB operatives mentioned in the Bellingcat investigation. A few times, he expressed reluctance to speak on an unsecured line, but kept answering Navalny's questions without calling the politician by name or naming the toxic substance to which he was exposed.

While posing as a Security Council aide, the politician asked "what went wrong" and why Navalny survived the poisoning. The man on the other end replied "it would have all gone differently" if the plane hadn't made the emergency landing and "if (it had) not (been) for the prompt work of the ambulance medics on the runway."

When Navalny asked which of item of clothing bore the highest concentration of the toxin, the man said it was the underwear. He suggested that the substance was "absorbed quickly" and that was why no traces of it could have been found on the politician's body.

The man also indicated that he was aware of the international scandal that followed Navalny's illness: "I watch TV, too, and read the internet. They weren't expecting all of this, I'm sure, that everything went the wrong way."

The Associated Press was not able to independently verify the identity of the man with whom Navalny spoke in the video or his claims. The FSB told the Russian state news agency Tass that the recording Navalny released was fake.

The video received over 5.5 million views on YouTube within hours of being posted.

Earlier this month, Russian officials brushed off the investigation by Bellingcat and other media outlets.

Putin charged last week that the investigation relied on data provided by U.S. spy agencies. Its authors have denied any link to U.S. or any other Western intelligence services.

"It's not some kind of investigation, it's just the legalization of materials provided by U.S. special services," the Russian leader alleged during his annual press conference. He said that means Navalny "relies on the support of U.S. special services."

"It's curious, and in that case, special services indeed need to keep an eye on him," Putin said. "But that doesn't mean that there is a need to poison him. Who would need that?"

Navalny, who is an anti-corruption investigator as well as a politician, is one of Kremlin's fiercest critics. His Foundation for Fighting Corruption has been exposing graft among government officials, including some at the highest level.

The most prominent member of Russia's opposition, Navalny campaigned to challenge Putin in the 2018 presidential election, but was barred from running. He set up a network of campaign offices across Russia and has since been putting forward opposition candidates in regional elections, increasingly putting pressure on members of Russia's ruling party, United Russia.

Congress' rescue aid: A dose of support, but is it enough?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — The \$900 billion economic relief package that emerged from Congress over the weekend will deliver vital aid to millions of households and businesses that have struggled for months to survive. Yet with the economy still in the grip of a pandemic that has increasingly tightened curbs on business activity, more federal help will likely be needed soon.

And it's unclear whether or when the government might provide it.

For now, the package that congressional leaders agreed to Sunday will provide urgently needed benefits to the unemployed, loans to help small businesses stay open and up to \$600 in cash payments to most individuals. It will also help families facing evictions remain in their homes. The measure includes no budgetary help, though, for states and localities that are being forced to turn to layoffs and service cuts as their tax revenue dries up — a potential long-run drag on the economy.

Months from now, economists say, the widespread distribution and use of vaccines could potentially unleash a robust economic rebound as the virus is quashed, businesses reopen, hiring picks up and consumers spend freely again. Until then, the limited aid Congress has agreed to won't likely be sufficient to

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stave off hardships for many households and small companies, especially if lawmakers balk at enacting further aid early next year. And a widening financial gap between the affluent and disadvantaged households will likely worsen.

"Some aid is better than no aid," said Gregory Daco, chief U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. "It's positive. But it's likely going to be insufficient to bridge the gap from today until late spring or early summer, when the health situation fully improves."

President-elect Joe Biden has said he will seek another relief package soon after his inauguration next month, setting up another political brawl, given that some Senate Republicans have said that with vaccines on the way, they think further government aid may be unnecessary.

The new rescue support offers less aid than Democrats had pushed for and much less than was provided in a multi-trillion dollar package for households and businesses that the government enacted in March. A new supplemental federal jobless benefit, for example, was set at \$300 a week — half the amount provided in March — and will expire in 11 weeks. An extension of a benefits program for jobless people who have exhausted their regular state benefits and for self-employed and gig workers will also be extended until mid-March, well before the economy is likely to have fully recovered.

"It's not as if in March there's suddenly going to be a light switch that's turned on and we're back in pre-COVID mode," Daco said.

Still, the new aid package may be enough, for now, to prevent another recession. S&P Global estimates that the money should help boost the U.S. economy back to its pre-pandemic level by the July-September quarter of next year — seven months or so from now. Without any support, that level wouldn't have been reached until 2022, S&P estimates.

The economy has been enduring a renewed slump as the resurgent virus has intensified pressure on businesses and consumers have stopped shopping, traveling, dining out and attending sports and entertainment events. Key measures of the economy — retail sales, applications for jobless aid, travel spending — have steadily weakened.

More than 9 million Americans had faced a total cutoff of their unemployment benefits if Congress hadn't agreed to the new package after months of stalemate. More than 4 million have already used all the unemployment aid available to them, which lasts 26 weeks in most states; they will be able to reapply.

They include Warren Calvert, who ran out of unemployment benefits about two months ago, and is several months behind on his electric bill. In the spring, Calvert lost what he considered the best job he ever had: A \$15-an-hour concession cook at the Fiserv Forum arena in Milwaukee, where the NBA's Bucks play.

Now, Calvert and his girlfriend, who also lost a serving job at Fiserv, are trying to manage by selling homemade eggrolls around their neighborhood. To try to stay on top of his rent, he sells the eggrolls — original fusion concoctions like chili or cheese steak — at all hours of the day and night. With little money left over for other food, they mostly eat egg rolls themselves.

"It's really still hard — I'm still struggling day by day," Calvert, 38, said. "Ain't nobody feeling Christmas-y right now. Who's buying presents? I'm going to put up some lights, and that's it."

Calvert said he will apply for the new unemployment benefits while he continues searching for work. But he fears it won't be enough to prevent him from losing his apartment.

"I'm really worried," he said. "I'm still going to be short. I feel like Congress is playing with our lives."

The much larger rescue package the government enacted in March was widely credited with averting a disaster. By injecting money quickly into the pockets of individual Americans, it served to reduce poverty. But as much of that aid expired over the summer, poverty grew. Many people ran through the \$1,200 direct payment checks that had been distributed in April and May. And a supplemental \$600 in jobless benefits expired over the summer.

According to research by Bruce Meyer at the University of Chicago and two colleagues, the U.S. poverty rate jumped from 9.3% in June to 11.7% in November — an increase of nearly 8 million people.

The new relief package restores the Paycheck Protection Program, which offers forgivable loans to many businesses. But many small businesses complain that the program in the past was too restrictive, requiring them to use most of the money on payroll and not enough for other expenses like rent, the cost of

personal protective equipment or other supplies.

According to the data firm Womply, about one in five small businesses have closed since early spring. More than half of small businesses have just two months' cash on hand or less, and one in six has two weeks or less of cash, according to a survey by the Census Bureau.

Most economists say that further aid for small businesses should focus mainly on keeping them alive rather than maintaining payrolls. If a business shuts down, they note, it can't re-hire once the pandemic is under control.

Sasha Coleman, one of three worker-owners of a co-op restaurant near Boston named Tanam, said they are barely surviving. They're relying on takeout food and cocktails that are generating less than one-fifth of pre-pandemic revenue.

The restaurant, which closed from March to September, received a loan from the PPP program. But like many small companies, Coleman and her co-worker-owners would prefer something that lasts longer and is more flexible. The PPP required most of the loan money to be spent on payroll for just eight weeks. They need to pay rent, maintain their health insurance and help offset the expenses they absorbed for adapting to takeout and outdoor dining, like buying patio furniture and outdoor heaters.

"It's just been very frustrating because there is this expectation to stay open and put on a good face for the customers, without much help from the government," said Kyisha Davenport, another worker-owner.

Democrats had wanted the new economic relief package to include about \$160 billion in aid for state and local governments. But Senate Republicans opposed it. States and cities have already cut about 1.3 million jobs since the pandemic began, contributing to a higher unemployment rate.

"It's not stimulus — it's a survival plan," Michael Graetz, a Columbia University law professor who studies tax and social policies, said of the new relief package. "Will it allow people to survive for a little longer than they would have otherwise, given what was about to happen at the end of the year? The answer is yes. Not doing it would have been malpractice."

But Graetz, a former Treasury Department official, said "it's not enough when you think about the fact that evictions are rising. People can't pay their rent. Unemployment has been creeping back up. Businesses have been shuttered again all over the country. So this is not the end of the story."

AP Business Writers Alexandra Olson in New York and Paul Wiseman in Washington contributed to this report.

Pope tells Vatican bureaucrats to stop gossipy conflicts

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis urged Vatican bureaucrats on Monday to stop their gossipy, self-absorbed conflicts, issuing another tough-love Christmas message at the end of a year marked by the coronavirus pandemic and a financial scandal at the Holy See.

Francis gathered his cardinals, bishops and Vatican prelates for his annual Christmas greeting in the Apostolic Palace. In past years, Francis has used the occasion to deliver a brutal dressing-down of the clerical court that surrounds the papacy, once denouncing the "spiritual Alzheimer's" of some Holy See clerics.

This year, Francis said conflicts in the church between left and right, progressives and traditionalists, only hurt the church and distort its true nature. "For this reason, it would be good for us to stop living in conflict and feel once more that we are journeying together," Francis said.

He stressed that "crisis" isn't the same as "conflict," with crises in the church offering an opportunity for renewal but conflicts just "a waste of energy and occasion for evil."

"The first evil that conflict leads us to, and which we must try to avoid, is gossip, idle chatter, which traps us in an unpleasant, sad and stifling state of self-absorption," he said. "It turns crisis into conflict."

Like the rest of the world, the Vatican's 2020 was marked by a virus lockdown that grounded the globe-trotting pope, canceled his weekly appointments with the faithful and shuttered the Vatican Museums, the Holy See's main source of revenue. Those pastoral and financial setbacks have been compounded by a scandal over the Holy See's bungled 350 million euro investment in a London real estate venture that is

now the subject of a corruption investigation.

The scandal, which has been fueled by leaks from within, has exposed divisive turf wars within the hierarchy and has led to the downfall of a high-ranking cardinal, among other casualties.

Francis asked that the church not be judged on the crises of the past or present.

"If a certain realism leads us to see our recent history only as a series of mishaps, scandals and failings, sins and contradictions, short-circuits and setbacks in our witness, we should not fear," he said. Instead, he said, such crises require an openness to change and discern a way forward.

This version removes inaccurate reference to audience in Clementine Hall.

Loeffler's wealth, Trump loyalty face scrutiny in Georgia

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — In the fight to retain her U.S. Senate seat, Republican Kelly Loeffler has boasted she is "more conservative than Attila the Hun" and has a "100% Trump voting record." She has backed the president's baseless allegations of voting fraud and rallied with a far-right candidate who expressed support for a conspiracy theory that sees Democrats as part of a Satanic child sex ring.

It's not the type of campaign that supporters expected from the superrich former finance executive. Before she entered politics in 2019, Loeffler ran in Atlanta's elite circles and didn't appear fired up by ultra-conservative zeal. Her appointment to the Senate by Gov. Brian Kemp in December last year was widely seen as a way for the Georgia GOP to appeal to moderate suburban women.

So as she heads into a runoff election on Jan. 5 against Democrat Raphael Warnock, Loeffler, 50, faces lingering questions about her political identity and her alignment with President Donald Trump. With Democrat Joe Biden in the White House, would she be the pro-Trump firebrand who slammed Black Lives Matter and claimed Democrats want to overturn the country's way of life? Or would she heed the plea for bipartisanship made in a farewell speech by her predecessor, retired Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson?

Loeffler has no political experience other than her year in the Senate, and her campaign has not focused on detailed policy proposals that might offer clues about a future approach. For critics, that leaves her background to parse.

For years, Loeffler was a deep-pocketed donor to mainstream Republicans. She and her husband, Jeff Sprecher, hobnobbed with Mitt Romney and contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to support his presidential campaign in 2012, when he was the party's nominee. She has also helped Maine Sen. Susan Collins and Democrat Chris Dodd.

Loeffler also has shown some inclination toward bipartisan comity. As co-owner of the Atlanta Dream, a WNBA team, she posed with Democrat Stacey Abrams on the court when Abrams was running for governor of Georgia in 2018.

In one of her first public appearances after being appointed senator, Loeffler followed Isakson's example and attended a ceremony on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday at Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King preached and Warnock is now pastor. Isakson regularly went to Ebenezer on the holiday.

Critics say Loeffler took a hard-right turn once she drew a challenge from staunch Trump ally and fellow Republican Doug Collins. Collins, a member of the U.S. House, attacked her for donating to Romney and appearing with Abrams. On the other side of the coin, Loeffler's campaign accused Collins of voting with Abrams more than 300 times when they were in the state legislature together.

Loeffler soon went out of her way to hype her conservative credentials — most notably campaigning with Marjorie Taylor Greene even after the GOP nominee for Congress in northern Georgia made racist remarks and embraced the online conspiracy fiction QAnon in a video. QAnon supporters believe Trump is waging a secret campaign against enemies in the "deep state" and a child sex trafficking ring they say is linked to Democrats.

Loeffler's moves have not won over some of her targeted voters.

"She's not genuine, and if she's elected, I fully believe she will be another Romney moderate Republican,

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that she will revert back to her true self," said Debbie Dooley, a national tea party organizer in Georgia. Dooley said she was not going to vote for Loeffler, but would cast a ballot for Georgia's other Republican senator in a runoff, David Perdue.

Loeffler's campaign did not make her available for an interview and did not respond to questions sent by email. She has insisted, however, that she is a lifelong conservative, and since her appointment she has railed against socialism, abortion and gun restrictions.

In July, amid protests following the killing of George Floyd, she sent a letter to the commissioner of the WNBA objecting to the league's plans to honor the Black Lives Matter movement, saying it "promoted violence and destruction across the country." Players on her team — many of whom are Black — responded by wearing "Vote Warnock" T-shirts. Loeffler doubled down on her criticism, saying the protest was "more proof that the out-of-control cancel culture wants to shut out anyone who disagrees with them."

Loeffler has refused to acknowledge Trump's loss to Biden. She expressed support for a far-fetched lawsuit by the attorney general of Texas demanding that justices toss Electoral College votes in four states, including her state of Georgia, where Kemp certified them. The U.S. Supreme Court rejected the suit.

Former Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss, who also represented Georgia, said he is confident that Loeffler will find ways to work with Democrats if she continues in the Senate.

"She's on a very steep learning curve right now," he said. "I think over the last year she has gotten a real appreciation for the job, of what it means to be a senator, and I think she's learning that you have to develop relationships across the aisle."

At her core, Loeffler is a real conservative, said Cole Muzio, a former Republican consultant who heads an influential conservative policy group in Georgia.

"I think she ran a very authentic campaign in terms of her conservative credentials," he said. "I think at the same time, a lot of the attacks on her hindered the ability from the outset to really share a lot of her personal narrative, which I think has sometimes gotten lost."

Loeffler has tried to play up that backstory. In an early ad, she stressed her roots "working in the fields" and "showing cattle" while growing up on her family's farm and said she waited tables to pay for school.

"We lived simply," she has said. "Life revolved around farming, church, school and 4-H."

Today, Loeffler is among the wealthiest members of Congress. In 2009, she and her husband spent more than \$10 million on a European-style mansion named Descante in Atlanta's tony Buckhead neighborhood. She loaned her campaign more than \$20 million before beating Collins in November to advance to the runoff and has traveled the state in her private jet.

She earned an MBA from DePaul University and worked in financial services before moving to Georgia in 2002 and joining Intercontinental Exchange, a company founded by Sprecher that operates the New York Stock Exchange and other marketplaces for securities and commodities. Sprecher is still the company's CEO.

Loeffler's connection to the company poses potentially deep conflicts of interest on Senate matters dealing with the regulation of financial markets. Loeffler told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in a statement in February that she would never take a vote that benefits her or her family.

The senator has also faced scrutiny for offloading parts of her investment portfolio and purchasing new stocks as Congress was receiving briefings on the growing threat of the coronavirus pandemic. She has said she played no part in the trades and has not attempted to profit from her time in the Senate.

"I'm here because I've earned everything I got," she said at a debate in October when Collins was still in the race. "I am the true conservative."

Probe: Trump officials attacked CDC virus reports

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Trump administration political appointees tried to block or change more than a dozen government reports that detailed scientific findings about the spread of the coronavirus, a House panel investigating the alleged interference said Monday.

Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., said his coronavirus subcommittee investigators have found evidence of a

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“political pressure campaign” to “bully” professionals at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in what may have been an attempt to “cripple the nation’s coronavirus response in a misguided effort to achieve herd immunity.”

Herd immunity is shorthand for a theory — rejected by most public health experts — that society can be best protected by allowing younger people to get infected and develop natural immunity until vaccines are widely available.

Accusing Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar and CDC Director Dr. Robert Redfield of stonewalling his investigation, Clyburn issued subpoenas to compel them to turn over reams of documents and emails by Dec. 30.

In a statement, HHS responded that there was no political interference, adding: “While the administration is focused on vaccination shots, the subcommittee is focused on cheap shots to create headlines and mislead the American people.”

The committee’s topline findings were detailed in a 20-page letter to Azar and Redfield that centered on the actions of two political appointees earlier this year at HHS. New York political operative and Trump loyalist Michael Caputo was installed as the department’s top spokesman during a period of high tension between White House officials and Azar. Caputo brought health researcher Paul Alexander with him as an adviser. Both men have since left the agency.

But for months, the letter alleges, they waged a campaign to block or change articles on the COVID-19 pandemic in a CDC publication called the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, or MMWR, which is closely followed by the public health community.

With Alexander firing off internal emails, investigators said the campaign:

— Sought to block or change more than a dozen MMWR articles, sometimes succeeding in getting changes to draft language and at other times delaying publication as internal arguments raged.

— Intensely challenged articles that detailed scientific findings on the spread of COVID-19 among children. This came during a time when President Donald Trump was adamantly urging a return to in-person schooling in the fall. Those included reports about outbreaks in summer camps, data on hospitalization rates among children, and findings about a dangerous condition called “multi-inflammatory syndrome,” which afflicts some children who get sick from the coronavirus.

___ Attacked a draft MMWR article showing a jump in prescriptions for hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug that Trump embraced early on as a “game changer” only to ultimately learn it could do more harm than good. HHS even went so far as to draft an op-ed rebutting the CDC article, although it was never published. The op-ed accused the MMWR authors of trying to grab headlines, calling them a “disgrace to public service.”

While some HHS career officials apparently tried to defuse Alexander’s criticism by making changes in wording or headlines of MMWR articles, at least one confronted the pressure tactics.

Bill Hall, a senior career spokesman, wrote to Caputo and Alexander to explain that the CDC’s publication was akin to a peer-reviewed scientific journal and that HHS historically had respected its independence. The HHS public affairs office that Caputo once headed “is not a science or medical program office,” wrote Hall. “As a matter of longstanding policy, we do not engage in clearing scientific articles, as that arena needs to remain an independent process.”

The HHS statement said Alexander’s emails “absolutely did not shape department policy or strategy.”

Clyburn explained he took the step of issuing subpoenas in part because his investigation has turned up evidence suggesting attempts to destroy records. A congressional demand for materials raises the legal stakes for anyone attempting to destroy or conceal materials.

Dr. Charlotte Kent, CDC’s chief of scientific publications, previously told committee investigators she was ordered to delete an email from Alexander attacking an MMWR article on coronavirus transmission among children. Kent said she believed the order had come from Redfield. It was transmitted to her through another official.

Redfield responded at the time that he had told CDC staffers to ignore Alexander’s email, and that he is fully committed to maintaining the independence of the MMWR health reports.

HHS said Monday that Kent's email "was never deleted – it was archived."

Dogs ease pandemic isolation for nursing home residents

By MARY ESCH Associated Press

Eileen Nagle sees her family in video chats and drive-by visits, but that hasn't made up for the lack of warm hugs in the nine months since the pandemic led her nursing home to shut its doors to visitors.

Enter Zeus.

"Zeus is a friendly little snowball, very happy," said Nagle, 79, after the peppy bichon frise paid a visit to her room at Hebrew Home at Riverdale, overlooking the Hudson River in the Bronx. "Petting and playing with the dogs breaks up the day and gets you to forget about yourself for a while."

Hebrew Home has had a pet therapy program for 20 years; tiny Zeus and gentle giant Marley the Great Dane are the current snugglers in residence. Now, the activities department is expanding the canine corps with two new recruits in training to give residents more of the affectionate physical contact that has become so scarce and precious in the coronavirus era.

"It's uplifting to have Zeus come and visit me, especially with COVID and being restricted to my room," said 80-year-old Jeff Philipson, beaming as he ran his fingers through Zeus' silky white fur while the dog clambered on his bed. "I talk on the phone every day with my daughter and my son, but that's as good as it can get for now."

When the pandemic lockdown began in March, dog therapy was suspended along with most other activities at the nursing home.

"I decided we needed to re-energize the pet visiting program since there's no outside visitation allowed," said Daniel Reingold, founder of the pet therapy program and president and CEO of RiverSpring Health, nonprofit operator of 103-year-old Hebrew Home. "They've been on the floors bringing happiness and unconditional love to residents and staff alike."

The dogs belong to staff members who bring them to work every day. But the program doesn't allow just any dog.

"It has to be a combination of the right owner, right dog and right temperament," said Reingold, whose own rescue dog, Kida, is one of the new recruits. "The dogs have to be assessed, follow basic commands and be able to cope with wheelchairs, elevators, medication carts and all the other things they'll encounter on a floor."

Cats are also used in the pet therapy program — but only robotic ones. Hebrew Home has numerous lifelike animatronic cats that purr and meow as residents hold them in their laps and stroke their fur. "The cats are especially soothing to people with dementia," said Catherine Farrell, director of therapeutic activities, primary dog handler and owner of Marley.

"The love of an animal is incredible," Farrell said. "It releases endorphins, reduces blood pressure, reduces anxiety. For people here who had animals in their life history, seeing dogs triggers memories and opens communication."

While Farrell has to remain 6 feet away from residents and wear a face mask and plastic shield, Marley can plop his head on their beds as they pet him.

"To break through the social distancing barrier is really important," Farrell said. "It's one of the only ways they're able to touch another living being and gain satisfaction from that physical connection."

But it's not just about petting a dog, said Olivia Cohen, dog handler and assistant director of the therapeutic activities program. For some residents, the interaction can break down barriers and open communication and emotional expression, she said.

Cohen recalls one woman who was struggling with anxiety and having trouble coping with the new environment when she moved into the home. "Nothing would get through to her to help her," Cohen said. "But when I brought the dog to her, her complete affect changed from crying to having her face light up and telling stories about her own experiences."

For resident Elizabeth Pagan, dog visits are a welcome respite from the isolation she has endured since

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she's been restricted to FaceTime visits with her children, grandchildren and terrier-dachshund mix Ruby. "It means a lot to me, makes me feel good when I pet the dogs," said Pagan, who's recovering from a stroke. "My favorite is Marley. He gives me a lot of comfort."

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined
Today in History

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 22, the 357th day of 2020. There are nine days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 22, 2001, Richard C. Reid, a passenger on an American Airlines flight from Paris to Miami, tried to ignite explosives in his shoes, but was subdued by flight attendants and fellow passengers. (Reid is serving a life sentence in federal prison.)

On this date:

In 1858, opera composer Giacomo Puccini was born in Lucca, Italy.

In 1894, French army officer Alfred Dreyfus was convicted of treason in a court-martial that triggered worldwide charges of anti-Semitism. (Dreyfus was eventually vindicated.)

In 1940, author Nathanael West, 37, and his wife, Eileen McKenney, 27, were killed in a car crash in El Centro, Calif. while en route to the funeral of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who had died the day before.

In 1941, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill arrived in Washington for a wartime conference with President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

In 1944, during the World War II Battle of the Bulge, U.S. Brig. Gen. Anthony C. McAuliffe rejected a German demand for surrender, writing "Nuts!" in his official reply.

In 1968, Julie Nixon married David Eisenhower in a private ceremony in New York.

In 1984, New York City resident Bernhard Goetz (bur-NAHRD' gehts) shot and wounded four youths on a Manhattan subway, claiming they were about to rob him.

In 1989, Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHES'koo), the last of Eastern Europe's hard-line Communist rulers, was toppled from power in a popular uprising. Playwright Samuel Beckett died in Paris at age 83.

In 1991, the body of Marine Lt. Col. William R. Higgins, an American hostage slain by his terrorist captors, was recovered after it had been dumped along a highway in Lebanon.

In 1992, a Libyan Boeing 727 jetliner crashed after a midair collision with a MiG fighter, killing all 157 aboard the jetliner, and both crew members of the fighter jet.

In 2003, a federal judge ruled the Pentagon couldn't enforce mandatory anthrax vaccinations for military personnel.

In 2008, five Muslim immigrants accused of scheming to massacre U.S. soldiers at Fort Dix were convicted of conspiracy in Camden, N.J. (Four were later sentenced to life in prison; one received a 33-year sentence.)

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed a law allowing gays for the first time in history to serve openly in America's military, repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The Senate ratified the New START treaty with Russia capping nuclear warheads for both nations and restarting on-site weapons inspections. Auburn's Cam Newton was named AP Player of the Year. "The Lone Ranger" announcer Fred Foy died in Woburn (WOO'-burn), Massachusetts, at age 89.

Five years ago: Migration experts said more than a million people who had been driven out of their countries by war, poverty and persecution entered Europe in 2015. Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey was named The Associated Press college football player of the year.

One year ago: Baba Ram Dass, a 1960s counterculture spiritual leader who experimented with LSD and

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traveled to India to find enlightenment, died at the age of 88. Afghanistan's election commission said a preliminary vote count showed that incumbent President Ashraf Ghani had won reelection with 50.64% of the vote. (Both Ghani and rival Abdullah Abdullah claimed victory; they announced a power-sharing arrangement in May 2020 in which Ghani would remain president.)

Today's Birthdays: Actor Hector Elizondo is 84. Country singer Red Steagall is 82. Former World Bank Group President Paul Wolfowitz is 77. Baseball Hall of Famer Steve Carlton is 76. Former ABC News anchor Diane Sawyer is 75. Rock singer-musician Rick Nielsen (Cheap Trick) is 72. Rock singer-musician Michael Bacon is 72. Baseball All-Star Steve Garvey is 72. Golfer Jan Stephenson is 69. Actor BernNadette Stanis is 67. Rapper Luther "Luke" Campbell is 60. Actor Ralph Fiennes (rayf fynz) is 58. Actor Lauralee Bell is 52. Country singer Lori McKenna is 52. Actor Dina Meyer is 52. Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, is 50. Actor Heather Donahue is 47. Actor Chris Carmack is 40. Actor Harry Ford is 38. Actor Greg Finley is 36. Actor Logan Huffman is 31. Rhythm-and-blues singer Jordin Sparks is 31. Pop singer Meghan Trainor is 27.