

# Groton Daily Independent

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## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



**Strong wind and blowing snow created blizzard type conditions Wednesday morning.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

## Groton Area's boys basketball team posted a triple win Tuesday in Redfield

The afternoon started with a 38-23 win in the C game. Colby Dunker and Logan Ringgenberg each had 10 points, Teylor Diegel eight, Cade Larson six, Holden Sippel three and Kaleb Hoover added a free throw. Kyle Woodring led Redfield with seven points.

Then the junior varsity team won, 37-29. Jayden Zak led the Tigers with 17 points while Wyatt Hearnen had 12, Favian Sanchez seven, Cade Larson six and Colby Dunker five. Zak made three three-pointers while Sanchez made two and Larson one.

Both of those games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM sponsored by the White House Inn of Aberdeen. The games are now archived at 397news.com where GDI subscribers will have access to the videos.

Then in the varsity game, Groton Area held off a last minute rally to hand the Pheasants their first loss, 61-59. Redfield never led in the contest, but it was tied twice early in the game at three and five. Groton Area took a 17-10 lead at the end of the first quarter and a 29-20 lead at halftime. The Tigers rallied to a 50-35 lead going into the fourth quarter. Redfield staged a rally late in the game as three players made a three-pointer down the stretch. Redfield closed to within two, 59-57, with 11 seconds left. Jayden Zak made two free throws to make it 61-57. The Pheasants scored in six seconds and fouled. Groton Area missed two free throws with five seconds left. A last second shot was partially blocked and the Tigers hung on for the win.

Tate Larson led Groton Area with 16 points while Lane Tietz and Jacob Zak each had 10, Cole Simon, Jayden Zak and Tristan Traphagen each had seven and Isaac Smith came in during the fourth quarter to score four insurance baskets.

Jaxson Frankenstein led the Pheasants with 20 points followed by Paul Juarez with nine, Isaac Suchor eight, Jerron Haider, Peyton Osborn and Ivan Blume each had six and Thomas Shantz added five.

Groton Area made 20 of 34 two-pointers for 59 percent, six of 20 three-pointers for 30 percent, was three of nine from the line for 33 percent off of Redfield's 15 team fouls, had 14 rebounds with Traphagen having nine, 11 assists with Tietz having four and Jacob Zak three, and Traphagen and Cole Simon each had a block.

Redfield had 15 turnovers, six of which were steals with Simon having two. The Pheasants were 24 of 50 in field goals shooting for 48 percent and were four of six from the line for 67 percent off of Groton Area's 11 team fouls.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM sponsored by Bierman Farm Sales, John Sieh Agency, Milbrandt Enterprises, Still Massage Therapy & Yoga Studio (Mary Johnson), Harr Motors (Bary Keith), Blocker Construction, Groton Vet Clinic, Allied Climate Professionals (Kevin Nehls).

Groton Area's basketball teams will travel to Sioux Valley (Volga) next Tuesday. The games will begin at 1 p.m. with the Boys C game, followed by the JV girls, JV boys, varsity girls and varsity boys.

- Paul Kosel

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## Girls JV wins, Varsity loses to Redfield

The Lady Tigers hosted Redfield on Monday where the Tigers split a pair of games with the Pheasants. Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 31-28. Groton Area scored 17 unanswered points in the second half to overcome a 20-14 deficit and then took a 31-20 lead en route to a 31-28 win. Sydney Leich led Groton Area with 11 points while Carly Guthmiller and Emma Schinkel each had five, Laila Roberts and Kennedy Hanson and Sara Menzia each had two points. Gracie Fast led Redfield with 18 points.

Redfield won the varsity game, 50-28. The Pheasants led at the quarter stops at 11-7, 22-14 and 35-22. Kenzie McInerney had nine points, Alyssa Thaler and Sydney Leicht each had six, Emma Schinkel three and Aspen Johnson and Gracie Traphagen each had two points.

Groton Area made five of 32 two-pointers, six of 25 three-pointers, did not attempt any free throws, had 23 rebounds with Gracie Traphagen and Aspen Johnson each having seven, 10 turnovers, eight assists with Traphagen having four, six steals with Traphagen and Sydney Leicht each having two, 13 team fouls and Alyssa Thaler and Kenzie McInerney each had a blocked shot.

Redfield made 17 of 45 field goals, 11 of 13 free throws and had six team fouls and 12 turnovers.

Both games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Dan and Marjae Schinkel while the varsity game was sponsored by Bierman Farm Sales, John Sieh Agency, Milbrandt Enterprises, Still Massage Therapy & Yoga Studio (Mary Johnson), Harr Motors (Bary Keith), Blocker Construction, Groton Vet Clinic, Allied Climate Professionals (Kevin Nehls).

## Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine Arrives in South Dakota State Amongst Leaders in Vaccination Efforts in Nation

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health announced that the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine, the second to achieve FDA authorization, has been delivered statewide to all major healthcare networks and smaller regional partners. The delivery marks the second vaccine allotment from the Federal government and the state's second week of flawless distribution of the life-saving vaccine to South Dakotans.

"The Department of Health and our vaccination partners are working around the clock to continue prompt delivery and administration of COVID-19 vaccines, per our vaccination plan," said Kim Malsam-Rysdon, Secretary of Health. "Our detailed and coordinated efforts are yielding real results for our residents and our state."

Moderna's vaccine allocation of 14,600 doses, comes a week after the delivery and distribution of 7,800 Pfizer vaccines, bringing the total COVID-19 federal allotment to the state to 22,400 doses with additional shipments arriving weekly. Given the allocations received and per South Dakota's vaccination plan, priority group 1A should be finalized this week.

As of today, over 8,300 doses have been administered, making South Dakota one of the top states in vaccination efforts per capita. Find the most up-to-date vaccination information by clicking here. To learn more about prioritized populations and the order of vaccine distribution to the public, click here.

For more information and the latest resources, visit [COVID.SD.GOV](https://COVID.SD.GOV).

## #303 in a series

### Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Weekend effect is over, as is usual on a Tuesday; the numbers are back up. It looks like we are not going to get a break before the Christmas numbers come pouring in, so batten the hatches and stay the hell at home. Things are bad and looking to get worse.

There were 205,600 new cases reported today, which is a very bad day, top-10 for sure. Our total is up to 18,267,000, 1.1% more than yesterday. Growth in cases is slowing, but hospitalizations and deaths continue to increase.

We set another record for hospitalized patients with 115,351 after three days of declines over the weekend. In the past six weeks, there have been only five days when this number has not set a record. We went over 100,000 hospitalized patients three weeks ago today and have never fallen below that since. We have a health care system operating on fumes. The folks who work in health care are saying to me that they don't know how much longer they can do this—and this is the third time this year they've been at this point. I'm not sure how long we can expect them to put in overtime and extra shifts and usher large numbers of their charges to the mortician instead of home to their families. I continue to worry about their psychological well-being in these dire times.

Deaths are significantly increased with 3298 new ones reported today, our third-highest of this pandemic. We have now lost 322,839 Americans to this disease, 1.0% more than yesterday, a horrifying number of empty places at the Christmas table. This is the number that speaks loudest to me because these are people who are never coming back, families which are permanently altered. You can't fix dead.

There may be some fights brewing in the various states about the next phase of vaccination. We know the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) has developed a framework for vaccine priority that places, in broad outlines, health care workers and at-risk people in congregate living settings (primarily nursing homes) first and essential workers next, followed by those with medical conditions that place them at risk for severe disease and the elderly. But there's quite a lot of vagueness in those broad outlines, for example, who is an essential worker. The ACIP has now, after a meeting yesterday, fleshed this out, but it should be understood the Committee's framework is only advisory; each state is free to embroider on that as they see fit. It appears most or all states are planning to follow that framework, again in broad outlines, but there are some battles shaping up around the details.

Here's the thing: We don't have enough vaccine for everyone who would like it, and we won't have for some time. That's just a fact; companies can make the stuff only so fast. And so it's unlikely everyone who could be considered essential by someone will be covered early on, which means someone's going to have to make some tough calls. Groups interested in being considered essential include transit and other for-hire drivers (think Uber and Lyft here), hospitality workers (hotels and restaurants), meatpacking and food processing workers, emergency responders (police, firefighters, paramedics), grocery and retail workers, and teachers. Then there are the repair people who go out to homes to work. There are journalists who have to work with the public. And there are bank tellers and sales people and delivery people. Probably some others I've missed.

And honestly, they should all be first; but of course, that's not going to work. You can look at people's risk of exposure, but how do you decide whether the guy who fixes your furnace in the depth of winter in -20 degree temperatures or the firefighter who responds when your faulty furnace sets the house ablaze is more essential? The teacher or the grocery worker? The bus driver or the meatpacker? Vegetable-pickers? Morticians? Don't look at salaries or education; look at the importance of keeping them working. You can look at people's risk of severe disease, but how do you decide between the black taxi-driver and the over-65 Uber driver? This is hard. There is concern that political pressure will be brought to bear on decision-makers or that political cronyism will play a role, that powerful lobbying groups will give some an unfair advantage, even position their members ahead of others who "should" be first in line.

ACIP has made its recommendation: Grocery store employees, teachers, emergency workers, and others on the front lines should be next along with adults 75 year of age and older. These groups represent

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about 49 million people, 30 million front-line workers (meat plants, grocery stores, prisons, public transit) and 19 million older adults. The next phase has been defined as a second tier of essential workers (finance, information technology, food service, energy, transportation, and logistics), adults 65 to 74 years, and adults with high-risk medical conditions. These groups far outstrip the expected supply of vaccine. Now the real fights can commence. I'll add a note that another phenomenon has arisen, that of well-heeled folks in some locales attempting to buy their way up the priority list. There have been reports of offers to make huge donations to a hospital, for example, in return for a quick jab in the arm of the donor—and maybe the donor's family too. Sigh. You had to see that coming.

I've been getting a lot of questions about ivermectin again, so I thought I'd sum up what I have on that at the moment. I'm feeling like ivermectin is the new hydroxychloroquine—unproven, but with a great fan club. There is a cadre of doctors running around claiming miraculous cures and such, but not offering solid evidence.

I've been reading about ivermectin since April when the first hints it may be beneficial emerged; these were based on laboratory studies. I wrote about it, but there was no good evidence one way or the other for effects in living persons at that time. The drug is already FDA-approved and on the market as an anthelmintic (treatment for parasitic worms); it is not, however, labeled for use in Covid-19.

Some work's been done since, but as of August 27, the National Institutes of Health was still saying its use is not recommended outside clinical trials. This is because it appeared from lab research that reaching a therapeutic concentration of the drug in serum would require doses many times what has been established as safe. In a paper published by NIH on October 7, scientists address the bioavailability question and speculate about delivery systems which might target the lungs. The conclusions presented include the following: "Despite the challenges faced in developing these drug delivery carriers, and uncertainty with regard to the efficacy of ivermectin, it indeed presents promising potential."

The only thing I've seen since is a paper early this month on a preprint server; preprint papers are those which have not yet been peer-reviewed or published in a journal. What's more, this paper was a review of other work done, most of it also still in preprint; so we're looking at a non-peer-reviewed paper that compiles the findings of a whole bunch of other non-peer-reviewed papers, so it's probably not ready for prime time. There were some hints the drug may have prophylactic or therapeutic value in some patients, but the studies reviewed were often retrospective and observational, not controlled double-blind studies, and most of them used the drug in combination (often with since-discredited drugs like hydroxychloroquine), which further complicates matters of interpretation.

It appears there is a number of clinical trials underway and a few which have already been reported on, but NIH hasn't budged yet, which tells me they're not yet satisfied with what they're seeing. If they're not satisfied, I'm certainly not satisfied. From what I see now, we could classify it as potentially promising, but not a drug that should be used for Covid-19 without further evidence it offers a benefit. I will add this warning: The veterinary formulation of this drug is frequently used in livestock and pets and is widely available; however veterinary medications are not at all suitable or safe for use in humans. People looking for a miracle cure should under NO circumstances take drugs intended for use in livestock or other animals. Ever.

Hayley Orlinky had a rough start in life, spending her first days in the neonatal intensive care unit of Anne and Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital in Chicago after experiencing breathing problems at birth. She is also a pretty good salesperson, having sold the most cookies in her Girl Scout troop. More recently, this seven-year-old dynamo has decided to take on fund-raising for the hospital where she spent those first fraught days after her birth. She wanted the personnel at the Hospital to "protect themselves." Apparently, this fund-raising urge is a common thing for children, with many of them raising \$500 to \$1000 for the Hospital. Hayley, in typical superachiever form, has done somewhat better than that.

She makes colorful rubber-band bracelets, looping the rubber bands over her thumb and index finger, then looping another one through until, she reports, her fingers were sore. She also recruited the other kids at her summer day camp and many friends via Zoom and Facetime to help make the bracelets, some

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8000 of them so far, most made by Orlinsky, but many contributed by her partners. She sells them for \$3 to \$5 for an additional charm with an initial goal of raising \$200. She passed that a while ago and is now at \$21,000 and counting.

A family friend who also helps make bracelets with her own children told WCIA TV, "We were excited that these bracelets were a symbol of hope and goodwill and brought people together in a time where people feel disconnected."

This second-grader isn't exactly sure just how much \$21,000 is, but she says, "It's more than the tooth fairy gives." She has sold bracelets to Chicago' mayor Lori Lightfoot, to actor Miguel Cervantes who played the lead in the Chicago production of Hamilton, and to the Chicago White Sox. This kid gets around. Her donation has bought PPE, but has also helped to fund telehealth services, the development of a diagnostic test, and Covid-19 research, according to CNN. The Hospital has also provided PPE and information on protecting themselves to low-income communities.

Her proud mother told CNN, "It was just a time when the world was at odds with each other and we had people from all walks of life donate. This is proof that in really trying times we can all come together under a little girl with a beautiful mission."

I guess we all need a beautiful mission to bring people together. Let's go to work on that.  
Take care. We'll talk again.

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The elementary Christmas program was held Tuesday at the Groton Area Elementary Gym. The event was livestreamed on GDILIVE.COM as no members of the public were allowed due to COVID-19. The fifth graders sang, "That's Christmas to me" and "Rockin around the Christmas Tree." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The fourth graders sang, "It's the most wonderful time of the year" and "Christmas comes this time each year." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The third graders sang, "Beautiful Christmas" and "Sleigh Ride." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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**The second graders sang, "Let it snow" and "Regifted."** (Photo by Paul Kosel)



**The first graders sang, "All I want for Christmas is my two front teeth" and "Reindeer fly."**  
(Photo by Paul Kosel)



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The junior kindergarten and kindergarten students sang, "All I want is a hippopotamus," and "Rudolph the red nose reindeer." The elementary program was directed by Kayla Duncan. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



Addison Hoeft, Ryder Schelle and Jonah Theisen were the masters for ceremony for the Groton Area Elementary Christmas Program. (Photo lifted from GDILIVE.COM)

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## December 22nd 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: +436 (95,509 total) Positivity Rate: 7.1%

Total Tests: 6130 (725,631 total)

Hospitalized: +32 (5461 total). 341 currently hospitalized -3)

Avera St. Luke's: 9 (-2) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 2 (-1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 12 (+3) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 1 (-1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (+1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +0 (1381 total)

Recovered: +1181 (86,501 total)

Active Cases: +746 (7627)

Percent Recovered: 90.6%

Beadle (34) +2 positive, +19 recovered (92 active cases)

Brookings (28) +21 positive, +34 recovered (219 active cases)

Brown (53): +21 positive, +46 recovered (290 active cases)

Clark (2): +0 positive, +7 recovered (19 active cases)

Clay (11): +9 positive, +11 recovered (113 active cases)

Codington (68): +26 positive, +48 recovered (394 active cases)

Davison (52): +4 positive, +26 recovered (126 active cases)

Day (19): +6 positive, +5 recovered (54 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +2 positive, +5 recovered (43 active cases)

Faulk (10): +1 positive, +2 recovered (15 active cases)

Grant (21): +1 positive, +13 recovered (78 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +5 recovered (18 active cases)

Hughes (25): +11 positive, +18 recovered (151 active cases)

Lawrence (27): +8 positive, +46 recovered (185 active cases)

Lincoln (61): +27 positive, +76 recovered (590 active cases)

Marshall (4): +3 positive, +6 recovered (29 active cases)

McCook (21): +5 positive, +8 recovered (40 active cases)

McPherson (1): +1 positive, +3 recovery (14 active case)

Minnehaha (251): +90 positive, +272 recovered (1903 active cases)

Pennington (123): +70 positive, +140 recovered (996 active cases)

Potter (2): +4 positive, +0 recovered (9 active cases)

Roberts (26): +6 positive, +18 recovered (107 active cases)

Spink (22): +1 positive, +0 recovered (77 active cases)

Walworth (14): +2 positive, +13 recovered (60 active cases)

### NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 22:

- 5.7% rolling 14-day positivity
- 349 new positives
- 3,875 susceptible test encounters
- 135 currently hospitalized (-23)
- 2,439 active cases (-216)
- 1,238 total deaths (+5)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	399	369	755	8	Substantial	27.59%
Beadle	2461	2335	5046	34	Substantial	7.63%
Bennett	347	321	1073	8	Moderate	8.22%
Bon Homme	1449	1381	1851	22	Substantial	13.89%
Brookings	2848	2601	9729	28	Substantial	7.36%
Brown	4245	3919	10899	53	Substantial	19.47%
Brule	624	596	1669	6	Substantial	19.35%
Buffalo	406	389	842	10	Moderate	13.33%
Butte	840	769	2788	16	Substantial	15.91%
Campbell	111	105	203	3	Minimal	15.38%
Charles Mix	1073	990	3498	10	Substantial	14.81%
Clark	301	280	837	2	Substantial	5.26%
Clay	1578	1454	4415	11	Substantial	21.05%
Codington	3311	2923	8192	68	Substantial	17.47%
Corson	446	411	883	7	Substantial	41.67%
Custer	662	600	2344	9	Substantial	22.22%
Davison	2652	2474	5623	52	Substantial	15.99%
Day	511	438	1503	19	Substantial	16.05%
Deuel	397	347	976	6	Substantial	29.85%
Dewey	1234	1068	3453	11	Substantial	12.50%
Douglas	367	317	814	7	Substantial	36.00%
Edmunds	324	277	872	4	Substantial	13.13%
Fall River	430	384	2248	10	Substantial	20.80%
Faulk	306	283	583	10	Moderate	6.25%
Grant	807	707	1889	21	Substantial	30.60%
Gregory	478	427	1061	26	Substantial	26.09%
Haakon	222	171	461	6	Substantial	28.57%
Hamlin	580	504	1484	32	Substantial	13.60%
Hand	310	293	695	2	Moderate	10.34%
Hanson	305	284	591	3	Moderate	26.53%
Harding	88	78	150	0	Minimal	16.67%
Hughes	1941	1765	5464	25	Substantial	4.90%
Hutchinson	682	614	1998	14	Substantial	16.19%

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Hyde	131	127	356	0	Minimal	15.38%
Jackson	257	219	854	8	Substantial	14.71%
Jerauld	258	229	484	15	Moderate	18.18%
Jones	64	63	180	0	None	0.00%
Kingsbury	513	459	1386	13	Substantial	16.85%
Lake	993	906	2715	13	Substantial	21.74%
Lawrence	2441	2240	7470	27	Substantial	19.06%
Lincoln	6499	5848	16992	61	Substantial	20.67%
Lyman	509	484	1678	9	Substantial	11.59%
Marshall	252	219	978	4	Substantial	20.83%
McCook	658	597	1382	21	Substantial	24.00%
McPherson	174	159	492	1	Moderate	0.75%
Meade	2129	1927	6564	22	Substantial	20.20%
Mellette	213	194	648	2	Moderate	23.53%
Miner	219	195	491	6	Moderate	26.32%
Minnehaha	24154	22000	66310	251	Substantial	15.75%
Moody	521	455	1567	14	Substantial	28.57%
Oglala Lakota	1878	1687	6143	33	Substantial	22.40%
Pennington	10613	9494	33094	123	Substantial	23.06%
Perkins	265	218	649	9	Substantial	26.15%
Potter	296	285	702	2	Moderate	4.44%
Roberts	918	785	3696	26	Substantial	21.60%
Sanborn	300	289	599	3	Moderate	4.00%
Spink	686	595	1822	22	Substantial	12.64%
Stanley	261	240	756	2	Substantial	6.67%
Sully	103	96	241	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1130	1046	3738	17	Substantial	25.00%
Tripp	612	563	1302	10	Substantial	10.71%
Turner	934	816	2330	47	Substantial	18.75%
Union	1526	1351	5230	30	Substantial	18.30%
Walworth	602	528	1596	14	Substantial	25.33%
Yankton	2382	2085	8124	23	Substantial	14.39%
Ziebach	283	228	693	7	Substantial	13.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1938	0		

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## South Dakota

New Confirmed Cases <b>318</b>	New Probable Cases <b>118</b>	Active Cases <b>7,627</b>	Recovered Cases <b>86,501</b>	Currently Hospitalized <b>341</b>
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Total Confirmed Cases <b>87,252</b>	Total Probable Cases <b>8,257</b>	RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate, Last 1 Day <b>11.6%</b>	Total Persons Tested <b>363,598</b>	Total Tests <b>725,631</b>
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Ever Hospitalized <b>5,461</b>	Deaths Among Cases <b>1,381</b>	% Progress (October Goal: 44233 Tests) <b>327%</b>	% Progress (November Goal: 44233 Tests) <b>402%</b>	% Progress (December Goal: 44233 Tests) <b>245%</b>
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### 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

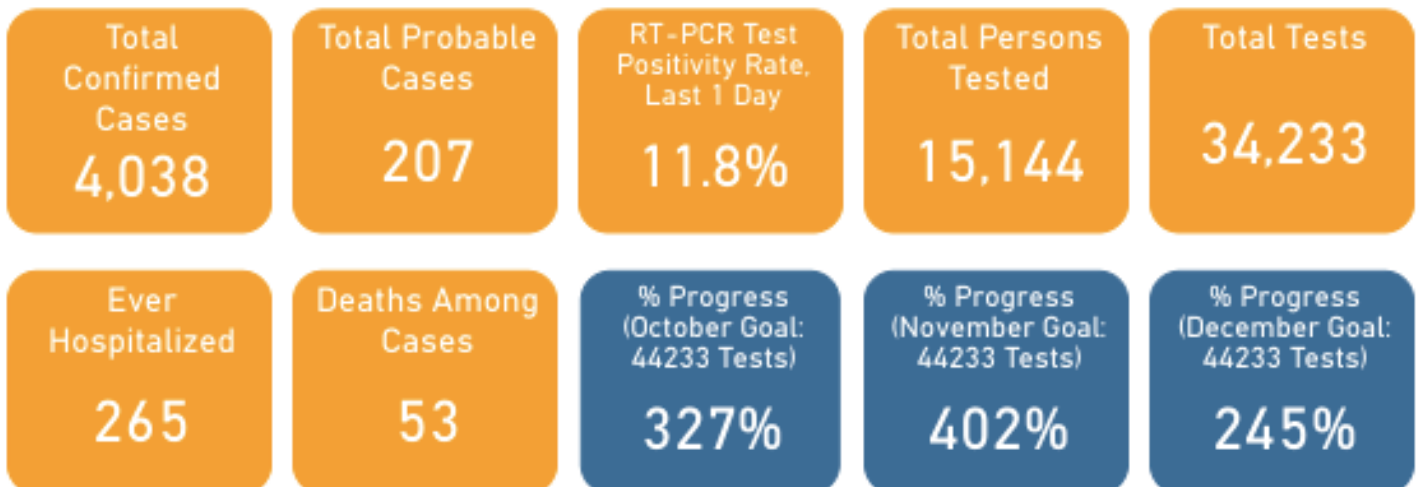
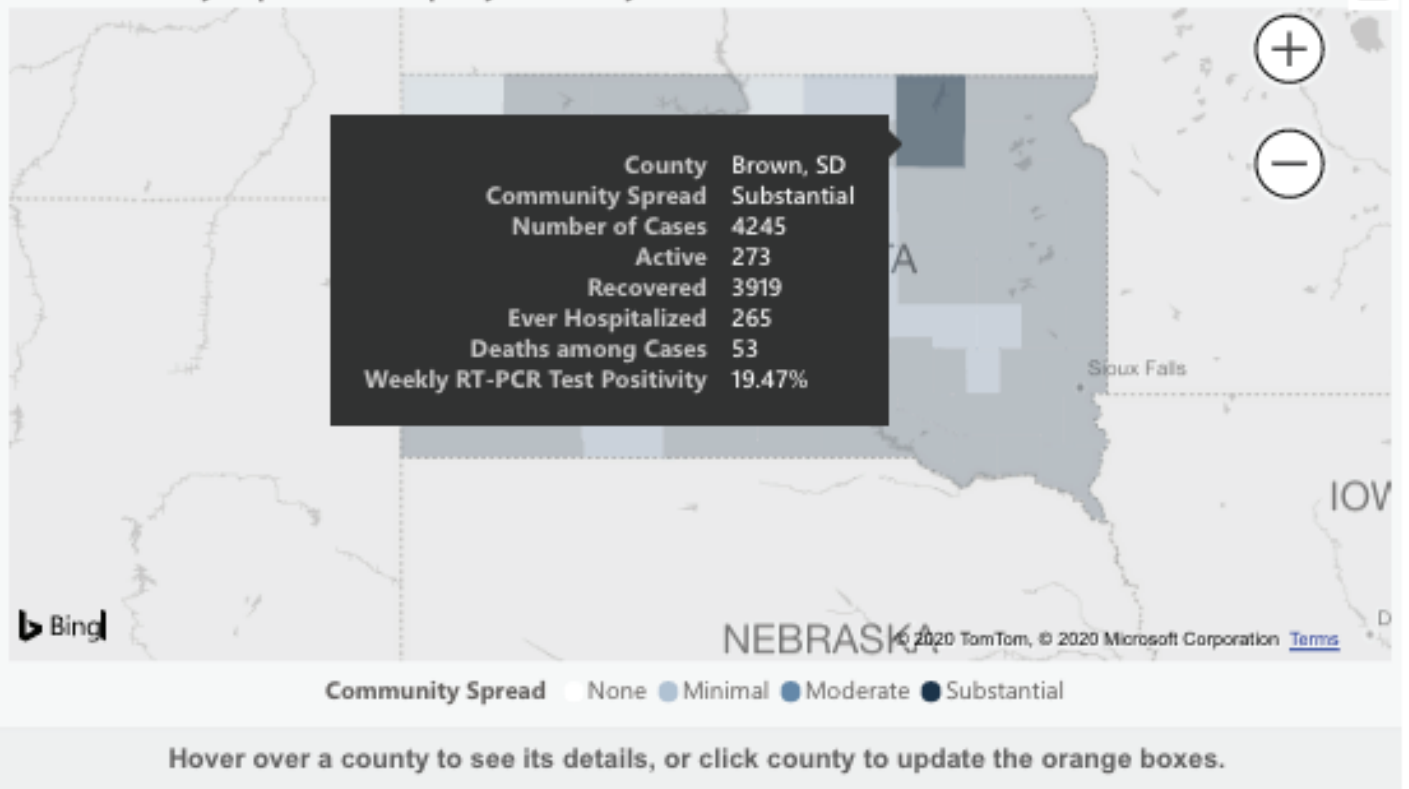
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## Brown County



### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



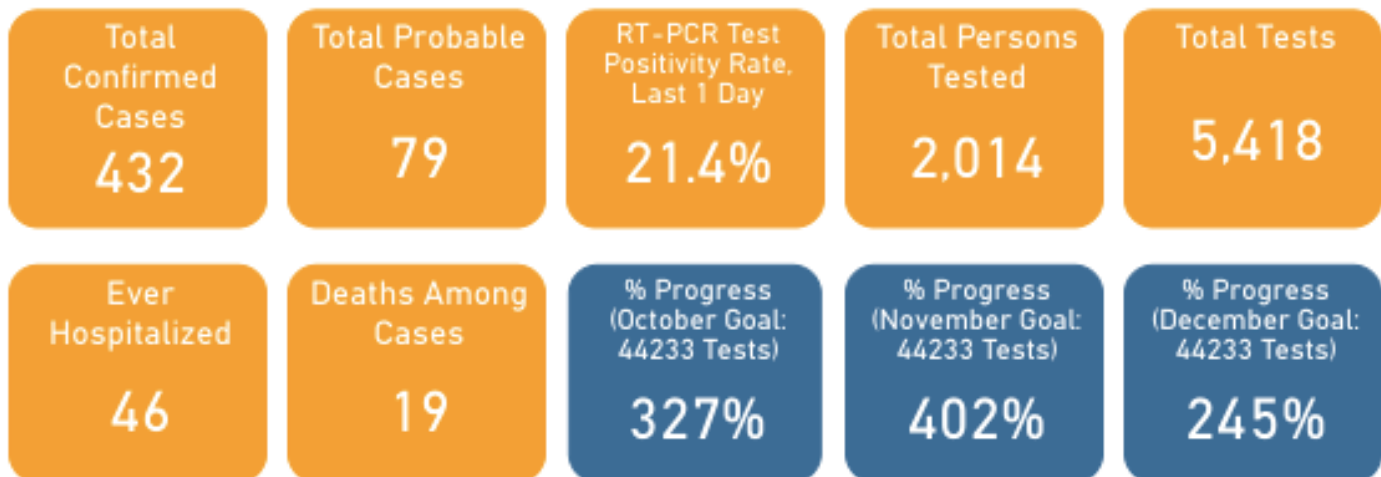
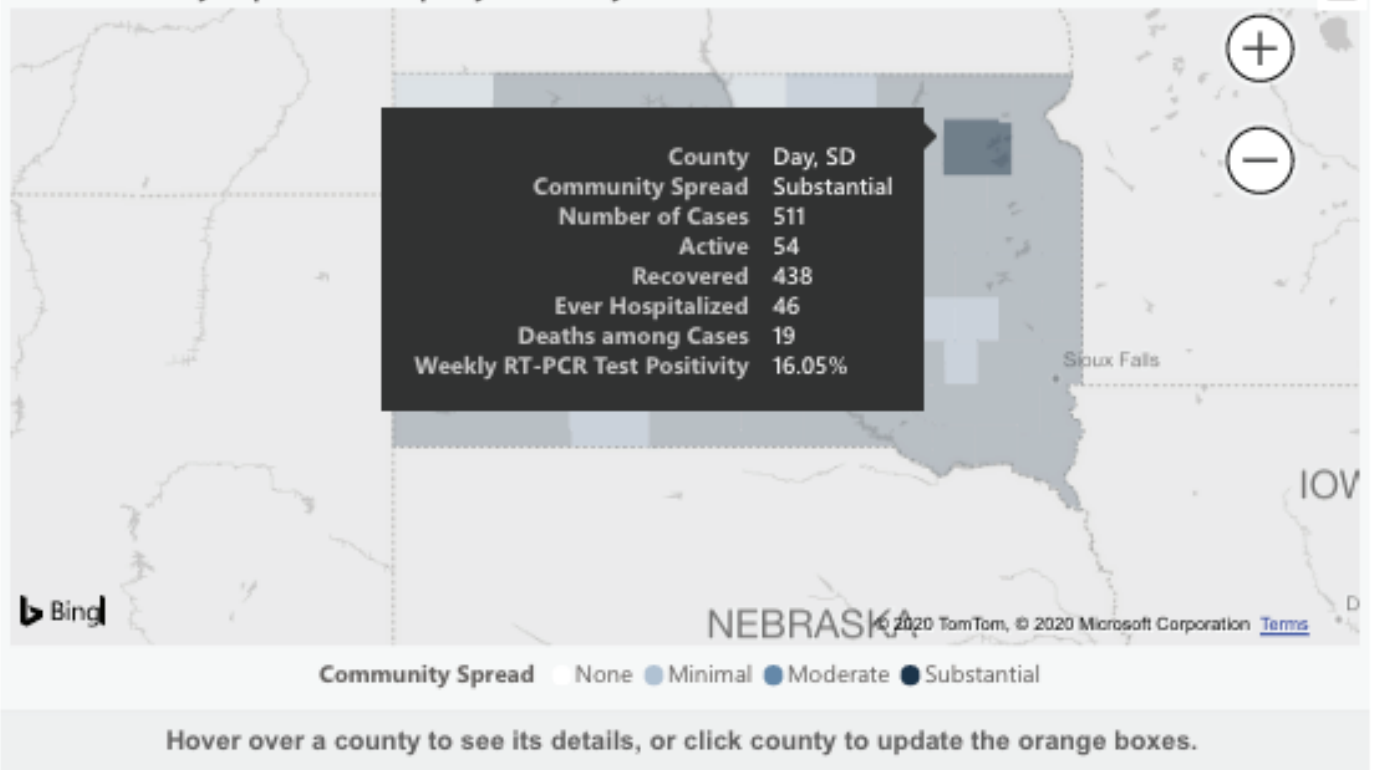
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## Day County



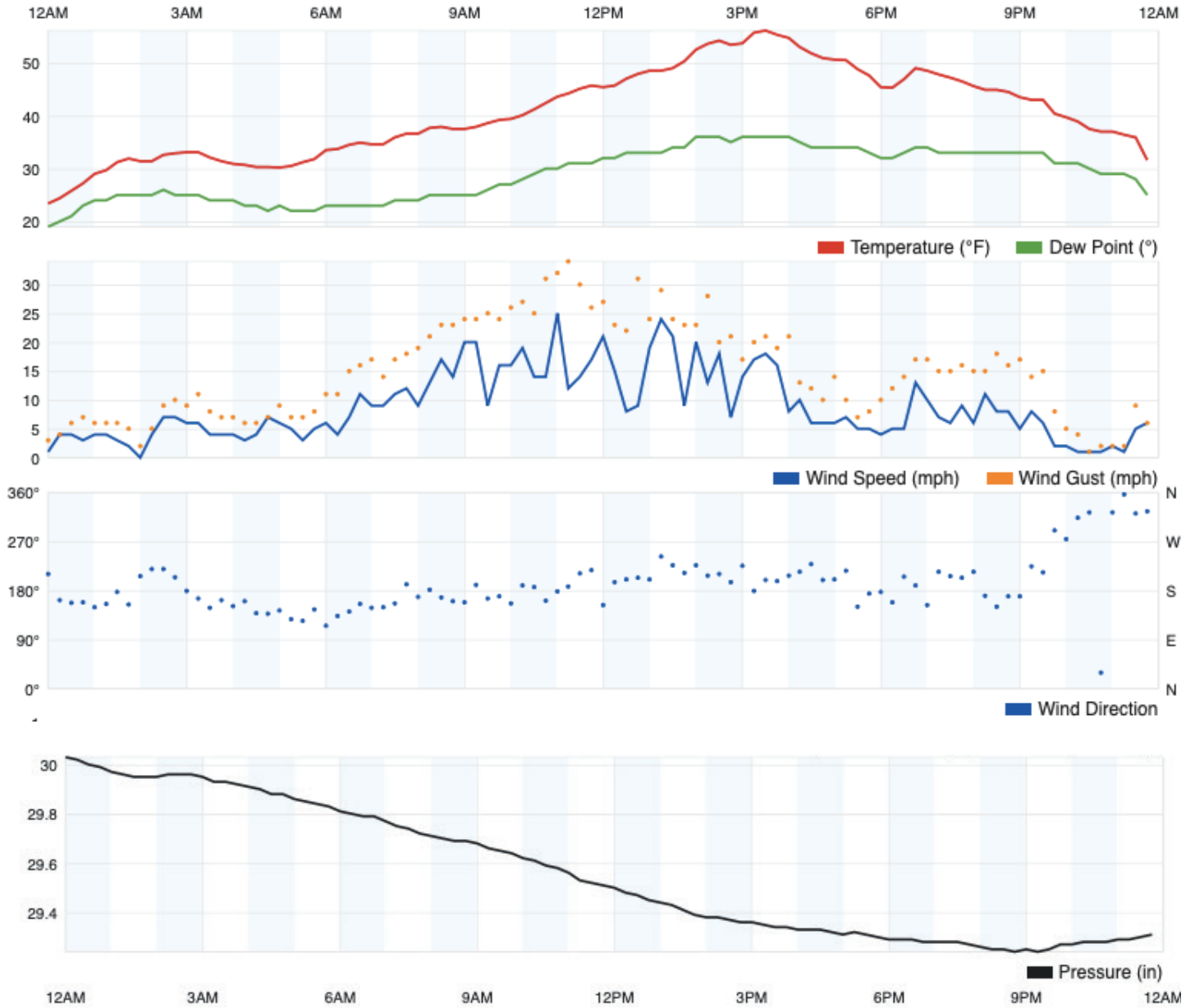
### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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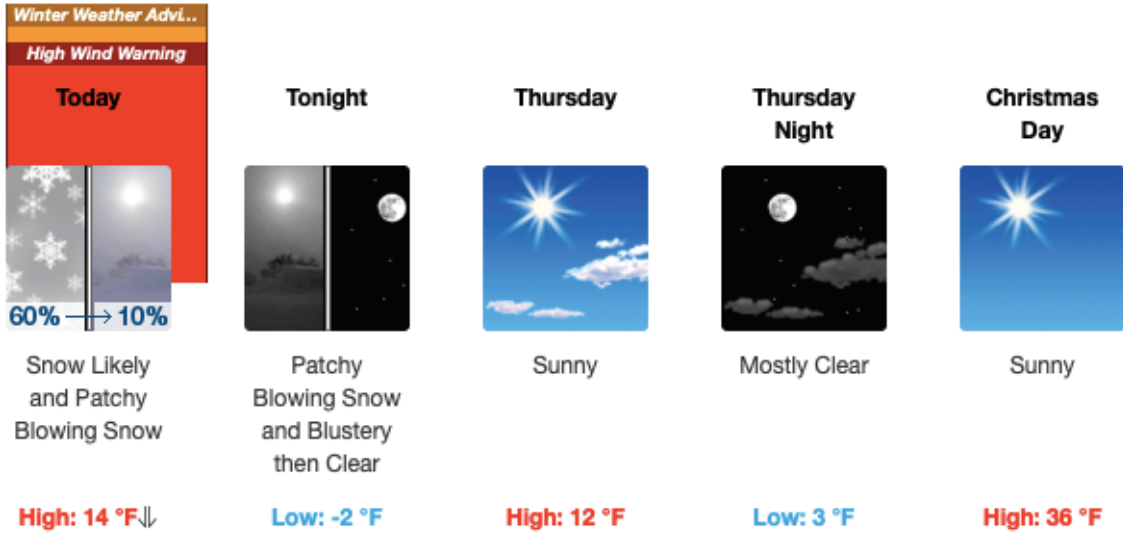
## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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## WEATHER CONCERNS & IMPACTS Today into Tonight

### STRONG WINDS

Northwest 30 to 40 mph with gusts up to 65 mph  
Strongest from mid morning to mid afternoon



### 1 to 4" SNOW

Highest across eastern SD and western MN. Snowfall comes to an end from west to east from late morning in the west to late afternoon in the east.

#### VERY ICY/SLIPPERY ROADS

Snow melting on roadways will quickly freeze early in the morning

#### BLOWING SNOW / REDUCED VISIBILITY

Visibilities reduced to one mile or less at times in falling and blowing snow  
**BLIZZARD CONDITIONS** with visibilities less than 1/4 mile at times expected over portions of eastern SD & western MN



### FALLING TEMPERATURES

Falling into the teens during the day to single digits by late afternoon

#### LOW WIND CHILLS

Lowest -15 to -25° Thursday morning across James valley and east

National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

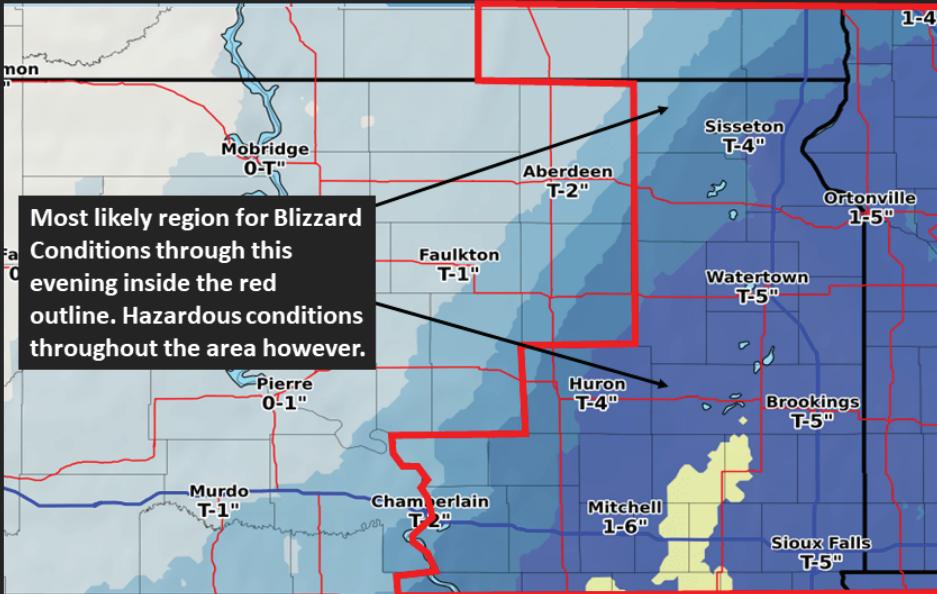


A strong area of low pressure will continue to move through the region today bringing very strong winds and light to moderate snowfall to the area. The combination of the new snowfall and the winds will create hazardous weather conditions through the afternoon hours and into the early evening. Snowfall should end from west to east fairly quickly from mid to late morning across the Missouri valley to late afternoon across the I-29 corridor into western Minnesota. The brunt of this storm will be felt across eastern South Dakota and western Minnesota where blizzard conditions can be expected through the daytime hours.

## Blizzard Conditions Today



Forecast Snow Totals (trending towards higher end of these ranges) from 6am-6pm Wed, Dec 23<sup>rd</sup>



Most likely region for Blizzard Conditions through this evening inside the red outline. Hazardous conditions throughout the area however.

### What

Strong wind gusts of 45 to 65 mph across the area, with snow of 1" to as much as 5" possible, particularly across eastern portions of SD and western MN. Much colder air moves in as well.

### When

This morning into the evening hours, ending from west to east (snow ends before winds). Wind chills as cold as -25 F by Thu AM for some.

### Impacts

Travel is not recommended - consider delaying travel plans if possible. Check road conditions if heading out at [safetravelusa.com](http://safetravelusa.com).  
**Note:** Blizzard conditions will be worse in open country vs in town.



[www.weather.gov](http://www.weather.gov)

Updated: 12/23/2020 6:22 AM CT

**A strong winter storm system is already underway this morning, and will persist through the day. Consider delaying travel plans if possible!**

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## Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1998: A major ice storm struck central and southeast Virginia and much of North Carolina beginning on Wednesday, December 23, and lasting until Christmas Day morning. Icy conditions caused injuries from slips and falls and numerous vehicle accidents. Ice accumulations of up to an inch brought down trees and power lines. Outages were so widespread with 400,000 customers were without power on Christmas Eve. Some people were without power for up to ten days.

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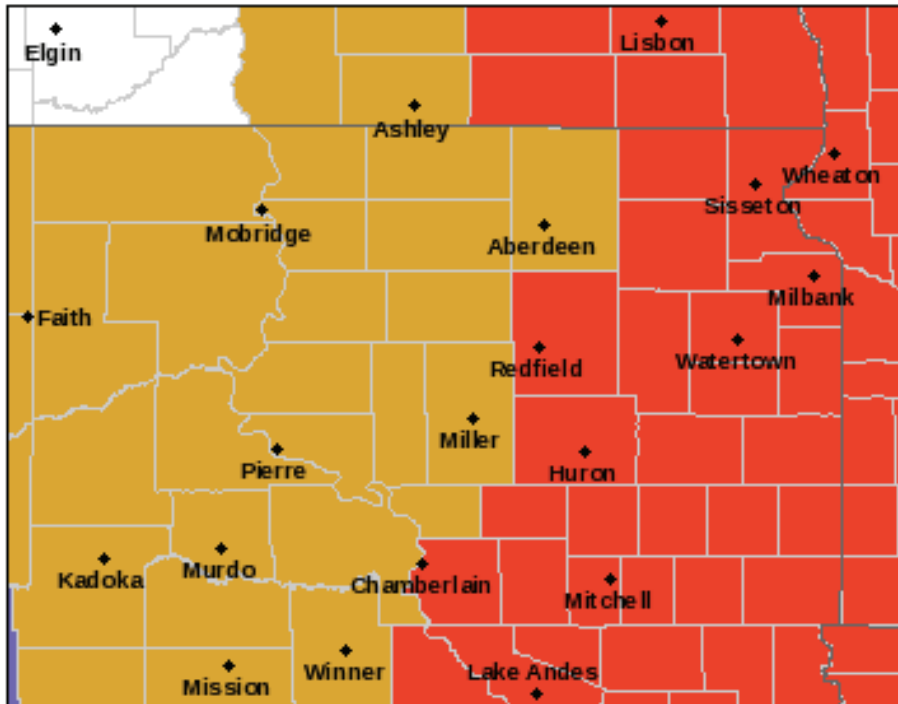
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 56 °F at 3:27 PM**  
**Low Temp: 23 °F at 12:00 AM**  
**Wind: 34 mph at 11:12 AM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 54° in 1893**  
**Record Low: -34° in 1983**  
**Average High: 24°F**  
**Average Low: 4°F**  
**Average Precip in Dec.: 0.36**  
**Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00**  
**Average Precip to date: 21.56**  
**Precip Year to Date: 16.52**  
**Sunset Tonight: 4:55 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:12 a.m.**



[Watches, Warnings & Advisories](#)

Zoom Out

<a href="#">Blizzard Warning</a>	Red
<a href="#">High Wind Warning</a>	Yellow
<a href="#">Winter Weather Advisory</a>	Purple
<a href="#">Local Area Emergency</a>	Grey
<a href="#">Hazardous Weather Outlook</a>	Light Green



## THE ANGEL'S VISIT TO MARY

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a village in Galilee, to a virgin named Mary. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. Gabriel appeared to her and said, "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think of what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his Kingdom will never end!"

Mary asked the angel, "But how can this happen? I am a virgin."

The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and He will be called the Son of God. What's more, your relative Elizabeth has become pregnant in her old age! People used to say she was barren, but she's now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

Mary responded, "I am the Lord's servant. May everything you have said about me come true." And though the angel left her, she was not alone.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your presence and the peace and protection that is ours when we are obedient to Your voice. Give us Your courage to be faithful to Your plan to fulfill Your purpose for our lives. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 1:26-38 Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and will name him Jesus.

## News from the Associated Press

### **Winter storms in Dakotas, Minnesota make travel frightful**

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Forecasters have posted blizzard warnings for the eastern Dakotas and western Minnesota as snow, strong winds and bitter cold move in, creating treacherous conditions for holiday travelers

The National Weather Service predicts wind chills could dip to 35 degrees below zero on Wednesday, pushed by gusts of up to 65 mph.

The weather service said snow depth could reach up to 6 inches, with the highest accumulations in west-central Minnesota.

Blowing snow is expected until Wednesday night, making travel difficult to impossible at times in the region, forecasters said.

### **Trump lashes out at Thune: 'He will be primaried in 2022'**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — President Donald Trump took to social media to lash out at South Dakota U.S. Sen. John Thune, saying his political career is over.

The attack on Thune comes following remarks by the 59-year-old Republican about efforts by some GOP members in the U.S. House to reject Electoral College results and stop President-elect Joe Biden from being sworn in next month.

Thune has said the move would "go down like a shot dog" in the Senate.

In a tweet, the outgoing president called the No. 2 Republican in the Senate a "RINO," meaning Republican In Name Only, and "Mitch's boy," in reference to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

"South Dakota doesn't like weakness," the president tweeted. "He will be primaried in 2022, political career over!!!"

Thune, whose office didn't immediately respond to a request for comment, was first elected to the Senate in 2004 and isn't seen as a vulnerable candidate in the 2022 election.

GOP Gov. Kristi Noem, who has adamantly supported the president and acted as a surrogate for him during the presidential campaign, said she won't challenge Thune in 2022, the Argus Leader reported.

"John is a friend of mine, and I will not be challenging him," Noem said in a statement. "I'm honored to be governor of South Dakota and will ask the people to give me an opportunity to continue serving them as Governor in 2022."

### **OSHA investigating fatal construction accident in Rapid City**

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Federal workplace safety officials are investigating a fatal construction accident in Rapid City.

The Rapid City Journal reports the Occupational Safety and Health Administration is investigating the trench collapse that trapped two workers, killing one of them.

Fire officials said the accident happened Monday afternoon while the men were working. Police and medics arrived to find the men trapped under a dirt pile — one man submerged up to his chest and another completely submerged up to his head. His body was recovered after about five hours of digging, officials said.

The rescued man was uninjured.

Officials said the men were digging the trench in the front yard of a home when the collapse happened. The names of the men have not been released.

## **SD Lottery**

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

29-53-56-59-67, Mega Ball: 21, Megaplier: 2

(twenty-nine, fifty-three, fifty-six, fifty-nine, sixty-seven; Mega Ball: twenty-one; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$330 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$321 million

## Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 68, Northwestern 41

Arlington 68, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 44

Canistota 62, Bridgewater-Emery 33

Chester 53, McCook Central/Montrose 47

Clark/Willow Lake 44, Florence/Henry 40

DeSmet 69, Estelline/Hendricks 32

Elkton-Lake Benton 68, Colman-Egan 26

Faith 68, Dupree 32

Faulkton 60, Wolsey-Wessington 51

Freeman Academy/Marion 57, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 43

Gayville-Volin 49, Centerville 41

Gregory 76, North Central, Neb. 43

Groton Area 61, Redfield 59

Harrisburg 61, LeMars, Iowa 55

Herreid/Selby Area 53, Miller 49

Highmore-Harrold 72, Kimball/White Lake 50

Ipswich 33, Aberdeen Christian 31

Kadoka Area 58, Philip 50

Lemmon 52, New England, N.D. 39

Milbank 67, Webster 49

Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 74, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 30

Parker 61, Parkston 57

Rapid City Central 70, Sturgis Brown 31

Sioux Falls Lincoln 73, Brandon Valley 70

Sioux Falls Washington 84, Huron 51

Sioux Valley 69, Beresford 38

Stanley County 59, Jones County 40

Vermillion 64, Tri-Valley 34

Yankton 47, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 45

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 70, Northwestern 23

Centerville 56, Gayville-Volin 42

Dakota Valley 65, Hartington Cedar Catholic, Neb. 51

Faith 52, Dupree 41

Florence/Henry 59, Clark/Willow Lake 49

Garretson 52, Dell Rapids 44

Harrisburg 53, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 43

Herreid/Selby Area 53, Strasburg-Zeeland, N.D. 19

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Jones County 52, Stanley County 25  
Kadoka Area 51, Philip 43  
Kimball/White Lake 46, Chamberlain 37, OT  
Lemmon 78, New England, N.D. 48  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 63, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 34  
North Central, Neb. 55, Gregory 29  
Parkston 65, Parker 34  
Rapid City Central 48, Sturgis Brown 38  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66, Yankton 30  
Sioux Valley 59, Beresford 51  
St. Thomas More 58, Hill City 35  
Tea Area 80, McCook Central/Montrose 79, OT  
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 48, Freeman Academy/Marion 22  
Vermillion 61, Tri-Valley 53, OT  
Viborg-Hurley 47, Elk Point-Jefferson 44  
Waubay/Summit 50, Ipswich 48  
West Central 53, Watertown 30  
White River 78, Miller 27  
Wolsey-Wessington 56, Faulkton 41

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

## Tech startups find niche in South Dakota Black Hills area

By SIANDHARA BONNET Rapid City Journal

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Nick Hutchinson and Ed Valdez brainstorm ideas for Hutchinson Car Audio in a 400-square-foot space above their workshop with plain walls save for two whiteboards filled with questions to answer and ideas to pursue.

The 2,500-square-foot facility hosts four machines to produce components and build prototypes for their competitive subwoofers.

"We started out of our garage in our place in Box Elder," said Hutchinson, co-founder and owner of Hutchinson Audio. "We had one machine then and we kind of manually manufactured all the subwoofers."

Hutchinson said he and co-founder Tom Vobreilt, who is no longer with the company, and Valdez used to manually manufacture their subwoofers. After three years of work, they will start manufacturing their subwoofers in China, beginning with their newest subwoofer The Origin.

Hutchinson Car Audio isn't the only tech startup in the Rapid City area to see success, and Elevate CEO Tom Johnson announced in November that there could be more companies on the way, the Rapid City Journal reported.

He said Elevate hopes to announce the new arrivals in the coming months, and the companies add to the continuing growth the area has seen in the tech industry.

"What you're seeing is a conjunction of several factors," Johnson said. "The Black Hills has an amazing quality of life that attracts people. You think of mountain biking, hiking, rock climbing, fishing, world class outdoor recreation — that's going to draw people here."

He said that paired with other areas the city and region invests in — like arts and culture, the downtown area and green spaces — the Black Hills draws in companies and workers.

"You know you've arrived when you see a ton of coffee shops, a ton of beer pubs, a ton of people biking downtown and sometimes a lot of dogs," Johnson said.

He said the combination of what the region has along with the state's tax benefits for starting new businesses creates a robust community that attracts businesses and the 22- to 35-year-old demographic that's been missing.



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DakotaShine Consulting president Todd Gagne, who also mentors School of Mines students and startup companies, said he's an example of just that. Gagne moved to South Dakota in the early '90s for work and then attended the School of Mines part-time.

He said once he and his wife finished school, there weren't any jobs for them in the area.

"I think we both wanted to stay in the region, but we kind of had to go," he said. "I think this is a story of most School of Mines grads, there's no place to go and what we're trying to do is find an opportunity to create good jobs and career paths."

Gagne said they moved to Seattle after they graduated. In 2004, they moved back to the Black Hills to raise their family.

He said he thinks if the region is able to retain the late 20- to early 30-year-olds, it could bring a vibrancy to the area as well as bring in a professional environment to the community.

"Those are people with more disposable income," he said. "Basically we start to round out areas that maybe we don't have as strong an offering for those kinds of urban professionals that want to grow and build a family here."

Bill Trevillyan, CEO of HomeMetrics and product manager for Property Meld, said he came to the School of Mines because it was a cheap option for school, but stayed because he was able to get experience working while at Property Meld.

Trevillyan also said it allows him to learn about the needs of a company.

"If it wasn't for Property Meld, I'd be in California," he said. "It also would probably mean the company I currently have wouldn't have the team that it has."

HomeMetrics sells home health monitoring technology that allows property owners to keep an eye on their homes while they're away. Trevillyan said his team is filled with students currently enrolled at the School of Mines.

"When you hire people on your team, you're not hiring them based on their technical abilities or being able to create and invent technology," Trevillyan said. "You're hiring them on their ability to learn, you're hiring on their mindset, do they have a growth mindset or a fixed mindset?"

Joseph Wright, associate vice president for Research-Economic Development at the School of Mines, said he's seen an increase in the number of start-ups in the area, particularly from School of Mines students, over the last 20 to 30 years.

"It's starting to be a critical mass of start-up companies that really give students an opportunity to find a job," Wright said. "When it was one or two, it was more the luck of the draw. If a student wanted to stay and was hungry enough, they could find a spot in one of these tech companies."

He said the quality of life contributes to retention and bringing companies, especially those in the tech sector, to the area, but it also has to do with the people he calls boomerangs, or the people who leave and then come back to the area and support companies.

Netflix engineer Michael Paulson recently moved to Rapid City with his wife because of family in the area and the quality of life. He also said the standard of living is also much less expensive than in Silicon Valley, the Bay Area and San Jose, California.

Paulson said it's a goal of his in the next six months to set up a sort of mentorship program with students at the School of Mines.

Wright said there are a number of investors and mentors in the area willing to help see these businesses grow. The School of Mines also offers the CEO Business Plan Competition, which helps students turn their ideas into a business and could result in \$3,000 for the overall winner.

"The kids attracted to the School of Mines have some kind of incredible innovative bent to them," he said.

Wright also said School of Mines students have won the Governors Giant Vision competition six years running. Students submit a written business plan outlining their idea for the contest and have the chance to win \$5,000.

Hutchinson said his company competed in some of the business competitions at the School of Mines and was later able to find funding through the Black Hills Angel Fund and other sources that helped them

purchase machines and start payroll.

Wright said students staying in the region is becoming a viable option because of the number of startups and the number of tech companies coming to Rapid City.

Johnson said the kind of tech companies he wants to see come to the region are those that can employ graduates not only from School of Mines but those at Black Hills State University, Western Dakota Tech and others.

"Hopefully we continue to see those graduates want to come back but also people that want to put them to work once they're out of school," he said.

## Sanford Health looking to move on after turbulent month

By JONATHAN ELLIS Sioux Falls Argus Leader

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — As he addressed his employees and guests one day this month, Sanford Health's new president and CEO Bill Gassen said he hoped the vaccines that were about to be administered to his first employees would help the world turn a corner on the coronavirus pandemic.

It was also a chance for Sanford to turn the corner on a tumultuous month.

Sanford's vaccination ceremony was typical pomp and circumstance for an organization that has loomed large in Sioux Falls and South Dakota. An organization that has thrown lavish parties, hosted famous musicians and planted new buildings around the city over the last decade. A heavyweight in the city's business community, Sanford has also been a generous source of philanthropy to the region's nonprofits and universities.

But even the Sanford's of the world can have a bad run. And Tuesday was the organization's opportunity to move on from a hectic and disorienting month, one that included the departure of its longtime leader following a public relations debacle, a monetary fine related to a surgeon accused of performing unnecessary surgeries, the shuttering of a much-ballyhooed merger deal with another hospital system and the departure of its chief medical officer "to pursue new opportunities."

Amid this was the backdrop of a global pandemic.

When he sat down with his counterpart from Intermountain Health on Oct. 26 to announce Sanford's merger with Intermountain, former Sanford CEO and president Kelby Krabbenhoft had the full backing of his board to create a \$15 billion a year health system. The merger hadn't been Krabbenhoft freelancing on his own. His board and executive team had been involved in the merger details.

It was big news for the local communities with Sanford and Intermountain facilities, and it was news in an industry that has seen rapid consolidation. The merger would create a sprawling system from Nevada to the Upper Great Plains, with pockets for future expansion in the Rocky Mountains, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported.

As he went through the details of the merger, Krabbenhoft nonchalantly mentioned that the new entity would be headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. It didn't matter, he said, where the new system would be chartered and headquartered.

But there were many in the city's business community who didn't share Krabbenhoft's casual indifference to that detail. Losing the headquarters would likely mean a loss of jobs in Sioux Falls, which was bad. But even worse, it would mean a loss of prestige for the city, with Sioux Falls becoming a mere outpost in a large medical empire.

The significance of that was not lost on the political establishment in South Dakota, including the governor's office. For a state that has touted its business-friendly environment for decades, South Dakota has struggled to attract large companies to locate here, even among industries that would fit in with the state's culture, such as agriculture and firearms. Losing the headquarters of a regional health system was not optimum, even if Krabbenhoft said it wasn't a big deal.

Three weeks after the merger announcement, Krabbenhoft and Gassen were guest speakers at the Downtown Rotary Club, where they explained the upcoming merger to a group whose membership includes the city's business elite.

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During the conversation, Krabbenhoft talked about Sanford's role in the business community, with its commitment over the years to funding economic development efforts, universities and nonprofits.

"I never want to be seen as someone who just did a little bit," he said. "I wanted our organization, if we were going to be a community leader, to act like one."

Suddenly, Krabbenhoft veered onto a subject that irritated him. A week earlier, the board at the Minnehaha Country Club had decided not to approve a two-year extension to the Sanford Invitational golf tournament. The board made the decision after the club's voting members deadlocked on the extension.

Krabbenhoft said the decision was ironic given Sanford's role as community benefactor.

"To vote not to extend it there because some tee times were interrupted for seven days, it was very difficult to swallow," he said, adding that Fargo, North Dakota would be happy to host the tournament.

The Minnehaha Country Club vote had been about more than just a few days of tee times. Those members who opposed the extension argued the economic losses to hosting the event outweighed the money the club received. The event itself, as well as the weeks of set-up and tear down, disrupted the club and closed a window of golf in a state where good weather is a scarcity. Some members were also not impressed with the extensive branding of Sanford around the club.

The vote was a rare rebuke to Sanford, and Krabbenhoft.

Two days later, he wrote the email.

It wasn't just that he questioned the use of masks, which he pointed out have become a symbol, it was the tone of the email. There were 593 people with COVID-19 in state hospitals that day, just 14 shy of the peak. In the past week before, 10,000 people had tested positive and more than 100 had died.

The following day, he told the Argus Leader in an interview that the worst of the pandemic would soon be over – which has so far proven true. He also rejected the need for mask mandates.

"At this point, we feel we've got this under control," he said. "There's not a crisis."

But that's not what his beleaguered frontline health workers were thinking as they tended to hundreds of sick patients. In an extraordinary move, Sanford's executive team, the one that had been handpicked by Krabbenhoft over the years, broke with him in a public email to Sanford's employees.

At that point it was probably a foregone conclusion Krabbenhoft was a goner. The only thing that could have saved him would have been a public apology and a plea for mercy. But anyone who knows Kelby Krabbenhoft knows he's not one to put his tail between his legs.

The end came on Nov. 26. Krabbenhoft and Sanford issued independent statements, with Krabbenhoft framing it as a retirement. The board named Gassen as his replacement. Significantly, Gassen was not named as an interim leader.

With Krabbenhoft's departure, with a raging pandemic, with employee dissatisfaction, with all the noise, it wasn't the right time to go through with the Intermountain merger, and Sanford bailed on Dec. 4.

Less than a week later, Sanford parted ways with its chief medical officer, Dr. Allison Suttle. A statement from the health system said Suttle was leaving to "pursue new opportunities." It was the capstone to a turbulent 44 days for one of the region's largest employers.

Gassen has focused his early weeks at reconciling the hospital system's leadership with its employees. On Thanksgiving he visited hospital workers who were busy tending to sick patients.

And he thanked them again at the vaccination ceremony. He also let them know that the first rounds of vaccines were for the workers in the trenches and Sanford's patients. Not for him or his executive team.

"We're going to do so at the right time," he said. "We're going to take our proper place in the line."

## Woman ordered to pay back nearly \$600,000 in wire fraud case

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A former payroll clerk for a South Dakota trucking company accused of writing checks to herself for more than a decade was sentenced Monday to federal prison and ordered to pay back more than half a million dollars.

Sheila Verbrugge, 50, of Brandon, pleaded guilty in September to wire fraud. Authorities say she began diverting money from a Blachowske Truck Line, Inc. account in January 2010. It continued until April of

this year.

U.S. District Judge Karen E. Schreier sentenced Verbrugge to three years in prison, followed by three years of supervised release. Verbrugge was ordered to pay back \$577,577.

Verbrugge managed the company's T-Chek account, which is used to pay for job-related expenses for the truck drivers, such as fuel and truck maintenance. Investigators say she issued T-Cheks payable to herself, deposited them into her personal account and then used the money for her own purposes.

Verbrugge disguised her theft by deleting her name and location and replacing it with names of Blachowske truck drivers and locations she knew to be associated with those drivers, according to court documents.

"This investigation demonstrates the FBI's commitment to assisting law enforcement partners with investigations of costly financial crimes," said Michael Paul, special agent in charge of the FBI's Minneapolis field office, which covers South Dakota.

## Noem takes to social media to show off flamethrower

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem took to Instagram to share an image of herself blasting a flamethrower, jokingly wondering whether it was "too late to add something to my Christmas list."

Noem posted the photo late Monday that showed her smiling widely while holding the device. Her office declined to say where or why Noem was operating it, though spokesman Ian Fury said it was not the governor's.

The Republican governor has crisscrossed the country in recent days, making visits to the White House and to Turning Points USA, a Florida conference for young conservatives. The latter was a gathering of supporters of President Donald Trump.

Noem's work to raise her profile with conservatives has led to speculation she is angling to assume the role of standard-bearer in Trump's GOP.

When asked by a conference attendee in Florida whether she would run for president in 2024, Noem declined to answer the question. She previously said in July that she was not interested in leaving South Dakota for a higher office.

## Moderna vaccine arrives in South Dakota as virus cases drop

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota reported a drop in virus cases on Tuesday as hospital systems in the state readied to administer a COVID-19 vaccine manufactured by Moderna.

Monument Health, the largest hospital system in the western part of South Dakota, began administering the vaccine to hospital workers and staff at long-term care facilities in several locations. Meanwhile, the largest hospital systems in the eastern part of the state planned to distribute the Moderna vaccine in the coming days.

The state's distribution plan calls for medical workers in hospitals and long-term care facilities to receive the vaccine first, followed by residents of long-term care facilities. The Department of Health reported that 7,844 people have received the first dose of the vaccine manufactured by Pfizer and expects to receive enough doses of the Moderna vaccine for 14,600 people.

Health officials reported 436 people had tested positive for the virus as the count of people with active infections dropped to the lowest level since October. However, the positivity rate of testing was over 10%, which is an indicator there may be significantly more infections than tests are showing.

Health officials reported no new deaths from COVID-19, but the state's death toll stands at 1,381.

## Group wants council president removed over posts on masks

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Dozens of Rapid City residents and business owners filed complaints against the city council president Monday for her social media posts and supporting a website they say targets those who are opposed to a mask mandate.

Tonchi Weaver brought almost 100 complaints to the city attorney's office accusing Laura Armstrong of

"abuse of office, illegal activity and cyber bullying" related to her posts on social media sites. Weaver is asking the city council to remove Armstrong from office, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Many of the complaints refer to Armstrong's support of a Facebook page called "Caring Businesses of Rapid City," which Armstrong said promotes local businesses that have followed CDC guidelines during the pandemic. Others say Armstrong has posted on sites that include lists of Rapid City businesses to avoid due to mask requirements.

Armstrong said many of the complaints are "grossly misstating the facts" about the website that is meant to protect the most vulnerable members of the community.

"It's unfortunate this public service was misconstrued and is being manipulated into a misinformation campaign," she said.

South Dakota had for months been among the worst states in the country for virus outbreaks per capita and currently has the seventh-highest death rate, according to Johns Hopkins University researchers.

## **1 dead, 1 rescued after construction accident in Rapid City**

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — One man is dead and another was rescued after a trench collapsed at a construction site in front of a Rapid City home.

Fire officials said the accident happened Monday afternoon while the men were working. Police and medics arrived to find the men trapped under a dirt pile — one man submerged up to his chest and another completely submerged up to his head. His body was recovered after about five hours of digging, said Rapid City Fire Department spokeswoman Tessa Jaeger.

The rescued man was uninjured.

Jaeger said the men were digging the trench in the front yard of a home when the collapse happened, but officials didn't know exactly what they were working on, how the trench collapsed or how the men became trapped.

The Rapid City Journal reported the incident will likely be investigated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

## **Pfizer to supply US with additional 100M vaccines doses**

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Pfizer said Wednesday it will supply the U.S. government with an additional 100 million doses of its COVID-19 vaccine under a new agreement between the pharmaceutical giant and the Trump administration.

Pfizer and its partner BioNTech said that will bring their total current commitment to 200 million doses for the U.S. That should be enough to vaccinate 100 million people with the two-shot regimen. The government also has an option to purchase an additional 400 million doses.

"This new federal purchase can give Americans even more confidence that we will have enough supply to vaccinate every American who wants it by June 2021," said Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar in a statement. The cost to taxpayers: \$1.95 billion for the additional 100 million doses.

A senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss details of the agreement, said it involves the government using its authority under a Cold War-era law to help safely expand output of the vaccine and accelerate production.

Pfizer's vaccine was the first to be approved for emergency use by the Food and Drug Administration. It has now been joined by another two-shot vaccine from Moderna, developed in close collaboration with the National Institutes of Health. The government began shipping the Pfizer vaccine to states last week, and the one from Moderna this week.

The priority groups for first vaccination include health care workers and nursing home residents. Gradually more Americans will have access to the free vaccines, which have been shown to be highly effective in clinical studies undertaken so far.

Separately, HHS announced it has joined forces with another big pharma company — Merck — to support

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the large-scale manufacture of a promising treatment for patients suffering from severe COVID-19 illness.

The treatment, still under investigation and not yet approved by the FDA, is known as MK-7110. It has the potential to minimize the damaging effects of an overactive immune response to COVID-19. This immune overdrive unleashes a cascade of effects on the human body, complicating the life-saving efforts of doctors and nurses.

The government is paying Merck about \$356 million to fast-track production of its treatment under the auspices of Operation Warp Speed, a joint effort between HHS, the Pentagon, and drug companies to develop vaccines and treatments. It's the same collaboration that led to Moderna's vaccine. The money will allow Merck to deliver up to 100,000 doses by June 30, if the FDA clears the treatment for emergency use. Hospitals are under strain in California and other states, as the current wave of COVID-19 threatens to overwhelm their capacity to treat more patients.

Under the Pfizer deal announced Wednesday, the company will deliver at least 70 million of the additional vaccine doses purchased by June 30, with the remaining 30 million to be delivered no later than July 31.

"With these 100 million additional doses, the United States will be able to protect more individuals and hopefully end this devastating pandemic more quickly," Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement. "We look forward to continuing our work with the U.S. government and healthcare providers around the country."

Pfizer initially had a contract through Operation Warp Speed to supply the government with 100 million doses of its vaccine. The drugmaker will receive nearly \$2 billion for that deal as well.

The Associated Press previously reported that the government was close to reaching the just-announced deal with Pfizer in exchange for helping the company gain better access to manufacturing supplies.

A law dating back to the Korean War gives the government authority to direct private companies to produce critical goods in times of national emergency. Called the Defense Production Act, it's expected to help Pfizer secure some raw materials needed for its vaccine.

The vaccine from Pfizer and German pharmaceutical BioNTech immediately raised hopes of taming a pandemic that has killed nearly 320,000 people in the U.S. and hobbled much of the national economy. Local TV stations across the country began broadcasting scenes of doctors and nurses garbed in hospital scrubs receiving the first vaccinations. Some polls show skepticism about getting vaccinated may be easing.

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

Operation Warp Speed is on track to have about 40 million doses of vaccine by the end of this month, of which about 20 million would be allocated for first vaccinations. Distribution of those doses would span into the first week of January. Both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require two shots to be fully effective.

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Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire contributed to this report.

## Travel guide with 2021 twist: Writers laud American places

By BETH J. HARPAZ Associated Press

Sixteen notable writers have created a combined list of places that they believe helped shape and define America, from coastal Oregon and Solvang, California, to Ellis Island and New Hampshire's Black Heritage Trail.

The resulting collection of mini-essays, including contributions from memoirist Cheryl Strayed, novelist Jodi Picoult, humorist David Sedaris and activist Gloria Steinem, was organized by Frommer's, the travel guidebook company. The collection can be read for free online.

The compilation is designed to be food for thought rather than an invitation to hit the road.

With COVID-19 cases surging in many parts of the country, "we don't want people to use these essays as the basis for travel until doing so is safe once again," Pauline Frommer, who heads the guidebook company, told the AP. "We hope this list will be a spur to future travel, but we also just wanted it to be

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great reading right now.”

If 2020 had been a normal year, Frommer and other travel experts would be offering year-end lists of great vacation spots for 2021 right now. But “with the virus surging, we felt it was irresponsible for us to put together a story that pushes travel,” she said.

So instead, the company decided “to bring to light our shared history and culture” by inviting celebrated storytellers to write about “places they thought Americans should know about to better understand who we are as a people and/or what we need right now to heal our divisions.”

Steinem wrote about Serpent Mound Historical Site in Ohio. Picoult picked the Black Heritage Trail in New Hampshire. Sedaris recommended the Little America Hotel in Salt Lake City. Strayed wrote about the Oregon coast.

The other contributors and their destinations are Daniel Okrent, Ellis Island, New York City; Lydia Millet, Avra Valley, Arizona; Sarah Mustafah, Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan; Susan Choi, Manzanar National Historic Site, California; Timothy Egan, Acoma Sky City, New Mexico; Kim Johnson, National Memorial for Peace and Justice, Montgomery, Alabama; Rick Atkinson, Washington, D.C.; Margaret Verble, Fort Gibson, Oklahoma; Fannie Flagg, Solvang, California; Dar Williams, Detroit; TaraShea Nesbit, Hanford Reach National Monument, Washington (state); and Cathleen Schine, the Kinney-Tabor House, Venice, California.

A 17th entry comes from Frommer herself, writing in collaboration with her father, Arthur, who founded the guidebook company that bears their name. They picked Independence Hall in Philadelphia, saluting the park rangers who tell visitors about the site.

These “gifted storytellers ... don’t pull their punches when discussing the mistakes the founders made, (the acceptance of slavery foremost among them) or the tumultuous nature of the debates that rang off these walls,” the Frommers wrote. “The human, messy, sometimes maddening nature of democracy comes alive, as does the power of compromise.”

## **A season of fear, not cheer, as virus changes Christmas**

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

Montserrat Parello lost her husband eight years ago, and Christmas gatherings with children and grandchildren had helped her deal with her loneliness. But this year, the 83-year-old will be alone for the holiday at her home in Barcelona, due to the risk of infection from the coronavirus.

“In these days of pandemic, I feel loneliness and anger,” Parello said, expressing fears that “I will leave this life devoid of affection, of warmth.”

All most people wanted for Christmas after this year of pandemic uncertainty and chaos was some cheer and togetherness. Instead many are heading into a season of isolation, grieving lost loved ones, worried about their jobs or confronting the fear of a new potentially more contagious virus variant.

Residents of London and surrounding areas can’t see people outside their households. Peruvians won’t be allowed to drive their cars over Christmas and New Year to discourage visits even with nearby family and friends. South Africans won’t be able to go to the beach on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or New Year’s Day.

The patchwork of restrictions being imposed by local and national governments across the world varies widely — but few holiday seasons will look normal this year.

People the world over are facing wrenching decisions — to see isolated elderly relatives despite the risk or to miss one of the potentially few Christmases left in the hopes of spending the holiday together next year.

There are no nationwide travel restrictions in the United States, but health officials have urged people to stay home and limit gatherings. Some states require travelers to get tested or quarantine.

Michelle Dallaire, 50, an attorney in Idlewild, Michigan, said this would be her first Christmas away from her father, who lives in northern Virginia. They decided it wasn’t worth the risk this year.

“It’s sad, but better than never seeing him again,” said Dallaire, who has health issues that also make her particularly vulnerable to the virus.

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In Brazil, which has the world's second-highest virus death toll after the United States, Francisco Paulo made a similar decision to skip a visit to his elderly mother in Sao Jose do Belmonte, in Pernambuco state. The 53-year-old doorman will work the holiday instead at a building in Sao Paulo.

"Now I'm hoping to drive there (to Pernambuco) in May, and crossing my fingers that she'll be vaccinated by then," Paulo said. "It isn't a happy Christmas, but at least I'm healthy and so are all the people I love."

The virus has been blamed for more than 1.7 million deaths worldwide, and many are still grieving — or worried about loved ones in hospitals or nursing homes as the virus surges anew. But some who have survived sickness — and everything else that 2020 has thrown at them — are looking to rejoice.

Dr. Elisaveta Tomova, an anesthesiologist in North Macedonia, is exhausted after months of helping women with the virus give birth and caring for her 26-year-old son, who became infected himself.

"I have faced a nine-headed monster, and my son and I have beat it," the 54-year-old said. "All I need now is my family to be around me, to celebrate in silence and to fill my heart with joy."

Many people head into the holidays facing financial uncertainty after lockdowns to slow the spread of the virus have decimated economies.

Matteo Zega, a 25-year-old Italian chef who has worked in Michelin-starred restaurants, lost a job offer in France when bars and restaurants there were ordered to remain closed until mid-January. He's hoping to start an internship in Copenhagen — as long as restrictions don't scupper that plan, too.

"It makes me stressed," Zega said. "But at the end of the day, I wouldn't complain when there are so many people suffering or dying. You can lose many things: jobs, money. But I'm here, I'm healthy."

In recent weeks, many countries tightened restrictions in the hopes of bringing the spread of the virus under control so that the rules could be relaxed for Christmas. But that has not worked in many places.

In Italy, which has Europe's highest confirmed death toll and where many have fallen into poverty following lockdowns, the government has imposed even more restrictions.

The four nations of the U.K. — England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland — have all ditched their original Christmas relaxation plans. Hopes that a vaccine could stop the spread were high just weeks ago when Britain was the first country to roll out a rigorously tested shot, but now an aura of dread hangs over the holiday as daily new infections soar.

Adding to the gloom, a new variant of the virus is surging around London and its surrounding areas. Dozens of countries banned travel from Britain in response, though France began allowing trucks from the country to enter again after a standoff that raised fears of Christmastime food shortages in the U.K.

For Matt Balch, a 40-year-old Australian who lives outside London, the ability to ditch the Christmas plan came as almost a relief. Balch was set to go to his in-laws' home in Wales with wife, Kelly, and their two young children.

"The prospect of being in a car for six hours each way with a 3-month-old and a 2-year-old filled me with dread," he said.

But James Wren, who works in Hong Kong's finance industry, was downbeat about his change of plans. He was initially going to fly home to Ireland — but the rapidly changing travel and quarantine policies, coupled with the uncertainty in the coronavirus situation both in Hong Kong and abroad, led him to cancel.

"This is my first time ever not being with my family for Christmas, even though I have lived outside of Ireland for many years, so it was an extremely upsetting decision to make," he said.

While many countries tightened restrictions, Lebanon, with the largest percentage of Christians in the Mideast, was actually easing them despite rapidly growing cases. It made that decision to boost an ailing economy and alleviate despair exacerbated by a devastating port explosion in Beirut in August.

But even that provided no relief to some.

"It will be a disaster after the holidays," said Diala Fares, 52. "People are acting like everything is normal, and our government doesn't care."

Amid all the gloom, at least some children can rest assured that Santa Claus is still coming to town.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease specialist, said during a CNN special program with Sesame Street characters that he had been to the North Pole and vaccinated the man himself.



"He is good to go," Fauci said.

Associated Press journalists from around the world contributed.

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

## 5 to midnight on Brexit talks? And EU-UK deal looks close

By RAF CASERT Associated Press

European Union and British negotiators closed in on a trade deal Wednesday with only a disagreement over fishing remaining, raising hopes a chaotic economic break between the two sides on New Year's Day could be averted even as soon as before midnight, officials said.

After resolving a few remaining fair competition issues, negotiators were dealing with EU fisheries rights in U.K. waters as they worked to secure a deal for a post-Brexit relationship after nine months of talks.

Two EU sources said the negotiations were in a final phase now, with one saying: "I expect to see some white smoke tonight." The official asked not to be identified because the talks were still ongoing.

Customs checks and some other barriers will be imposed under whatever circumstances on Jan. 1, but a trade deal would avert the imposition of tariffs and duties that could cost both sides hundreds of thousands of jobs. Britain withdrew from the EU on Jan. 31, and an economic transition period expires on Dec. 31.

Rumors of a pre-Christmas trade deal surfaced in recent days based on progress on the outstanding issues beyond fishing. However, some EU nations insisted that upon close scrutiny, Britain's latest proposals on quotas for EU vessels in U.K. waters were far less conciliatory than first met the eye.

On Wednesday, the brokering on quotas and transition times for EU vessels to continue fishing in U.K. waters were in full swing, with progress reported from several sides.

In London, U.K. Cabinet minister Robert Jenrick said, "We will need to get those final issues resolved, and there's some way further to go on that." He said he nonetheless felt optimistic.

The EU has long feared that Britain would undercut the bloc's social, environmental and state aid rules to be able to gain an unfair edge with its exports to the EU. Britain has said that having to meet EU rules would undercut its sovereignty. On those issues, a compromise had been reached, a diplomat from an EU country said.

If both sides fail to meet the Jan. 1 deadline, it's unclear under what conditions trade would take place before a deal would eventually be approved.

Over the past few days, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have been drawn more and more into the talks and have been in contact by phone seeking to unblock negotiations.

Businesses on both sides are clamoring for a deal that would save tens of billions in costs. A failure to reach a post-Brexit deal would lead to more chaos on Britain's borders with the EU at the start of 2021, when new tariffs by both sides would add to other impediments to trade.

The border is already reeling from new restrictions placed on travelers from Britain into France and other EU countries due to a new coronavirus variant sweeping through London and southern England. One U.K. minister said Wednesday that some 4,000 trucks were stuck in traffic jams near Dover, waiting for their drivers to get virus tests so they can enter the Eurotunnel to France.

While both sides would suffer economically from a failure to secure a trade deal, most economists think Britain would take a greater hit, at least in the near-term, as it's relatively more reliant on trade with the EU than the other way around.

Follow all AP stories on the Brexit trade talks at <https://apnews.com/Brexit>

## US layoffs remain elevated as 803,000 seek jobless aid

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell by 89,000 last week to a still-elevated 803,000, evidence that the job market remains under stress nine months after the coronavirus outbreak sent the U.S. economy into recession and caused millions of layoffs.

The latest figure, released Wednesday by the Labor Department, shows that many employers are still cutting jobs as the pandemic tightens business restrictions and leads many consumers to stay home. Before the virus struck, jobless claims typically numbered around 225,000 a week before shooting up to 6.9 million in early spring when the virus — and efforts to contain it — flattened the economy. The pace of layoffs has since declined but remains historically high in the face of the resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

“The fact that more than nine months into the crisis, initial claims are still running at such a high level is, in absolute terms, bad news,” Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the economic consulting firm Maria Fiorini Ramirez Inc., wrote in a research note. “With the pandemic again worsening, it is likely that claims will remain quite elevated for some time to come.”

The total number of people who are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits fell to 5.3 million for the week that ended Dec. 12 from a week earlier. That figure had peaked in early May at nearly 23 million. The steady decline since then means that some unemployed Americans are finding work and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

Millions more jobless Americans are now collecting checks under two federal programs that were created in March to ease the economic pain inflicted by the pandemic. Those programs had been set to expire the day after Christmas. On Monday, Congress agreed to extend them as part of a \$900 billion pandemic rescue package.

On Tuesday night, though, President Donald Trump suddenly raised doubts about that aid and other federal money by attacking Congress’ rescue package as inadequate and suggesting that he might not sign it into law.

The supplemental federal jobless benefit in Congress’ new measure has been set at \$300 a week — only half the amount provided in March — and will expire in 11 weeks. A separate benefits program for jobless people who have exhausted their regular state aid and another benefits program for self-employed and gig workers will also be extended only until early spring, well before the economy will likely have fully recovered.

A tentative economic recovery from the springtime collapse has been faltering in the face of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases: An average of more than 200,000 confirmed cases a day, up from fewer than 35,000 in early September. Hiring in November slowed for a fifth straight month, with employers adding the fewest jobs since April. Nearly 10 million of the 22 million people who lost jobs when the pandemic hit in the spring are still unemployed.

According to the data firm Womply, closings are rising in some hard-hit businesses. For example, 42% of bars were closed as of Dec. 16, up from 33% at the start of November. Over the same period, closures rose from 25% to 29% at restaurants and from 27% to 35% at salons and other health and beauty shops.

The number of jobless people who are collecting aid from one of the two federal extended-benefit programs — the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which offers coverage to gig workers and others who don’t qualify for traditional benefits — rose by nearly 27,000 to 9.3 million in the week that ended Dec. 5.

The number of people receiving aid under the second program — the Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation program, which provides federal jobless benefits to people who have exhausted their state aid — fell by nearly 8,200 to 4.8 million.

All told, 20.4 million people are now receiving some type of unemployment benefits. (Figures for the two pandemic-related programs aren’t adjusted for seasonal variations.)

States and cities have been increasingly issuing mask mandates, limiting the size of gatherings, restrict-

ing or banning restaurant dining, closing gyms or reducing the hours and capacity of bars, stores and other businesses, all of which has slowed economic activity. With vaccines now beginning to be gradually distributed, though, optimism is rising about 2021.

Months from now, economists say, the widespread distribution and use of the 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 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.

"Recession risks are very high," said Mark Zandi, chief economist at Moody's Analytics. "I do think the economy's going to start losing some jobs here. Unemployment will probably go higher. The only thing that will save us from recession is that \$900 billion fiscal rescue package."

AP journalist Julie Walker in New York contributed to this report.

## Virus-linked isolation of UK eases but backlog persists

By JO KEARNEY and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

DOVER, England (AP) — Gridlock at an English port kept thousands of truckers and travelers stranded Wednesday despite a deal with France to lift a two-day blockade imposed because of a new variant of the coronavirus that had isolated Britain and raised fears of food shortages.

Some goods and passengers began arriving on French shores in the morning, thanks to an agreement that allows people with a negative virus test to cross the Channel from Britain. But officials warned the backlog would take days to clear, and some truckers scuffled with police as huge lines of vehicles persisted at the port of Dover.

"Looking around, it doesn't really seem that there's a lot of progress being made here," said Ben Richzenheim, a financial services worker who drove overnight from Scotland in hopes of getting home to Germany by car. "People are still not moving out of the way, and the authorities are not doing something either. So it's a real deadlock."

Some suggested the chaos was a precursor to what Britain may face if it doesn't come to a trade agreement with the European Union before it leaves the bloc's economic embrace on Dec. 31.

Soldiers and contact-tracers were being deployed to administer virus tests, but drivers — some who have been stuck near English ports for three days with limited access to food and toilet facilities — say that has been delayed by traffic in the area. Germany's ambassador to Britain, Andreas Michaelis, said on Twitter that he tried to get to a disused airport where trucks had been parked to talk to drivers — but couldn't get through and was forced to speak to them by phone instead.

British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said testing had begun but acknowledged there were "severe delays."

Nations around the world began barring people from Britain over the weekend after Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that scientists said a new version of the virus whipping around London and England's southeast may be more contagious. The announcement added to anxieties at a time when Europe has been walloped by soaring new virus infections and deaths.

Some European countries relaxed restrictions on Britain on Wednesday, though many remain in place. Still, it was France's ban on freight that caused the most alarm, since the U.K. relies heavily on its cross-Channel commercial links to the continent for food at this time of year, especially fresh fruit and vegetables.

Associated Press reporters saw a ferry from Britain pulling into the French port of Calais before dawn Wednesday, and rail operator Eurotunnel said some trains carrying freight and car passengers were allowed to cross to the continent beneath the English Channel again.

But Jean-March Puissesseau, director of the Calais-Boulogne port, said he didn't expect freight trucks to begin arriving there until later Wednesday, though two cargo vans and some passenger cars had come

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by ferry. The port normally brings in up to 4,000 trucks a day.

Fears of food shortages added to an already glum runup to Christmas in Britain, where authorities have scaled back or canceled plans to relax restrictions for the holiday as daily virus infections soar and many hospitals are nearing capacity. Many Britons were already bracing for disruption, if the U.K. and the EU can't agree on a new trade deal by the time the country leaves the bloc's tariff-free single market and customs union in just over a week.

French authorities have insisted that the blockade was based on scientific concerns and not politics, but some noted it may have offered a glimpse of what Britain can expect next year.

"We thought we were OK, preparing for Dec. 31 (and Brexit), and then kaboom, we are in chaos already," Puissesseau, the French port director, told The Associated Press. The slowdowns could be worse when Brexit kicks in and French authorities will have to check customs documents as well as virus tests, he warned.

Clement Beaune, France's European affairs minister, told BFM television during a discussion about the Brexit talks that when it comes to trade, "the British side has much more dependence on Europe than the reverse."

People arriving from Britain are required to have a virus test capable of detecting the new variant, according to a late-night agreement reached after 48 hours of frenzied negotiations among French, British and EU authorities.

British Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick said around 4,000 trucks may be waiting in the county of Kent to cross the Channel and urged other truckers not to head there until the backlog is cleared. It will take "a few days" to test all the drivers before they can travel to France, he said.

"Whatever the number is, whether it is 4,000 or more, it is a significant number to work through," Jenrick said.

The Netherlands, Belgium and Bulgaria relaxed travel restrictions on Britain on Wednesday, but dozens of other countries are continuing to bar travelers. Japan announced that it will reinstate an entry ban on most new arrivals from the country.

Eurostar passenger train services also resumed from Britain to the continent, but only for citizens of Europe's border-free zone, British citizens with EU residency and those with a special reason to come temporarily, such as truckers.

Liza Peirrusio, an Italian living in London, traveled to Paris on Wednesday to spend the holidays with her boyfriend.

"I've never been so happy to be a European citizen," she said as she got off the first Eurostar to arrive since the weekend.

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Hui reported from London. Associated Press journalists Jeff Schaeffer in Calais, France, Nicolas Garriga and Angela Charlton in Paris, Jason Parkinson in Dover, England, and Lorne Cook in Brussels contributed.

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

## Season's greetings: Cards solicited for COVID-19 patients

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

SOMERS POINT, N.J. (AP) — Joseph Johnson was going about his life, getting ready for the holidays at the Jersey Shore, when he started to feel ill and wound up in a hospital. It turned out he had diabetes, and it was threatening his life.

The shock of a sudden illness and hospitalization was compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. To slow its spread, most hospitals are forbidding visitors, meaning patients like Johnson find themselves alone during what is supposed to be a joyous season.

"Because of the plague, my wife can't come visit; all she can do is call and text," he said. "It's pretty

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depressing.”

Then one day a small bit of cheer came his way. Tucked next to the covered dish on his meal tray at Shore Medical Center in Somers Point were two Christmas cards, handmade by local children, wishing him a speedy recovery and a happy holiday season.

It was part of a wave of greeting cards being collected independently by hospitals this December for patients cut off from the support of visitors. It does not appear to have any central coordination; many hospitals just decided on their own that it would be a kind thing to do.

Realizing this year’s unique dynamic, hospitals asked adults, organizations and schoolchildren to either make or buy holiday cards and send them to the institutions for distribution to patients. The goal is for everyone in the hospital to get a card and at least a tiny bit of holiday cheer.

“It was definitely a surprise,” Johnson said of his two cards, one of which had plastic jewels glued to it. “It was really cute, and quite enjoyable, and it made me feel a little better.”

He has since been released from the hospital.

It put out a request for cards in late November and had received nearly 1,000 by early December. They range from elaborate store-bought cards to hand-drawn construction-paper creations from grade-school children, several wishing the recipient “Happy Hoildays!” or a “Meery Christmas!”

A more somber note came tucked inside a box of Christmas cards that was short and to the point.

“If you could give these to people on the top floor where my husband died, I would appreciate it,” a woman named Lori wrote.

The holidays arrive as the nation undergoes a grim December, with the virus surging to record levels in many parts of the country. Hospital beds are filling up and some facilities are opening overflow centers in parking lot tents or buildings used for other purposes.

One of them is a 353-bed field hospital in Cranston, Rhode Island, that opened in a former bank call center. Its operator, Care New England, asked the community to send cards to patients, as well as health care workers caring for them; more than 5,000 have been received so far.

“I was expecting an outpouring of support from the community, but 5,000 really is a huge response, and we are so grateful,” said Raina Smith, a company spokesperson.

In Arizona, a 12-year-old boy and his 15-year-old brother started Project Smile, a drive to collect and send cards to hospitalized patients. They made 2,400 on their own and are encouraging others to send in more.

In Cincinnati, a doctor at The Christ Hospital, his three children, 10 neighborhood children and a kindergarten class wrote 120 Thanksgiving cards to COVID-19 patients there.

Young patients at Arkansas Children’s Hospital created Christmas cards to sell and raise money for the hospital. A nurse at Lexington, Virginia’s Carilion Stonewall Jackson Hospital started a holiday card drive for patients, and Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital Rahway in New Jersey has gotten 300 cards from schools and local Girl Scout troops.

And Southeast Health in Dohan, Alabama, is collecting cards to lift the spirits of health care workers dealing with the pandemic.

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Follow Wayne Parry at <http://twitter.com/WayneParryAC>

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“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>

## Trump’s presidential legacy, by the numbers

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Words matter. But numbers tell stories, too.

Presidential historians and others will plumb them as they assess President Donald Trump’s legacy, Trump’s presidency is reflected in a broad range of numbers representing everything from the U.S. death

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toll during the coronavirus pandemic to the miles of his "big, beautiful wall" along the border with Mexico to the tens of thousands of tweets he sent during four years in office.

Some of the numbers that are part of Trump's legacy:

—322,000 and counting: Number of U.S. deaths attributed to COVID-19.

—6: Coronavirus vaccines being developed and-or distributed under Trump's Operation Warp Speed program.

—2: Coronavirus vaccines — by Pfizer and BioNTech, and a separate one by Moderna — that U.S. regulators approved in 2020 for emergency use.

0: Comprehensive health care overhaul plans Trump introduced despite repeated promises to replace the Obama-era Affordable Care Act with a plan that would cover everyone at a lower cost.

3: Justices added to the Supreme Court, establishing a solid 6-3 conservative majority.

221: Federal trial-level and appeals court judges added to the judiciary.

\$3.1 trillion: 2020 budget deficit, the largest in dollar terms in U.S. history. Trump had pledged during the 2016 campaign to eliminate the gap between federal spending and revenue. Tax cuts Trump enacted in 2017 contributed to the imbalance, and it ballooned further after Congress passed \$2.4 trillion in economic relief earlier this year to help unemployed workers, business owners and others weather the financial fallout from the coronavirus pandemic.

3: In-person meetings with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un (in Singapore, Vietnam and the Korean demilitarized zone).

\$21 trillion: Federal debt in December, when it exceeded the size of the economy for the first time in history outside World War II.

82: Number of Trump administration environmental and public health rollbacks tracked on Harvard University's rollback tracker.

4: Men who served as acting secretary of defense, the most in any administration.

203: Days the Pentagon operated without a Senate-confirmed defense secretary, the longest stretch in the history of the office.

450: Miles of Trump's "big, beautiful" steel wall along the U.S.-Mexico border expected to completed by year's end.

39%: Trump's average approval rating among American adults in AP-NORC polls over the course of his presidency. Assessments of Trump's performance were remarkably stable, compared with his recent predecessors, ranging from a low of 32% to a high of 43% in AP-NORC polls.

1 billion: Barrels of oil and gas pumped from federally managed lands in 2019 as the administration sped permits and opened wilderness and other areas to the industry.

\$135 billion: Expected growth in the defense budget under Trump. President Barack Obama's final defense budget for 2017 totaled \$605 billion; Trump's final defense budget for 2021, approved by Congress in December, totaled \$740 billion. Trump said he planned to veto the bill for unrelated reasons, but Congress had enough votes to override a veto and enact the bill over his objections.

4: International agreements Trump pulled the U.S. out of: Iran nuclear deal, Paris climate agreement, Open Skies Treaty and Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

13: Federal executions scheduled since July, when the administration resumed putting inmates to death after a 17-year hiatus, making Trump the most prolific execution president in more than 130 years. Federal executions will be carried out until just before the Jan. 20 inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden.

315: Days Trump has visited a golf course as president, according to Factba.se, a data analytics company.

418: Days Trump has visited a property he owns, according to Factba.se.

1: New branch of U.S. military: the Space Force.

15%: Drop in trade deficit with China between January-September 2020 and a year earlier. This followed a 19% drop in 2019 to \$308 billion, the lowest since 2013.

25,000 and counting: Tweets, including original messages and retweets, sent by Trump since he took office on Jan. 20, 2017, according to Factba.se.

Associated Press writers Martin Crutsinger, Paul Wiseman, Andrew Taylor, Ellen Knickmeyer, Deb Riechmann, Ben Fox, Robert Burns, Hannah Fingerhut, Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar and Jessica Gresko contributed to this report.

## After months of calm, Thailand grapples with virus outbreak

By GRANT PECK and CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — After managing against the odds to keep the coronavirus largely in check for most of the year, Thailand has suddenly found itself challenged by an expanding outbreak among migrant workers on the doorstep of Bangkok, the capital.

The surge of cases in Samut Sakhon province threatens to undo months of efforts to contain the virus and hasten recovery of Thailand's ailing economy.

Seeking to slow the spread of the virus by isolating infected patients, the army and navy have been ordered by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha to help set up a 1,000-bed field hospital in the province, Defense Ministry spokesperson Lt. Gen. Kongcheep Tantrawanit said Wednesday. It would be located as close as possible to where the most patients already are in order to reduce the risks of transmission by transporting them elsewhere, he said.

Cases related to the outbreak have already been reported in more than a dozen other provinces, including Bangkok. Officials in the capital ordered existing safety measures, such as social distancing, mask wearing and checking for fevers, to be more strictly observed at markets, temples, parks and entertainment venues. The city's more than 700 state schools and nurseries have been ordered to close for 12 days starting Thursday.

Contact tracing has found suspected cases for testing as well as areas to be disinfected. At a mall in central Bangkok's popular Siam Square shopping area, three shops visited by a Thai woman who tested positive for the coronavirus were temporarily closed for deep cleaning, as was a food court at the nearby MBK mall.

The new wave of coronavirus cases abroad already means Thailand's economic rebound will be slowed as the global economy will take longer to recover, Prayuth said in a televised speech Tuesday evening.

"What we have seen now is that being too relaxed about COVID precaution measures can lead to greater economic suffering," he said.

Prayuth said the situation means Thailand must tread carefully as it relaxes rules for admitting visitors from other countries — an approach that could hinder efforts to revive the country's lucrative tourism industry, whose business dried up after Thailand closed to regular passenger flights from overseas in early April.

Shortly before the latest outbreak was found last week, a new expanded list of countries whose tourists would be allowed in under tight restrictions was issued, and the idea of shortening a mandatory 14-day quarantine on arrival was under discussion.

Thailand's 576 new cases of the coronavirus reported on Sunday — a 13% increase over the previous overall total of 4,907 — was the country's biggest daily spike. For months, nearly all of the cases detected were in people already in quarantine after arriving from abroad.

More cases since Sunday have pushed Thailand's total to 5,762. Virtually all were migrant workers in Samut Sakhon or otherwise linked to a big seafood market in the province. Health officials said 44% of the migrant workers and people with direct links to the market who have been tested so far were found to be infected, though most did not display symptoms.

The seafood market was sealed off over the weekend, and other local restrictions were imposed, including a night curfew, the banning of travel out of the province and the closing of many public places. Late Tuesday night, two neighboring provinces also imposed lockdown measures, including bans on New Year's celebrations. The seaside resort city of Pattaya also canceled plans for public celebrations.

The Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration on Wednesday declared 23 provinces — almost a third of the total — to be high risk based on vendors identifying where their major customers were from.

Even though cases related to the seafood market have spread around the country, Prayuth expressed

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confidence that Thailand "can continue to be among the least affected countries in the world by this terrible disease."

World Health Organization chief Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has praised Thailand's handling of its coronavirus crisis several times, citing in a September tweet, "A whole of society & whole of government response, extensive testing, contact tracing, community engagement, & nationwide mobilization of community #healthworkers."

Prayuth's declaration in March of a state of emergency allowed his government to also implement measures ranging from lockdowns and censorship to making mask wearing mandatory and banning sales of alcohol to fight the virus.

The chairman of the Federation of Thai Industries, Supan Mongkolsuthree, said that due to the new outbreak, Samut Sakhon's industrial sector was facing estimated losses of around 1 billion baht (\$33.1 million) per day.

Supan said the federation opposes lockdown measures in other areas, because the problem was localized and the government could contain it.

Thai Union Group and Charoen Pokphand Foods, both major seafood producers with operations in Samut Sakhon, said they expect little or no disruption to their supply chains.

The origin of the latest outbreak is not yet clear, but virtually all the new cases involve migrant workers from Thailand's neighbor Myanmar working in the seafood industry.

Low-wage migrant labor powers much of Thailand's economy, from factories to fishing and construction. According to Thailand's Labor Ministry, there are more than 233,000 documented migrant workers in Samut Sakhon in addition to an unknown number working illegally. There are an estimated 4 million to 5 million foreign workers in Thailand, according to the U.N.-affiliated International Organization for Migration.

Despite efforts at regularizing their status, many migrant workers are taken to Thailand by human traffickers and then forced to work in conditions of near slavery for small businesses, as a 2015 investigation by The Associated Press found when it looked into some of the hundreds of shrimp peeling sheds hidden in plain sight on residential streets or behind walls with no signs in Samut Sakhon.

The workers' Myanmar origins have already led to finger-pointing over the current outbreak, since a coronavirus outbreak that began in August in Myanmar's western state of Rakhine spread to the commercial capital, Yangon, and then farther east to the border with Thailand.

Thai authorities tried to limit cross-border traffic, but the frontier is notoriously porous. In early December, cases that originated in Myanmar were found in northern Thailand. They were Thais who had returned from stays in Myanmar and evaded border controls that would have forced them to quarantine. At least two flew south to Bangkok before they could be traced.

Yet a segment of popular opinion blames migrant workers who allegedly sneaked into Thailand for the new outbreak.

"This latest flare-up of infections in Samut Sakhon is primarily due to such illegal immigrants," Prime Minister Prayuth said Tuesday, without providing evidence. On Wednesday, he ordered the military to step up patrols to detect illegal border crossings and called for investigations into corrupt officials who might be aiding the criminal networks who engage in human trafficking.

Activists for migrant workers frame the situation differently, and point out that two other Southeast Asian countries, Singapore and Malaysia, have also had large outbreaks among migrant workers.

"Migrant workers across Asia continue to remain at high risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 due to their inability to practice social distancing both at their labor intensive workplaces and at their crowded and often insanitary living accommodation," said Andy Hall, a migrant worker rights specialist working across Asia.

## Trump pardons 15, commutes 5 sentences, including GOP allies

By COLLEEN LONG, KEVIN FREKING and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has pardoned 15 people, including a pair of congressional



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Republicans who were strong and early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad.

Trump's actions in his final weeks in office show a president who is wielding his executive power to reward loyalists and others who he believes have been wronged by a legal system he sees as biased against him and his allies. On Tuesday, Trump issued the pardons — not an unusual act for an outgoing president — even as he refused to publicly acknowledge his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden, who will be sworn in on Jan. 20.

Trump is likely to issue more pardons before then. He and his allies have discussed a range of other possibilities, including members of Trump's family and his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Those pardoned on Tuesday included former Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of California and Chris Collins of New York, two of the earliest GOP lawmakers to back Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump also commuted the sentences of five people, including former Rep. Steve Stockman of Texas.

Collins, the first member of Congress to endorse Trump to be president, was sentenced to two years and two months in federal prison after admitting he helped his son and others dodge \$800,000 in stock market losses when he learned that a drug trial by a small pharmaceutical company had failed.

Hunter was sentenced to 11 months in prison after pleading guilty to stealing campaign funds and spending the money on everything from outings with friends to his daughter's birthday party.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the pardons for Hunter and Collins were granted after "the request of many members of Congress." She noted that Hunter served the nation in the U.S. Marines and saw combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the group announced Tuesday night were four former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad that left more a dozen Iraqi civilians dead and caused an international uproar over the use of private security guards in a war zone.

Supporters of Nicholas Slatten, Paul Slough, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard, the former contractors at Blackwater Worldwide, had lobbied for pardons, arguing that the men had been excessively punished in an investigation and prosecution they said was tainted by problems and withheld exculpatory evidence. All four were serving lengthy prison sentences.

The pardons reflected Trump's apparent willingness to give the benefit of doubt to American service-members and contractors when it comes to acts of violence in war zones against civilians. Last November he pardoned a former U.S. Army commando who was set to stand trial next year in the killing of a suspected Afghan bombmaker and a former Army lieutenant convicted of murder for ordering his men to fire upon three Afghans.

Trump also announced pardons for two people entangled in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. One was for 2016 campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about a conversation in which he learned that Russia had dirt on Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. The president also pardoned Alex van der Zwaan, a Dutch lawyer who was sentenced to 30 days in prison for lying to investigators during the Mueller probe.

Van der Zwaan and Papadopoulos are the third and fourth Russia investigation defendants granted clemency. By pardoning them, Trump once again took aim at Mueller's inquiry and advanced a broader effort to undo the results of an investigation that yielded criminal charges against a half-dozen associates.

The pardons drew criticism from top Democrats. Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said the president was abusing his power.

"Trump is doling out pardons, not on the basis of repentance, restitution or the interests of justice, but to reward his friends and political allies, to protect those who lie to cover up him, to shelter those guilty of killing civilians, and to undermine an investigation that uncovered massive wrongdoing," Schiff said.

Last month, Trump pardoned former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI, and months earlier commuted the sentence of another associate, Roger Stone, days before he was to report to prison.

Trump has granted about 2% of requested pardons in his single term in office — just 27 before Tuesday's

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announcement. By comparison, Barack Obama granted 212 or 6%, and George W. Bush granted 189 or about 7%. George H.W. Bush, another one-term president, granted 10% of requests.

Also among those pardoned by Trump was Phil Lyman, a Utah state representative who led an ATV protest through restricted federal lands.

Lyman was serving as a Utah county commissioner in 2014 when he led about 50 ATV riders in a canyon where there are Native American cliff dwellings that officials had closed to motorized traffic. The ride occurred during a sputtering movement in the West pushing back against federal control of large swaths of land and came after an armed confrontation Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy had with Bureau of Land Management over grazing fees.

Lyman spent 10 days in prison and was ordered to pay nearly \$96,000 in restitution. The Trump administration in 2017 lifted a ban on motorized vehicles in parts of the canyon but left restrictions in place through other areas where Lyman led his ride.

Two former U.S. Border Patrol agents were also pardoned, Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean, convicted of shooting and wounding a Mexican drug smuggler near El Paso, Texas, in 2005.

Others on the list included a Pittsburgh dentist who pleaded guilty to health care fraud, two women convicted of drug crimes, and Alfred Lee Crum, now 89, who pleaded guilty in 1952 when he was 19 to helping his wife's uncle illegally distill moonshine.

Crum served three years of probation and paid a \$250 fine. The White House said Crum has maintained a clean record and a strong marriage for nearly 70 years, attended the same church for 60 years, raised four children, and regularly participated in charity fundraising events.

Associated Press writers Zeke Miller, Jill Colvin and Michael Balsamo in Washington and Michelle Price in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

## **In France, a pandemic dilemma over holiday rights for elders**

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — Not once in the long months since the pandemic struck has 74-year-old Jean-Francois been able to leave his nursing home in eastern France to visit his daughter or sister.

In fact, the retired metal worker thinks it's been two months since he last stuck his nose outside at all, as nursing homes across France shielded their vulnerable residents from another nationwide surge of virus infections and deaths.

Yet freedom now beckons.

Until Jan. 3, France is springing nursing home residents for the holidays. The aim is to alleviate some of the mental suffering and solitude of the pandemic by allowing multi-generation family reunions, which have been off-limits during repeated lockdowns for fear of relatives infecting each other.

And so a year full of sorrows and privations is ending with nursing home residents and their families facing the agonizing dilemma of whether a few days, or hours, of communal Christmas and New Year's cheer are worth risking lives for. As well as trips out of the nursing homes, the three-week window of relaxed rules also allows visits to homes that have COVID infections and to residents who are infected. Visits were previously allowed only in homes with no infections.

On the other hand, even without the pandemic, this might be the last chance for many elderly people to celebrate Christmas with their families.

Jean-Francois' daughter wants him to join them around the Christmas tree. But he would rather stay put, as the risk of infection unnerves him.

"I'm very scared," he said.

The year-end gift of freedom also comes with strings attached: Residents face a government-mandated week of solitary confinement in their rooms when they return. Jean-Francois doesn't relish that prospect. But he is also mindful of not hurting his daughter's feelings, which is why he didn't want to be identified by his full name in explaining his preference to spend the holidays apart.

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"Family is sacred," he said in a phone interview. "But to then spend a week in total confinement in my room is a big thing."

"A week isn't very long," he added, "but it's extremely long for us."

The director of Jean-Francois' home is trying to limit family outings as much as she can. Lucile Grillon says some of her staffers are still traumatized by the two dozen deaths they saw when the epidemic hit France with full force in March. She wants to spare them and her residents more misery if she can.

She says some residents are secretly relieved that she is frowning on trips outside.

The three nursing homes that Grillon manages have so far successfully kept out infections during the autumn-winter surge in cases that has pushed France's death toll past 60,000, nearly one-third of them inside nursing homes. During visits in homes, residents and loved ones are encouraged not to touch or embrace each other or exchange gifts. Grillon fears these barriers against the virus will be forgotten in family settings, with festive gift-giving and feasting.

From her perspective, in one of France's regions hit hardest by the latest surge of infections, "it's completely irresponsible to let residents out," Grillon says. "The virus isn't going to say, 'It is Christmas. I'm not going to contaminate people.'"

In the northeast town of Kaysersberg, Thierry Mouille is torturing himself over the government's Christmas offer. He's changed his mind again and again about whether to bring his 94-year-old grandmother Marguerite out to share a holiday meal.

"It's awful," he said. "The choice between one special visit at Christmas and confinement for a week, or multiple little visits on days that aren't as special."

His grandmother is letting him make the decision. He says he understands residents who don't want to leave; he also understands families who fear this Christmas could be their loved ones' last and don't want to pass up this opportunity to surround them with holiday affection while they still can.

Many nursing homes are taking the view that the holidays are an unmissable family occasion. Directors of homes struck by cases are also hoping that residents who tested positive have some immunity that could protect them during family reunions.

Valerie Martin is letting out six of her residents on Christmas Day and has requests for another four for New Year's Day. The home she manages on the outskirts of Lyon made headlines earlier this year when she and other staff members locked themselves in with their residents for 47 days to minimize the risk of infecting them. The home stayed COVID-free until November, when a resident returning from a hospital stay brought the virus back with him. The home has since had 35 cases and seven deaths.

Martin says some families have pleaded with her to lock in everyone over the festive period, to lower the risk of further infections.

She says that's impossible.

"There are people who are in fine health, who aren't COVID-positive, and I am not going to deprive them of their families simply because we are scared of the virus," she says. "I'm always on the side of freedom for the residents."

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Jean-Francois Badias in Kaysersberg, France contributed.

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## Doctors detail Navalny poison treatment in medical journal

BERLIN (AP) — German doctors treating Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny after he was poisoned with a nerve agent have detailed the case in an article for a major medical journal.

Berlin's Charite hospital said Wednesday that Navalny had given his permission for the article to be published in The Lancet journal.

Navalny fell ill suddenly on a domestic flight in Russia on Aug. 20. Following an emergency landing and

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treatment at a Siberian hospital in Omsk, after two days of political wrangling Navalny was flown to Berlin on a private air ambulance on Aug. 22.

The European Union imposed sanctions on six Russian officials and a state research institute after tests by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons established that Navalny had been exposed to the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok. The Kremlin, which denies involvement in the poisoning, has hit back with its own sanctions against EU officials.

In their journal article, Charite doctors detailed the exact course of Navalny's illness and treatment with a variety of drugs to address his symptoms and the underlying medical condition.

As Navalny's condition improved, he was brought out of a medically-induced coma and doctors determined that difficulties understanding speech and speaking he had initially showed after waking up disappeared after three weeks.

"At the last follow-up visit on day 55, we found near-complete recovery of neurological, neuropsychological, and neurophysiological findings without evidence of polyneuropathy," they wrote.

It is the first clinical case study detailing a Novichok poisoning, although the symptoms and treatment are similar to those for exposure to organophosphorus pesticides, which claim over 100,000 lives in Asia each year.

Navalny's doctors note that their patient "had a very favourable outcome" and attribute this to the swift treatment he received in Russia.

Last week, a joint investigation by the research group Bellingcat and several media outlets alleged that operatives from Russia's FSB domestic security agency followed Navalny during his trips since 2017.

Navalny, who is currently convalescing in Germany, this week posted a video of a phone call to one of the alleged operatives, who said the poison was applied to Navalny's underwear. The FSB has branded the call a fake.

## Global virus rules for Christmas: Tough, mild or none at all

The Associated Press undefined

In Peru, you can't drive your car on Christmas. In Lebanon, you can go to a nightclub, but you can't dance. In South Africa, roadblocks instead of beach parties will mark this year's festive season.

How many people can you share a Christmas meal with? France recommends no more than six, in Chile it's 15, and in Brazil it's as many as you want. Meanwhile, Italy's mind-boggling, color-coded holiday virus rules change almost every day for the next two weeks.

Countries around the world are trying to find the right formulas to keep their people safe for Christmas, especially as new virus variants prompt renewed travel bans and fuel resurgent infections, hospitalizations and deaths at the end of an already devastating year.

Here's a look at some of the restrictions around the world for the holiday season:

### BRITAIN

It was meant to be a time when families across the U.K. could enjoy something like a normal Christmas despite the pandemic. Authorities planned to relax restrictions, allowing up to three households to mix in the days around Dec. 25.

The emergence of a new, more contagious variant of the coronavirus changed that.

The four nations of the U.K. – England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland – are all in various states of shutdown and have ditched their Christmas plans. No indoor mixing of households is allowed in London and southeast England.

Instead of Christmas joy, a sense of dread and isolation is looming. Dozens of countries have limited flights from Britain, and daily new infections are running at record highs. Hospitals across the U.K., which has Europe's second-highest virus-related death toll at over 68,000, are heading towards capacity at a time of year when other illnesses abound.

### BRAZIL

In Brazil, Christmas 2020 will look much like normal – even though the country has been among the

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world's hardest-hit by the pandemic and new COVID-19 infections are now on track to match the peak of the first surge.

Many beaches and restaurants in Rio de Janeiro were packed last weekend, despite a city measure forbidding drivers to park along the shore.

No national restrictions have been imposed ahead of Christmas, though the governor of São Paulo ordered that only essential services such as public transport, supermarkets and pharmacies remain open around Christmas and New Year's Eve.

Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador have also called off their Dec. 31 firework displays.

## SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is targeting beaches and booze as it imposes new restrictions for the Christmas season amid resurgent infections.

Alcohol can only be sold Monday through Thursday, and a nighttime curfew is in place. Beaches — major tourist attractions this time of year — will be closed on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

The government is urging people to avoid crowded Christmas celebrations, but indoor gatherings of up to 100 people are still allowed; outdoors up to 250 people can congregate.

Police are setting up roadblocks to slow a second surge of infections that authorities and scientists say is being fueled by another variant of the virus, one distinct from the variant affecting England. Some countries are banning flights from South Africa, where the weekly infections and deaths have doubled over the past two weeks.

## LEBANON

Unlike much of the world, Lebanon eased restrictions during the holidays, hoping to inject foreign currency into a tanking economy. Tens of thousands of Lebanese expats have arrived home for the holidays, leading to fears of an inevitable surge in infections.

Last week, the Interior Ministry allowed nightclubs to reopen — but said dancing will be prohibited. That triggered a debate on social media about what constitutes dancing.

Lebanon's health sector has been challenged by the pandemic that struck amid an unprecedented financial crisis. The massive Aug. 4 explosion in Beirut's port only increased pressure on the city's hospitals, knocking out at least three of them.

## ITALY

Newspapers in Italy are running color-coded graphics that resemble children's board games to help people keep track of the rules aimed at limiting new infections over the holidays. Travel between regions is banned for 16 days, and a curfew begins at 10 p.m.

From Dec. 24-27, "red" rules kick in, closing all shops except food stores, pharmacies and hairdressers — since looking one's best is essential in Italy. Two people can visit the home of another family member and bring children younger than 14 with them. Restaurants and cafes can't serve customers, although takeout and home delivery are allowed.

From Dec. 28-30, Italians segue into "orange" rules, when non-essential shops can re-open, although dining out is still banned. Things turn red again for Dec. 31-Jan. 3, orange for Jan. 4, then red again on Jan. 5-6 for the national holiday on Epiphany.

## SOUTH KOREA

South Korea is clamping down on private social gatherings of five or more people and closing tourist spots from Christmas Eve through at least Jan. 3.

National parks and coastal tourist sites, where thousands travel to watch the sun rise on the new year, will close. So will churches and skiing, sledding and skating venues. Restaurants could face fines of up to 3 million won (\$2,700) if they serve groups of five or more.

The greater Seoul area, home to half of the country's 51 million people, has been at the center of a viral resurgence in past weeks that has overwhelmed hospitals, increased death tolls and raised questions as to how the government is handling the outbreak, after winning global praise for its response earlier in the year.

Forty-eight COVID-19 patients have died in the deadliest two days since the pandemic began.

## THE UNITED STATES

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The U.S. has issued no nationwide restrictions on travel, a decision left to state governments, but a federal agency is advising against criss-crossing the country for the Christmas season.

Still, millions of people have passed through airport security in recent days. The travel company AAA predicted that nearly 85 million Americans would be journeying during the holidays – a 29% decline from last year.

The U.S. has reported by far the most virus infections and deaths in the world, over 18 million cases and 322,800 deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University. Even before Christmas, new cases have been rising over the past two weeks.

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

Angela Charlton in Paris, Pan Pylas in London, Diane Jeantet in Rio de Janeiro, Frances D'Emilio in Rome, Zeina Karam in Lebanon, Tong-Hyung Kim in Seoul, Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg, John Flesher in Traverse City, Michigan contributed.

## Trump threatens to torpedo COVID relief with new demands

By KEVIN FREKING, ANDREW TAYLOR and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has threatened to torpedo Congress' massive COVID-19 relief package in the midst of a raging pandemic and deep economic uncertainty, suddenly demanding changes fellow Republicans have opposed.

Trump assailed the bipartisan \$900 billion package in a video he tweeted out Tuesday night and suggested he may not sign the legislation. He called on lawmakers to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for individuals and \$4,000 for couples.

Railing against a range of provisions in the bill, including for foreign aid, he told lawmakers to "get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation and to send me a suitable bill."

Trump did not specifically vow to veto the bill, and there may be enough support for the legislation in Congress to override him if he does. But if Trump were to upend the sprawling legislation, the consequences would be severe, including no federal aid to struggling Americans and small businesses, and no additional resources to help with vaccine distribution. In addition, because lawmakers linked the pandemic relief bill to an overarching funding measure, the government would shut down on Dec. 29.

The relief package was part of a hard-fought compromise bill that includes \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September and contains other end-of-session priorities such as money for cash-starved transit systems, an increase in food stamp benefits and about \$4 billion to help other nations provide a COVID-19 vaccine for their people.

Lawmakers spent months in a stalemate over pandemic relief funds, even as COVID-19 cases soared across the country. Democrats had pushed for higher payments to Americans, but compromised with Republicans to allow a deal to proceed.

Following Trump's interjection, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi all but dared Trump's Republican allies in Congress to meet the president's demand for far higher payments.

"At last, the President has agreed to \$2,000. Democrats are ready to bring this to the Floor this week by unanimous consent. Let's do it!" Pelosi said in a tweet. An aide said she would put the proposal forward Thursday for a vote.

Republicans have been reluctant to spend more on pandemic relief and only agreed to the big year-end package as time dwindled for a final deal. And Sen. Chuck Schumer, the Senate Democratic leader, said that "Trump needs to sign the bill to help people and keep the government open," and Congress would step up for more aid after.

Trump's call for changes to the legislation will test his sway with a Republican Party he has held tight control of throughout his presidency. Several Senate Republicans, including Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, have begun to gingerly break with Trump and acknowledge his defeat to President-elect Joe Biden,

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a step Trump has refused to take. McConnell has also warned Republicans against disputing the election on Jan. 6, when Congress must formally affirm the results.

Shortly after castigating the relief bill, Trump challenged McConnell and Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Senate Republican who has also said any effort to overturn Biden's victory would be futile. Trump said he would back a primary challenge to Thune when he is up for reelection in 2022.

Trump's threats to hold up the pandemic legislation could also complicate matters for Republicans in Georgia, where two runoff races to determine control of the Senate will be held in January. Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler have been running as ardent supporters of Trump and will now face questions about whether they will back his call for more money for Americans.

Jon Ossoff, Perdue's Democratic opponent, tweeted simply on Tuesday night: "\$2,000 checks now."

The relief package was brought forward Monday afternoon and sped through the House and Senate in a matter of hours as lawmakers worked to close the books on the year. While many lawmakers complained about being given so little time to read the bill, they overwhelmingly voted for it as local businesses and constituents seek economic relief from the pandemic.

The Senate cleared the huge relief package by a 92-6 vote after the House approved it by another lopsided vote, 359-53. Those votes totals would be enough to override a veto should Trump decide to take that step.

After months of partisanship and politicking about pandemic relief, the logjam broke after Biden urged his party to accept a compromise with top Republicans that is smaller than many Democrats would have liked.

The relief bill Trump is criticizing 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.

Earlier in the day, Biden applauded lawmakers for their work. He described the package as far from perfect, "but it does provide vital relief at a critical time."

He also said more relief would be needed in the months ahead. "We have our first hint and glimpse of bipartisanship," Biden said. "In this election, the American people made it clear they want us to reach across the aisle and work together."

## California health system buckling under COVID-19 pandemic

By ROBERT JABLON and DON THOMPSON undefined

LOS ANGELES (AP) — California's health care system is buckling under the strain of the nation's largest coronavirus outbreak and may fracture in weeks if people ignore holiday social distancing, health officials warned as the number of people needing beds and specialized care soared to previously unimagined levels.

Top executives from the state's largest hospital systems — Kaiser Permanente, Dignity Health and Sutter Health, which together cover 15 million Californians — said Tuesday that increasingly exhausted staff, many pressed into service outside their normal duties, are now attending to COVID-19 patients stacked up in hallways and conference rooms.

The CEO of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Community Hospital in Los Angeles, Dr. Elaine Batchlor, separately said patients there have spilled over into the gift shop and five tents outside the emergency department.

"We don't have space for anybody. We've been holding patients for days because we can't get them transferred, can't get beds for them," said Dr. Alexis Lenz, an emergency room physician at El Centro Regional Medical Center in Imperial County, in the southeast corner of the state. The facility has erected a 50-bed tent in its parking lot and was converting three operating rooms to virus care.

California is closing in on 2 million confirmed cases of COVID-19. The state on Tuesday reported nearly 32,700 newly confirmed cases. Another 653 patients were admitted to hospitals — one of the biggest one-day hospitalization jumps — for a total approaching 18,000.

State data models have predicted the hospitalizations could top 100,000 in a month if current rates continue.

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Even more worrying than lack of beds is a lack of personnel. The pool of available travel nurses is drying up as demand for them jumped 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.

"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 in San Francisco.

California is reaching out to places like Australia and Taiwan to fill the need for 3,000 temporary medical workers, particularly nurses trained in critical care.

Around the country, outbreaks are being blamed on lack of social distancing and mask-wearing during Thanksgiving and officials fear an even worse surge if people gather for Christmas and New Year's.

Fresno County in California's agricultural Central Valley is in desperate condition. Dr. Thomas Utecht, chief medical officer for Community Medical Centers Fresno, related how medical staff daily see sobbing families, desperate patients and people dying in isolation wards with their loved ones watching remotely.

Doctors and health officials there are begging people to avoid gathering outside of their immediate families.

"If people don't stay home ... we're going to see something that's, it's hard for me to even imagine," said Dr. Patrick Macmillan, palliative specialist in Fresno County. "I think it will break the health care system."

Similar warnings echoed around the country, from Tennessee, which is seeing the nation's worst new COVID-19 infection surge per capita, to Mississippi and West Virginia, which surpassed their previous highs for virus deaths reported in a single day on Tuesday.

COVID-19's impact isn't just on the infected. Lack of beds or nurses means that there are long lines to emergency rooms for other patients as well, such as those with heart attacks or trauma, and paramedics who must wait for an ER nurse to take charge of a patient may not be able to immediately answer another 911 call, said Dr. Anneli von Reinhart, an emergency physician at Community Regional Medical Center in downtown Fresno.

In the midst of the surge, the distribution of thousands of doses of COVID-19 vaccine to health care workers does mark light at the end of the tunnel but "it also feels like the tunnel is narrowing," said Dr. Rais Vohra, interim health officer for Fresno County.

"It's just a race against time to try to get people through this tunnel as safely as possible," he said. "That's exactly what it feels like to be working on the front lines right now."

Thompson reported from Sacramento, California. Associated Press reporters from around the U.S. contributed to this report.

## Trump pardons security contractors in deadly Iraq shooting

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday pardoned four former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad that left more than a dozen Iraqi civilians dead and caused an international uproar over the use of private security guards in a war zone.

Supporters of the former contractors at Blackwater Worldwide had lobbied for the pardons, arguing that the men had been excessively punished in an investigation and prosecution they said was tainted. All four were serving lengthy prison sentences.

"Paul Slough and his colleagues didn't deserve to spend one minute in prison," said Brian Heberlig, a lawyer for one of the four pardoned defendants. "I am overwhelmed with emotion at this fantastic news."

The pardons, issued in the final days of Trump's single term, reflect Trump's apparent willingness to give the benefit of the doubt to American servicemembers and contractors when it comes to acts of violence in warzones against civilians. Last November, he pardoned a former U.S. Army commando who was set to stand trial next year in the killing of a suspected Afghan bombmaker and a former Army lieutenant convicted of murder for ordering his men to fire upon three Afghans.

The Blackwater case has taken a complicated path since the killings at Baghdad's Nisoor Square in Sep-



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tember 2007, when the men, former veterans working as contractors for the State Department, opened fire at the crowded traffic circle.

Prosecutors asserted the heavily armed Blackwater convoy launched an unprovoked attack using sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers. Defense lawyers argued their clients returned fire after being ambushed by Iraqi insurgents.

They were convicted in 2014 after a months-long trial in Washington's federal court, and each man defiantly asserted his innocence at a sentencing hearing the following year.

"I feel utterly betrayed by the same government I served honorably," Slough told the court in a hearing packed by nearly 100 friends and relatives of the guards.

Slough and two others, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard, were sentenced to 30 years in prison, though after a federal appeals court ordered them to be re-sentenced, they were each given substantially shorter punishments. A fourth, Nicholas Slatten, whom prosecutors blamed for igniting the firefight, was sentenced to life in prison.

A federal appeals court later overturned Slatten's first-degree murder conviction, but the Justice Department tried him again and secured another life sentence last year.

Heard's lawyer, David Schertler, said they were "thrilled and grateful" for the pardon. "We have always believed in Dustin's innocence and have never given up the fight to vindicate him. He served his country honorably and, finally today, he has his well-deserved freedom."

A lawyer for Liberty, Bill Coffield, said, "These are four innocent guys and it is completely justified."

The American Civil Liberties Union decried the pardons. Hina Shamsi, the director of the organization's national security project, said in a statement that the shootings caused "devastation in Iraq, shame and horror in the United States, and a worldwide scandal. President Trump insults the memory of the Iraqi victims and further degrades his office with this action."

The trial was held years after a first indictment against the men was dismissed when a judge ruled that the Justice Department had withheld evidence from a grand jury and violated the guards' constitutional rights. The dismissal outraged many Iraqis, who said it showed Americans considered themselves above the law.

Joe Biden, speaking in Baghdad in 2010 as the vice president, expressed his "personal regret" for the shootings in declaring that the U.S. would appeal the court decision. The Justice Department later revived the case.

Blackwater contractors were notorious in Baghdad at the time and frequently accused of firing shots at the slightest pretext, including to clear their way in traffic. The shooting in the traffic circle stood out for the number killed, but was far from an isolated event in Iraq at the time.

Armed militants opposed to the U.S. presence in Iraq frequently deployed vehicle bombs next to Western and Iraqi motorcades in traffic, making the ubiquitous armed guards accompanying most dignitaries extra jittery — and in Blackwater's case, insistent about not allowing other vehicles near them.

The Blackwater firm was founded by Erik Prince, an ally of Trump and the brother of Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. It has since been renamed.

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Associated Press writer Ellen Knickmeyer in Oklahoma City contributed to this report.

## Trump pardons 15, commutes 5 sentences, including GOP allies

By COLLEEN LONG, KEVIN FREKING and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Tuesday pardoned 15 people, including a pair of congressional Republicans who were strong and early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad.

Trump's actions in his final weeks in office show a president who is wielding his executive power to reward loyalists and others who he believes have been wronged by a legal system he sees as biased against him and his allies. Trump issued the pardons — not an unusual act for an outgoing president — even as he

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refused to publicly acknowledge his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden, who will be sworn in on Jan. 20.

Trump is likely to issue more pardons before then. He and his allies have discussed a range of other possibilities, including members of Trump's family and his personal attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Those pardoned on Tuesday included former Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of California and Chris Collins of New York, two of the earliest GOP lawmakers to back Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump also commuted the sentences of five other people, including former Rep. Steve Stockman of Texas.

Collins, the first member of Congress to endorse Trump to be president, was sentenced to two years and two months in federal prison after admitting he helped his son and others dodge \$800,000 in stock market losses when he learned that a drug trial by a small pharmaceutical company had failed.

Hunter was sentenced to 11 months in prison after pleading guilty to stealing campaign funds and spending the money on everything from outings with friends to his daughter's birthday party.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the pardons for Hunter and Collins were granted after "the request of many members of Congress." She noted that Hunter served the nation in the U.S. Marines and saw combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

In the group announced Tuesday night were four former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad that left more a dozen Iraqi civilians dead and caused an international uproar over the use of private security guards in a war zone.

Supporters of Nicholas Slatten, Paul Slough, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard, the former contractors at Blackwater Worldwide, had lobbied for pardons, arguing that the men had been excessively punished in an investigation and prosecution they said was tainted by problems and withheld exculpatory evidence. All four were serving lengthy prison sentences.

The pardons reflected Trump's apparent willingness to give the benefit of doubt to American servicemembers and contractors when it comes to acts of violence in war zones against civilians. Last November, for instance, he pardoned a former U.S. Army commando who was set to stand trial next year in the killing of a suspected Afghan bomb-maker and a former Army lieutenant convicted of murder for ordering his men to fire upon three Afghans.

Trump also announced pardons for two people entangled in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. One was for 2016 campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about a conversation in which he learned that Russia had dirt on Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. The president also pardoned Alex van der Zwaan, a Dutch lawyer who was sentenced to 30 days in prison for lying to investigators during the Mueller probe.

Van der Zwaan and Papadopoulos are the third and fourth Russia investigation defendants granted clemency. By pardoning them, Trump once again took aim at Mueller's inquiry and advanced a broader effort to undo the results of the investigation that yielded criminal charges against a half-dozen associates.

The pardons drew criticism from top Democrats. Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., the chairman of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said the president was abusing his power.

"Trump is doling out pardons, not on the basis of repentance, restitution or the interests of justice, but to reward his friends and political allies, to protect those who lie to cover up him, to shelter those guilty of killing civilians, and to undermine an investigation that uncovered massive wrongdoing," Schiff said.

Last month, Trump pardoned former national security adviser Michael Flynn, who had twice pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI, and months earlier commuted the sentence of another associate, Roger Stone, days before he was to report to prison.

Trump has granted about 2% of requested pardons in his single term in office — just 27 before Tuesday's announcement. By comparison, Barack Obama granted 212 or 6%, and George W. Bush granted about 7%, or 189. George H.W. Bush, another one-term president, granted 10% of requests.

Also among those pardoned by Trump was Phil Lyman, a Utah state representative who led an ATV protest through restricted federal lands.

Lyman was serving as a Utah county commissioner in 2014 when he led about 50 ATV riders in a canyon home to Native American cliff dwellings that officials closed to motorized traffic. The ride occurred amid a

sputtering movement in the West pushing back against federal control of large swaths of land and came in the wake of an armed confrontation Nevada rancher Cliven Bundy had with Bureau of Land Management over grazing fees.

Lyman spent 10 days in prison and was ordered to pay nearly \$96,000 in restitution. The Trump administration in 2017 lifted a ban on motorized vehicles in parts of the canyon but left restrictions in place through other areas where Lyman led his ride.

Two former U.S. Border Patrol agents were also pardoned, Ignacio Ramos and Jose Compean, convicted of shooting and wounding a Mexican drug smuggler near El Paso, Texas, in 2005.

Others on the list included a Pittsburgh dentist who pleaded guilty to health care fraud, two women convicted of drug crimes, and Alfred Lee Crum, now 89, who pleaded guilty in 1952 when he was 19 to helping his wife's uncle illegally distill moonshine.

Crum served three years of probation and paid a \$250 fine. The White House said Crum has maintained a clean record and a strong marriage for nearly 70 years, attended the same church for 60 years, raised four children, and regularly participated in charity fundraising events.

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Associated Press writers Zeke Miller Jill Colvin, Michael Balsamo in Washington and Michelle Price in Las Vegas contributed to this report.

## **Dominion worker sues Trump campaign and conservative media**

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — An election systems worker driven into hiding by death threats has filed a defamation lawsuit against President Donald Trump's campaign, two of its lawyers and some conservative media figures and outlets.

Eric Coomer, security director at the Colorado-based Dominion Voting Systems, said he wants his life back after being named in false charges as a key actor in "rigging" the election for President-elect Joe Biden. There has been no evidence that the election was rigged.

His lawsuit, filed Tuesday in district court in Denver County, Colorado, names the Trump campaign, lawyers Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell, conservative columnist Michelle Malkin, the website Gateway Pundit, Colorado conservative activist Joseph Oltmann, and conservative media Newsmax and One America News Network.

"I have been thrust into the public spotlight by people with political and financial agendas but, at heart, I am a private person," Coomer said in a statement.

"While I intend to do everything I can to recapture my prior lifestyle, I have few illusions in this regard," he said. "And so, today, I put my trust in the legal process, which has already exposed the truth of the 2020 presidential election."

Dominion, which provided vote-counting equipment to several states, has denied accusations that it switched Trump votes in Biden's favor, and no evidence has emerged to back those charges up.

Dominion and another voting technology company, Smartmatic, have begun to fight back against being named in baseless conspiracy theories. After legal threats were made, Fox News Channel and Newsmax in recent days have aired retractions of some claims made on their networks.

There was no immediate comment from those named in the lawsuit.

His lawyers said Coomer has become "the face of the false claims." Coomer's name first got public exposure in a podcast by Oltmann, who claimed to have heard a strategy call of Antifa activists. When the prospect of a Trump victory was brought up, Oltmann said a man identified as "Eric from Dominion" supposedly said "don't worry about the election, Trump is not going to win. I made ... sure of that," adding an expletive.

In an opinion piece written for the Denver Post, Coomer wrote that he has no connections to Antifa, was never on any call and the idea that there is some recording of him is "wholly fabricated."

The fact-checking website Snopes said Oltmann hasn't cooperated in any attempts to verify his claims.

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Oltmann also claimed that Coomer made anti-Trump comments on Facebook. The lawsuit acknowledged that Coomer made comments critical of the president on his private Facebook page; he now says his page is inactive.

Oltmann's charges spread after he was interviewed by Malkin and Gateway Pundit. Eric Trump tweeted about them. OANN, and its White House correspondent Chanel Rion, reported on them. Powell, misidentifying Coomer as working for Smartmatic, said at a news conference that Coomer's "social media is filled with hatred" for Trump, and she later repeated her charges in a Newsmax interview.

Giuliani, at a news conference, called Coomer "a vicious, vicious man. He wrote horrible things about the president ... He is completely warped," according to the lawsuit.

Fox News Channel, another network popular with Trump supporters, is not being sued and Coomer actually uses Fox's Tucker Carlson to buttress his case. The lawsuit notes a scheduled Powell appearance on Carlson's show did not happen after she could not provide evidence for her charges.

Coomer told The Associated Press earlier this month that right-wing websites posted his photo, home address and details about his family. Death threats began almost immediately.

He said his father, an Army veteran, received a handwritten letter asking, "How does it feel to have a traitor for a son."

"It's terrifying," Coomer said. "I've worked in international elections in all sorts of post-conflict countries where election violence is real and people are getting killed over it. And I feel that we're on the verge of that."

## US close on deal with Pfizer for millions more vaccine doses

By JONATHAN LEMIRE and RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. government is close to a deal to acquire tens of millions of additional doses of Pfizer's vaccine in exchange for helping the pharmaceutical giant gain better access to manufacturing supplies.

A person with knowledge of the negotiations told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the deal is under discussion and could be finalized shortly. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to describe ongoing deliberations.

Pfizer's vaccine was the first to gain approval from the Food and Drug Administration and initial shipments went to states last week. It has now been joined by a vaccine from Moderna, which was developed in closer cooperation with scientists from the National Institutes of Health.

Moderna's vaccine comes under the umbrella of the government's own effort, which is called Operation Warp Speed. That public-private endeavor was designed to have millions of vaccine doses ready and available to ship once a shot received FDA approval.

But another deal with Pfizer would move the nation closer to the goal of vaccinating all Americans.

A law dating back to the Korean War gives the government authority to direct private companies to produce critical goods in times of national emergency. Called the Defense Production Act, it's expected to be invoked to help Pfizer secure some raw materials needed for its vaccine.

Pfizer already has a contract to supply the government with 100 million doses of its vaccine under Operation Warp Speed, but government officials have said it's more of an arms-length relationship with the company and they don't have as much visibility into its operations.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said last week that the government was negotiating with Pfizer for more doses, but details provided Tuesday about the company's desire for better access to supplies are new.

Earlier, U.S. officials had said they were discussing the purchase of another 100 million doses of Pfizer vaccine for delivery as early as the middle of next year. Those details and timing may have changed.

Pfizer said in a statement that "we continue to work collaboratively with the U.S. government to get doses of our COVID-19 vaccine to as many Americans as possible. The company is not able to comment on any confidential discussions that may be taking place with the U.S. government."

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The vaccine from Pfizer and German pharmaceutical BioNTech immediately raised hopes of taming a pandemic that has killed nearly 320,000 people in the U.S. and hobbled much of the national economy. Health care workers and nursing home residents topped the list as local TV stations across the country began broadcasting scenes of the first vaccinations. Some polls show skepticism about getting vaccinated may be easing.

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

Operation Warp Speed is on track to have about 40 million doses of vaccine by the end of this month, of which about 20 million would be allocated for first vaccinations. Distribution of those doses would span into the first week of January. Both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines require two shots to be fully effective.

The New York Times first reported the new details of negotiations between Pfizer and the Trump administration.

## Lava lake forms as Hawaii volcano erupts after 2-year break

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Lava was rising more than 3 feet (1 meter) per hour in the deep crater of a Hawaii volcano that began erupting over the weekend after a two-year break, scientists said Tuesday.

Kilauea volcano within Hawaii Volcanoes National Park on the Big Island was gushing molten rock from at least two vents inside its summit crater, the U.S. Geological Survey said. A lava lake has formed, rising about 440 feet (134 meters) from the bottom of the crater.

Since the eruption began Sunday night, Kilauea has spewed some 2 billion gallons of lava (10 million cubic meters), enough to cover 33 acres (13 hectares). The lava has been contained inside the deep crater.

It isn't threatening to get close to people or cover property, like when Kilauea erupted from vents in the middle of a residential neighborhood in 2018 and destroyed more than 700 homes.

Still, the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory has warned residents to beware of potentially high levels of volcanic gas, rockfalls and explosions.

When erupting, Kilauea tends to spew large volumes of sulfur dioxide, which forms volcanic smog, or vog, when it mixes with oxygen, sunlight and other gases in the air. The state Department of Health warned residents to reduce their outdoor activities if they encounter volcanic smog conditions.

Kilauea is one of the world's most active volcanoes, having erupted some 50 times in the last century. Between 1983 and 2018, it erupted almost continuously. It had a lava lake in its crater for the last decade of that eruption.

## Biden: Reversing Trump border policies will take months

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden says it will take months to roll back some of President Donald Trump's actions on immigration, tempering expectations he generated during his campaign and one that may rile advocates pushing for speedy action on the issue.

His Tuesday comments echo those made by two of his top foreign policy advisers in an interview with Spanish wire service EFE on Monday hitting the brakes on rolling back Trump's restrictive asylum policies. Susan Rice, Biden's incoming domestic policy adviser, and Jake Sullivan, his pick for national security adviser, as well as Biden himself, warned that moving too quickly could create a new crisis at the border.

Speaking to reporters in Wilmington, Delaware Wednesday, Biden said he's already started discussing the issues with the Mexican president and "our friends in Latin America" and that "the timeline is to do it so that we in fact make it better not worse."

"The last thing we need is to say we're going to stop immediately, the access to asylum, the way it's being run now, and then end up with 2 million people on our border," Biden said.

He noted that more funding is needed for more asylum judges to process claims, and promised that

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while he will work to loosen Trump's asylum restrictions, "it's going to take probably the next six months to put that in place."

His comments come as interceptions along the border have increased in recent months. U.S. authorities encountered migrants at the border with Mexico more than 70,000 times in October and in November, four times April's tally. Some experts predict the surge could increase in the early months of Biden's presidency, as a response to the damage wrought by the two hurricanes that have pummeled Central America and the economic fallout from the pandemic, as well as expectations of a more humane approach to immigration from the Biden Administration.

Sullivan and Rice both said in their interview with EFE that Biden will take executive action where possible to address issues with the immigration system, and emphasized plans to provide humanitarian aid and help bolster Latin American economies to try to address the root cause of the influx of immigrants to the U.S.

Biden "will work to promptly undo" Trump's deals with Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador that let the U.S. transfer asylum seekers to those countries, and will "follow through" on his commitment to end a Trump-era program that returns undocumented border crossers to Mexico to await their legal proceedings, Sullivan said. On his campaign website, Biden promised to end the agreement with Mexico, known as the Migrant Protection Protocols, within the first 100 days of his presidency.

But Sullivan emphasized that many of those reforms will take time.

He cautioned that "increasing processing capacity and changing policy at the border will take time," and warned those considering fleeing for the U.S. to wait, predicting it will take "months" for the Biden Administration to fully implement their plans with respect to Latin America.

"Given the pandemic and the large number of migrants already waiting in northern Mexico, now is not the time to undertake the dangerous trip to the United States," he said. It will take months until we are able to fully implement our plans."

Rice said that "processing capacity at the border is not like a light that you can just switch on and off."

"Our priority is to reopen asylum processing at the border consistent with the capacity to do so safely and to protect public health, especially in the context of COVID-19. This effort will begin immediately but it will take months to develop the capacity that we will need to reopen fully," she said.

But Michele Heisler, medical director of Physicians for Human Rights, expressed concerns about the pace of change during a conference call with reporters Tuesday and said there should be no "public-health rationale" to maintain extraordinary powers to immediately expel people from the United States without an opportunity to seek asylum.

Rice was noncommittal about when Biden would withdraw that authority, which Trump introduced in March on grounds that it would contain the coronavirus even though reporting by The Associated Press and others has found that government scientists saw no evidence for it.

Still, other pro-immigrant advocates said Tuesday that while they understood it would take time to untangle some of Trump's changes at the border, they underscored a sense of urgency. They hailed Biden's emphasis on working with Mexico and Central America on joint solutions.

"The Biden administration's work to end cruelty must start immediately," said Linda Rivas, executive director and managing attorney of Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center in El Paso, Texas. "Human rights and dignity must take center stage."

Guerline Jozef, executive director of the Haitian Bridge Alliance, said it was a "matter of life and death," with many asylum-seekers waiting in extremely violent Mexican border cities for their cases to be heard in the United States.

She said in a conference call with reporters that she was concerned about how many asylum-seekers will be allowed in by Biden "but we are here, ready, determined that the process works for all those that are impacted."

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AP writer Elliot Spagat contributed reporting.

## Feds sue Walmart over role in opioid crisis

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and ANNE D'INNOCENZIO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department sued Walmart on Tuesday, accusing it of fueling the nation's opioid crisis by pressuring its pharmacies to fill even potentially suspicious prescriptions for the powerful painkillers.

The civil complaint filed points to the role Walmart's pharmacies may have played in the crisis by filling opioid prescriptions and Walmart's own responsibility for the allegedly illegal distribution of controlled substances to the pharmacies at the height of the opioid crisis. Walmart operates more than 5,000 pharmacies in its stores around the country.

The Justice Department alleges Walmart violated federal law by selling thousands of prescriptions for controlled substances that its pharmacists "knew were invalid," said Jeffrey Clark, the acting assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's civil division.

Federal law required Walmart to spot suspicious orders for controlled substances and report those to the Drug Enforcement Administration, but prosecutors charge the company didn't do that.

"Walmart knew that its distribution centers were using an inadequate system for detecting and reporting suspicious orders," said Jason Dunn, the U.S. attorney in Colorado. "For years, Walmart reported virtually no suspicious orders at all. In other words, Walmart's pharmacies ordered opioids in a way that went essentially unmonitored and unregulated."

The 160-page suit alleges that Walmart made it difficult for its pharmacists to follow the rules, putting "enormous pressure" on them to fill a high volume of prescriptions as fast as possible, while at the same time denying them the authority to categorically refuse to fill prescriptions issued by prescribers the pharmacists knew were continually issuing invalid prescriptions.

The suit highlighted alleged problems in Walmart's compliance department, which oversaw the dispensing nationwide of controlled substance prescriptions. In particular, even after Walmart pharmacists informed the compliance unit about "pill-mill" prescribers whose practices raised egregious red flags, Walmart allegedly continued to fill invalid prescriptions issued by those prescribers, according to the suit. The suit said that only later did Walmart allow pharmacists to do blanket refusals for these suspect practices.

Walmart fought back in an emailed statement to The Associated Press, saying that the Justice Department's investigation is "tainted by historical ethics violations." It said the "lawsuit invents a legal theory that unlawfully forces pharmacists to come between patients and their doctors, and is riddled with factual inaccuracies and cherry-picked documents taken out of context."

Walmart noted it always empowered its pharmacists to refuse to fill problematic opioids prescriptions, and said they refused to fill hundreds of thousands of such prescriptions. Walmart also noted it sent the Drug Enforcement Administration tens of thousands of investigative leads, and it blocked thousands of questionable doctors from having their opioid prescriptions filled at its pharmacies.

In a corporate blog post published late Tuesday, Walmart argued that many health regulators, medical groups, doctors and patients criticize the company for going too far in refusing to fill opioid prescriptions. Some even say Walmart is improperly interfering in the doctor-patient relationship, the company said.

AP reported the news of the lawsuit ahead of the Justice Department's public announcement, citing a person who could not discuss the matter publicly before the announced move. The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Walmart filed its own preemptive suit against the Justice Department, Attorney General William Barr and the Drug Enforcement Administration nearly two months ago.

In its lawsuit, Walmart said the Justice Department's investigation — launched in 2016 — had identified hundreds of doctors who wrote problematic prescriptions that Walmart's pharmacists should not have filled. But the lawsuit charged that nearly 70% of the doctors still have active registrations with the DEA.

"Blaming pharmacists for not second-guessing the very doctors the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) approved to prescribe opioids is a transparent attempt to shift blame from DEA's well-documented failures in keeping bad doctors from prescribing opioids in the first place," the company said in its statement.

Walmart's lawsuit alleged the government was blaming it for the lack of regulatory and enforcement policies to stem the crisis. The company is asking a federal judge to declare that the government's suit has no basis to seek civil damages. That suit remains ongoing.

The initial investigation was the subject of a ProPublica story published in March. ProPublica reported that Joe Brown, then U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Texas office, spent years pursuing a criminal case against Walmart for its opioid prescription practices, only to have it stymied after the retail giant's lawyers appealed to senior officials in the Justice Department.

Two months later, Brown resigned. He didn't give a reason for his departure except to say he would be "pursuing opportunities in the private and public sectors." Brown went into private practice in the Dallas area.

D'Innocenzio reported from New York.

## France relaxes its ban on trucks entering from Britain

By PAN PYLAS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — France relaxed its coronavirus-related ban on trucks from Britain on Tuesday after a two-day standoff that had stranded thousands of drivers and raised fears of Christmastime food shortages in the U.K.

French authorities, who had imposed the ban to try to protect the continent from a new variant of the virus that is circulating in London and southeast England, said delivery drivers could enter by ferry or tunnel provided they showed proof of a negative test for the virus. Select passengers will be allowed back on the continent, too.

After two days of intense talks with British and European Union partners, French Transport Minister Jean-Baptiste Djebbari said in a statement that the coming hours would be dedicated to setting up testing sites so that British truckers could make it to the continent and back in time for Christmas. Quick tests will be accepted if they are able to detect the new virus variant, Djebbari said.

At least 2,800 truck drivers had been anxiously waiting near the England Channel port of Dover for word they could cross over to the continent. French and British authorities urged them to avoid ports until they can get tested.

France also said it would allow EU travelers, along with British citizens with EU residency, back into the country if they had a negative virus test in the preceding 72 hours. British tourists remain barred.

Some 40 countries imposed travel bans on Britain, leaving the island nation increasingly isolated, after Prime Minister Boris Johnson warned over the weekend that the new variant of the virus might be 70% more contagious.

But the French restrictions were particularly worrisome, given that Britain relies heavily on its cross-Channel commercial links to the continent for food this time of year.

At the same time, Britain is witnessing an alarming rise in infections, with a record 36,800 reported Tuesday, and is facing deep uncertainty over its final exit from the European Union in less than two weeks. Despite the looming deadline, the country has yet to work out its post-Brexit trade arrangements with the EU.

"What is so bad to me, is not just this new mutation, but the fact that we have been so bad at dealing with the pandemic, and it now looks like we're heading for what's called a perfect storm with the mutation 70% more infectious and Brexit all at the same time," 73-year-old Jim Gibson of London said during the standoff.

"People are really struggling to get their heads round one of these, let alone both — and now we're being told we may have eaten our last lettuce for three months, too, probably."

For the drivers, it was a grim couple of days, with some complaining about the lack of toilet facilities and food.

"My family is waiting for me, my children, my daughter, my son, my wife," said Greg Mazurek of Poland.



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"It was supposed to be a very quick trip, three to four days max. I spent in the U.K. 10 minutes in the gas station and 20 minutes unloading, and now I need to wait two days here in the port in Dover."

British retailers had become increasingly concerned about the blockage at the ports, given that 10,000 trucks pass through Dover every day, accounting for about 20% of the country's trade in goods.

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

The problem, he explained, is that the empty trucks sitting in England can't reach the continent to pick up 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.

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

Over the weekend, Johnson imposed strict lockdown measures in London and neighboring areas amid mounting concerns over the new variant. He scrapped a planned relaxation of rules over Christmastime for millions of people and banned indoor mixing of households. Only essential travel will be permitted.

In Switzerland, meanwhile, 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 Britain over the new variant.

The quarantine order is likely to affect thousands of Britons 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.

"Do not leave your room or residence and avoid all contacts," Switzerland's public health agency urged vacationing Britons and South Africans. It warned they face potential fines of 10,000 Swiss francs (\$11,250).

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Angela Charlton in Paris, Jo Kearney in Dover, England, Lorne Cook in Brussels and Frank Jordans in Berlin contributed to this report.

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

## As small businesses await new US aid, it's too late for some

By JOYCE M. ROSENBERG and PAUL WISEMAN AP Business Writers

NEW YORK (AP) — Clay Reynolds is starting to make peace with a gut-wrenching reality: He may have to once again close his business, Arrichion Hot Yoga and Circuit Training.

The \$900 billion pandemic relief package that Congress has just approved contains billions in aid directed specifically at struggling small companies like Reynolds'. Arrichion received a loan last spring from the government's earlier economic aid program. But Reynolds, a co-owner, needs another. Business was down 75% in the third quarter. The fourth quarter will likely be worse.

Like other independent fitness studios and gyms, his has lost many longtime members who feared working out alongside others indoors or don't want to wear a mask while exercising. And after being forced to close during the spring, Reynolds worries that the surge in virus cases will bring new government restrictions.

"There's a good chance this type of business will be shut down again in the next few weeks," said Reynolds, whose studios are in North Carolina and Utah.

America's entrepreneurs welcomed Congress' long-delayed relief package, which provides \$325 billion in aid to small companies and makes it easier for them to gain access to grants and loans under its renewed Paycheck Protection Program. But the rescue comes too late for tens of thousands of businesses that have already closed or may have to soon, a consequence of a pandemic that has kept away diners, shoppers and customers since early spring. The National Restaurant Association, for example, estimates

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that 110,000 U.S. restaurants — 17% — have shut down indefinitely or for good, doomed by restrictions on their hours or capacity and by Americans' reluctance to eat out.

"If you closed already, it doesn't help you a bit," said Henry Pertman, director of operations at Total Image Creative, a Maryland-based hospitality consulting firm. "We lost a lot of restaurants that didn't have to go under. They saw no light at the end of the tunnel."

It's a fear that weighs heavily on one restaurateur, Amy Sidhom. She isn't convinced that the new federal aid will be enough to significantly help her or the 21 workers she furloughed heading into the holiday season. The surging pandemic has dealt a devastating blow to her restaurant, Crumbs, in Danville, California, about 30 miles east of San Francisco

After she'd spent about \$35,000 to set up for outdoor dining, Crumbs' sales had finally returned to their pre-pandemic levels, enabling the 2-year-old restaurant to recall its entire staff of 25. But the comeback was short lived. After outdoor dining was banned through most of California earlier this month, Crumbs was forced to return to takeout only.

Sales have plunged 85% to 90% in recent weeks. Crumbs now has only four employees.

As a stark reminder of the pandemic's economic toll, Sidhom has set up in front of Crumbs' now-empty outdoor seating area a row of empty chairs bearing the names and sad stories of the employees who have lost their jobs.

"We are kind of day-by-day now," she said. "It doesn't seem like there is an end in sight, and it doesn't seem like there is empathy toward small businesses, particularly restaurants. So, no, I am not optimistic."

Many small and independent retailers are in jeopardy, too. They typically collect an outside proportion of their annual revenue during the holiday shopping season. But government restrictions are limiting how many customers can be in a store at one time. Even apart from such restrictions, many consumers are staying home anyway as a precaution against the resurgent virus.

Especially vulnerable are small independent shops, many of which are barely hanging on and will likely close their doors after the holidays — joining more than 8,600 retailers that have already gone out of business this year, according to market researcher CoreSight.

For them, Congress took too long and probably offered too little relief on top of a \$2 trillion rescue package that the government enacted in March but whose benefits had largely expired. That aid package introduced PPP loans, which are meant to help small businesses keep employees on their payrolls.

"We really needed this second round and renewal of the program back in August to help many businesses to get through the last quarter of 2020," said Karen Kerrigan, president of the advocacy group Small Business & Entrepreneurship Council.

Reynolds, the fitness studio owner, is hoping for government help to tide his fitness company over until a coronavirus vaccine becomes widely available and customers feel comfortable enough to return to Arrichion.

Now, he said, "would be the right time to get it, to get us through the winter."

At the same time, for small businesses the new aid is in some ways an improvement on the original rescue package. It will, for example, let small businesses take a tax deduction for expenses paid for with PPP money, including payroll, rent and utilities. And companies that already received one PPP loan can seek another if their revenue has dropped by 25% in any quarter of 2020 from a year earlier.

Under the new relief measure, hard-hit restaurants and hotels receive especially generous treatment: They can obtain PPP loans worth up to 3.5 times their payroll expenses, versus only 2.5 times payroll expenses for other companies. And the loans are available to hotels and restaurants that employ up to 300 workers per location. For other businesses, loans are limited to companies that employ 300 in total.

"The PPP money is going to be a huge difference maker if you're on the cusp right now," said Pertman, the restaurant consultant. "For the people on the bubble, who are putting their own money in day and day out, it's going to be huge."

That said, some of the problems that small businesses now face are simply beyond Congress' capacity to solve. How long, for instance, can they survive when their customers are either locked down or choosing to stay home?

Tiffany Joy Murchison, who couldn't receive a PPP loan during the first round because of a series of miscommunications with her bank, is willing to try again now that there's more money available. She needs

the aid to help her New York-based publicity firm find new clients. She's lost revenue during the pandemic because her clients are generally small, struggling organizations.

"I would be able to continue paying my staff while putting full effort into scaling my business, going after larger corporations, organizations, and government agencies that are less likely to be impacted by swings in the economy," Murchison said.

Wiseman reported from Washington. AP Business Writer Michael Liedtke contributed to this report from Danville, California.

## Critics say EPA allowing more time to fix lead-tainted water

ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

The Trump administration overhauled the country's widely criticized, 29-year-old framework to eliminate toxic lead from drinking water on Tuesday, but critics charge that the new rule gives utilities far more time than before to finally replace old, lead-contaminated pipes.

The new rules come six years after the Flint, Michigan, water crisis highlighted ongoing, dangerous exposure of children and others in the city to the neurotoxin in drinking water, and the failures of officials on all levels to adequately protect local families at the time.

Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Andrew Wheeler said Tuesday the new regulation, proposed by the agency in 2019, "requires more replacements than ever before" for aging water systems leaching lead.

"It will help ensure that all Americans have access to safe drinking water, regardless of what zip code they live in," Wheeler said. More than half of the residents of Flint were Black, and residents and advocacy groups have said systemic racism is behind the neglect of the water system and slow response to the crisis. Thousands of Flint children and adults were exposed to lead, which can damage young people's development and cause behavioral problems.

Changes in the rule include newly requiring utilities to test their water at schools and day-care centers nationwide and requiring water systems to tell the public the location of lead service lines.

But the changes also allow the country's water systems to go far more slowly than under the old rule to replace the millions of lead service lines in use around the United States — from 14 years for the worst contaminated systems under the old rules, to more than 33 years under the new ones, according to public health and environmental groups.

"So yes the old rule was terrible, but EPA has missed the opportunity 3 decades later to fundamentally fix the rule and to protect millions of kids from lead," Erik Olson, the senior strategic director for health at the Natural Resources Defense Council advocacy group, said in an email.

"It's a huge disappointment," Olson said.

Wheeler, the EPA administrator, defended the new rules, saying loopholes in the old rule were allowing replacement to drag on much longer than was stipulated.

The outgoing Trump administration has said that dealing with lead pipes and improving access to safe drinking water were priorities. The administration has rolled back dozens of protections for public health and the environment, and President Donald Trump also proposed eliminating environmental enforcement funding for minority and low-income communities in at least one annual budget. Congress has held the agency's funding generally steady, rejecting Trump's proposals for sharp cuts.

## Mayor: Body cam not activated in police killing of Black man

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — A police officer who shot and killed a Black man holding a cell phone in Ohio's capital city early Tuesday did not activate his body camera beforehand, and dash cameras on the officers' cruiser were also not activated, city officials said.

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Because of an automatic "look back" feature on the body camera, the shooting was captured on video but without audio, said Columbus Mayor Andrew Ginther and the city's department of public safety. As a result, there's no way to hear what the 47-year-old man or the officer said during the interaction, Ginther said.

Neither the man nor the officer has been publicly identified.

Body camera footage from immediately after the shooting indicated "a delay in rendering of first-aid to the man," the public safety department said in a news release.

"It is unacceptable to me and the community that officers did not turn on their cameras," Ginther said during a news conference. Columbus Police Chief Thomas Quinlan echoed the sentiment in a statement a few minutes later.

"The Division invested millions of dollars in these cameras for the express purpose of creating a video and audio record of these kinds of encounters," Quinlan said. "They provide transparency and accountability, and protect the public, as well as officers, when the facts are in question."

Officers activated their body cameras immediately after the shooting, Quinlan said.

Police aren't releasing the victim's name until his family is notified and until they have a chance to view the video of the shooting, Ginther said.

Police said officers were responding to a neighbor's non-emergency call at 1:37 a.m. about a man sitting in a vehicle for a long time, repeatedly turning the vehicle on and off. Because it was a non-emergency call, the cruiser dash cam wasn't activated.

On arrival, officers arrived to find a garage door open and a man inside.

In the body camera video, "the man walked toward the officer with a cell phone in his left hand," police said. "His right hand was not visible."

One officer fired and hit the man, who died just under an hour later at a local hospital. There was no weapon recovered at the scene, police said.

The man was visiting someone at the home at the time, police said.

Quinlan relieved the officer of duty, ordered him to turn in his gun and badge and stripped him of police powers pending the outcome of investigations into the shooting. By union contract the officer will still be paid. A message was left with the union representing Columbus officers.

The look-back function, known as "buffering," is a common technology on body cameras, and is meant to address this exact situation, said Charles Katz, an Arizona State University criminal justice professor.

Although the cameras' video is perpetually running, they only begin recording once they're activated, saving whatever they're set to, such as 30 seconds or a minute, Katz said.

"In a technical sense it's always recording but it's not saved until it's activated, and then it only saves the prior 60 seconds," Katz said.

The city council issued a statement describing members as "beyond frustrated" at the news.

"We are impatient for answers but insist on a thorough, professional, and complete investigation that ensures justice is done," the statement said.

The state's Bureau of Criminal Investigation is leading the investigation, as is city policy for shootings involving Columbus police. Ginther said he's also asked the U.S. Attorney for Columbus to review the case for violations of the victim's federal civil rights.

U.S. Attorney David DeVillers is also investigating the Dec. 4 shooting of Casey Goodson Jr. by a Franklin County sheriff's deputy.

## Biden: Trump 'failed' to shore up nation's cybersecurity

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and MEG KINNARD Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President-elect Joe Biden on Tuesday assailed the Trump administration for failing to fortify the nation's cyber defenses, and called on President Donald Trump to publicly identify the perpetrator of a massive breach of U.S. government agencies — a hack some of Trump's top allies have blamed on Russia.

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Biden, who is being briefed on high-level intelligence in preparation for taking office next month, said planning for the hack began as early as 2019. Several federal agencies, including the Treasury Department, have said they were targeted.

"There's still so much we don't know," Biden said during a news conference in Wilmington, Delaware. "But we know this much: This attack constitutes a grave risk to our national security. It was carefully planned and carefully orchestrated."

The U.S. government has not made a formal assessment of who was behind the attack, but both Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Attorney General William Barr have said all signs point to Russia. But Trump, who has long sidestepped blaming Moscow for its provocations, has not followed suit and has instead suggested — without evidence — that China may have carried out the hack.

The breach of the Treasury Department 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 truth is, the Trump administration failed to prioritize cybersecurity," Biden said. "This assault happened on Donald Trump's watch, while he wasn't watching."

Given Trump's reluctance to publicly blame Russia, it appears likely that any formal U.S. retaliation for the hacking will fall to Biden. The president-elect said he would work with allies to set up international rules to hold nation states accountable for cyberattacks and vowed that his administration would make cybersecurity a top priority.

Biden spoke a day after Congress passed a \$900 billion coronavirus aid bill that includes direct payments to many Americans and aid for struggling small businesses. He called the bill a "down payment" on a broader relief bill he plans to introduce when he takes office in January.

"Like all compromises, this is far from perfect," Biden said. "Congress did their job this week, and I can and I must ask them to do it again next year."

The president-elect also expressed empathy for families who have struggled this year through the pandemic and resulting economic uncertainty. He singled out in particular frontline workers, scientists, researchers, clinical trial participants and those with deployed family members during the holiday season.

"Our hearts are always with you — keep the faith," said Biden, even as he warned that the nation faces a "dark winter" as COVID-19 cases rise across the country. More than 320,000 people have died from the virus in the United States.

He urged Americans to continue to take precautions, particularly during the holidays when many typically come together with family and friends. Noting the ways that the pandemic has altered his own holiday celebrations, which typically include up to two dozen relatives, Biden said "not this year."

On Monday, Biden was vaccinated on live television as part of an effort to reassure people that the COVID-19 vaccine is safe.

"I look forward to the second shot, and I have absolute confidence in the vaccine," Biden said. "But we're in short supply."

With about a month to go until his inauguration, Biden is working through the holiday to build out his Cabinet and White House team. He's expected to nominate Miguel Cardona, Connecticut's education chief, to serve as education secretary, according to people familiar with the matter.

Biden's transition team on Tuesday also announced a new round of White House staff appointments, led by longtime aide Bruce Reed as deputy chief of staff. Reed served as Biden's chief of staff during his first term as vice president and has long been a close member of Biden's inner circle of advisers.

But throughout the weeks of speculation over Biden's Cabinet selections, progressives have expressed concerns about what they see as Reed's moderate political views and fiscal conservatism.

Progressives notched a win in the latest round of staff announcements, however, with the appointment of Gautam Raghavan as deputy director of the office of presidential personnel. Raghavan served as chief of staff to Rep. Pramila Jayapal, who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus, and in his new position he'll help evaluate applicants for thousands of federal jobs and appointments throughout the administration.

Biden has also appointed Anne Filipic as director of management and administration, Ryan Montoya as

director of scheduling and advance, Vinay Reddy as director of speechwriting and Elizabeth Wilkins as a senior adviser to the chief of staff. All are alumni of the Obama-Biden administration, and Montoya and Reddy worked on Biden's campaign as well.

Kinnard reported from Columbia, South Carolina.

## Louis Vuitton yoga mat made of leather draws Hindu complaint

BOSTON (AP) — A Hindu activist is calling on luxury goods maker Louis Vuitton to pull a yoga mat made partly from cowhide leather, calling it "hugely insensitive."

Rajan Zed, president of the Universal Society of Hinduism, said in a statement Tuesday that the mat is "highly inappropriate" to practicing Hindus, who regard cows as sacred symbols of life.

"The scenario of yoga — a profound, sacred and ancient discipline introduced and nourished by Hinduism — being performed on a mat made from a killed cow is painful," Zed said.

Paris-based Louis Vuitton did not immediately respond Tuesday to messages from The Associated Press seeking comment.

The company's yoga mat, made mostly of canvas with leather details and a cowhide carrying strap, retails for \$2,390 online.

In an email to AP, Zed called on Louis Vuitton executives to apologize and adhere to its corporate code of conduct, which includes commitments to ethical and social responsibility. The company "should not be in the business of religious appropriation, sacrilege, mocking serious spiritual practices and ridiculing entire communities," he said.

The Universal Society of Hinduism, which is based in Reno, Nevada, has led several recent campaigns targeting what it considers the commercial misuse of sacred symbols.

Zed's organization is part of an interfaith coalition that's recently called on Anheuser-Busch InBev to rename its Brahma beer line — which shares its name with a Hindu god, but isn't named for the deity, the beer giant says — and also urged nightclubs to stop using sacred Buddhist and Hindu imagery as decor.

In August, online home goods giant Wayfair pulled a towel depicting the Hindu deity Lord Ganesha after the coalition objected.

## Performing in the pandemic, by zoom, drive-in and doorstep

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A good way to hear what we've missed this year is to listen to Sam Cooke's landmark live album, "Live at the Harlem Square Club, 1963." On a warm January night in downtown Miami, Cooke was well into his torrid set when, in the middle of "Bring it on Home to Me," he asks the audience to join in.

"Let me hear you say yeah," coos Cooke.

The "Yeah!" that follows — instant, exuberant, loud — is one of the great call-and-responses in music, a euphoria of performer and audience as one.

Anything like that blissful moment has been painfully out of reach in 2020. Music halls have been closed since March. Broadway is shuttered. Comedy clubs empty. Live studio audiences mostly sent home. Cinemas with only "Wash your hands" on the marquee. The entertainment world has trudged on, by live-streaming, zooming and improvising. But its in-person soul was nearly snuffed out, and with it a lifeblood of human connection.

The pandemic has upended entertainment industries, driving thousands out of work, reshaping time-tested institutions and accelerating digital transformations. For the arts, which are predicated on bringing people closer together if only for a song or a few acts, a year of isolation and social distancing goes against nature. Yet despite gathering being nearly impossible in 2020, many have found ways to connect nevertheless — even if applause is on mute, and standing ovations are sounded by car honks.

The show isn't the same, but it goes on.

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After a month of practicing and playing inside, Los Angeles Philharmonic members Cathy and Jonathan Karoly decided they had had enough. Cathy, a flutist, and Jonathan, a cellist, began playing on the porch of their Pasadena, California, home. At first, they didn't tell anyone but their neighbors. Friends came and sat on the lawn. Passersbys inquired. And before they knew it, the Karolys had played 25 concerts, through heat and (until recently) virus spikes. They got adept at printing programs and putting out folding chairs. A steam of Philharmonic colleagues joined them. Some wept.

"We take it very seriously," Jonathan says, speaking with his wife. "The fact that it's on our porch is irrelevant. We never wanted to sacrifice the quality. People come and they're going to hear a first-rate concert. We challenged ourselves."

"As if we're playing Carnegie Hall," says Cathy.

With famed concert halls and neighborhood joints alike closed around the world by COVID-19, new venues took their place. The drive-in, a barely surviving remnant of the '50s, proliferated, filling everywhere from box-store parking lots to deserted high-school ball fields. Playing not just movies but concerts, graduations and church services, the drive-in was reborn as the pandemic's unlikely ark.

Much of the year's entertainment was left to the streaming services, an ever-expanding array of subscription options that offered new oceans of content, and potentially a vision of Hollywood's future. Not everything worked. Remember Quibi? But media goliaths increasingly reoriented their operations for the unfolding streaming wars. Warner Bros., the studio of "Casablanca," detoured dramatically, sending "Woman Woman 1984," straight into homes and potentially forever downsizing the movie business.

Digital was both a lifeline and an imperfect stopgap. Zoom performances, virtual cinemas, filmed theater — even when done really well, as in "Hamilton" or "David Byrne's American Utopia" — were all inevitably insufficient imitations of the genuine article. But they made weathering the storm possible. Some pandemic-fueled creations — zoom reunion shows, podcasts — stitched together people otherwise quarantined from one another. Artists like Taylor Swift and Fleet Foxes used time shut in to create arguably their most bracingly intimate work.

One moment of grace came in late April with the virtual 90th birthday concert for Stephen Sondheim. The theater community, settling in for a dark year, was beleaguered and lonesome.

"We're dealing with so much grief that it feels kind of petty to be concerned about whether we can perform," says Raúl Esparza, who hosted the concert. "Yet there's something about the intimacy of live performance that you feel bereft without it. Like emptiness the world over. It's not a small thing. It's how we live."

Technical troubles plagued the concert's start. Eventually it began, with "Merrily We Roll Along."

"Part of what made it so special was the mess," says Esparza. "The fact that things went so wrong made it seem like things couldn't possibly go right."

Yet they did, and Esparza's rendition of "Take Me to the World" — "Take me to the world/ Out where I can push through crowds" — took on a new poignancy in lockdown. Later, Esparza would watch a Twitter map of the show's hashtag lighting up around the globe as the performance went on. "At one point, probably during 'Ladies Who Lunch,' New York starts to glow," says Esparza.

Performers like Esparza have moved on to other virtual productions, TV and film work. But reopening for Broadway remains at least months away, part of the endless, indefinite postponements of the pandemic. A summer's worth of a blockbusters pulled up stakes and now waits in the wings, while theaters await financial relief from Congress to stave off bankruptcy.

But 2020 also brought with it a sense of urgency. Protests and uprisings following the death of George Floyd were felt acutely in entertainment, where diversity still lags in many meaningful areas. Many of the year's most vital works spoke directly to the moment, even if they were created long before it.

Steve McQueen dedicated his "Small Axe" anthology to Floyd, and one of its stars, John Boyega, memorably joined throngs of protesters. Other films delved into deep and painful roots of racism, including Garrett Bradley's documentary "Time," Spike Lee's Vietnam veteran drama "Da 5 Bloods" and the August Wilson adaptation, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," starring Viola Davis.

"I feel now that it's up to us — now that it's really out there in the open — to challenge each other in

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every facet our lives," says Davis. "If we want that change, then we have to face some really undeniable truths about ourselves and about our country. We have to challenge that in our personal and professional spaces. This is not a time to be silent. This is not a time to question. This is not a time to make people feel comfortable. I think we're over that. And that translates into art."

Maybe the year's greatest music act was the 7 p.m. pots-and-pans clatter for hospital and essential workers that echoed through New York, and many other places as the pandemic surged around the country. Death was always close at hand, and the drumbeat of losses in the arts, whether from COVID-19 or other causes, was constant. John Prine. Chadwick Boseman. Alex Trebek. Bill Withers. Sean Connery. Little Richard. Carl Reiner. Eddie Van Halen. Charley Pride.

In June, the comedian and "Conan" writer Laurie Kilmartin lost her mom, JoAnn, to complications from COVID-19. While her mother was in the hospital, Kilmartin tweeted with heartache and humor through her mom's agonizingly quick descent. One example: "She is barely breathing but it would be great if she could awaken from all this and tell me to wash my robe."

"It always helps me to write jokes about a real situation," says Kilmartin. "Then I can take whatever emotion it is — grief — and make it useful."

Like most stand-ups, Kilmartin, believes getting in front of an audience — for her, five times a week since 1987 — is necessary to stay sharp. Zoom sets have helped, but living without the thing she does best has been disorienting. On stage, Kilmartin knows she's good. She knows she's in control.

"It's brain to brain," says Kilmartin. "When you're on stage, you're actively finding common ground with a whole bunch of strangers for 30 minutes or an hour. And it's super intense. When you're in the audience, it's also super intense. It's someone changing the temperature of your body for an hour."

The outlook for live performance in 2021 is, of course, uncertain. Vaccines are rolling out, but daily cases are extremely high and global deaths exceed 1.7 million. Nobody knows how soon it will be before movie theaters are again packed, Broadway is bustling and concert stages are booming. But whenever it is, something innate and beautiful about us will be restored.

Let me hear you say yeah.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

## **VIRUS TODAY: Deaths to set record, consumer confidence down**

By The Associated Press undefined

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

### THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

—Largely because of the pandemic, this is shaping up as the deadliest year in U.S. history, with deaths expected to exceed 3 million for the first time. The 2020 death rate could be at least 15% higher than last year's, once December totals are tallied. Life expectancy for 2020 could drop as much as three full years, said Robert Anderson of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

—The coronavirus pandemic is dragging down U.S. consumer confidence during the crucial holiday season, which could make or break a number of retailers, airlines, restaurants and other sectors. The December reading of 88.6 released Tuesday by the Conference Board is a sharp decline from last month, which was revised downward to 92.9, and it is far worse than economists had expected.

—The governor of North Dakota is allowing bars and restaurants to return to regular hours of operation with a drop in active COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations. Republican Gov. Doug Burgum's executive order requires the establishments to follow other state and local rules, including limiting capacity and continuing precautions such as social distancing and mask wearing.

**THE NUMBERS:** The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. increased over the past two weeks from 2,228 on December 7 to 2,655 on December 21, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

**DEATH TOLL:** The U.S. death toll stands at 319,466 people, roughly the same as the population of Hen-



derson, Nevada, a Las Vegas suburban city.

QUOTABLE: "This is the perfect 2020 tree." — Camm Tyler, one of many customers who bought scrawny "Charlie Brown" Christmas trees from a neighborhood lot in Richmond, Virginia, to support a private middle school that provides scholarships for students from an impoverished area of the city.

ICYMI: The coronavirus legislation approved by Congress should put a stop to "surprise" medical bills as of January 2022. Unexpected charges that can reach tens of thousands of dollars come from doctors and hospitals that are outside the network of a patient's health insurance plan. The compromise bill would limit what patients can be billed for out-of-network services to a fee that's based on in-network charges.

ON THE HORIZON: President Donald Trump is expected in coming days to sign a \$900 billion pandemic relief bill that cleared Congress on Monday. It would establish a temporary \$300 per week supplemental jobless benefit and a \$600 direct stimulus payment to most Americans. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin says direct payments will begin arriving in bank accounts next week.

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

## Perdue seeks payoff from Trump loyalty in Georgia runoff

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — In 2014, David Perdue introduced himself to Georgia voters as a corporate executive capable of bringing pragmatism to a Congress depicted in his first TV ad as a bunch of diaper-clad, crying babies.

"Help me change the childish behavior up there," he asked voters in his winning campaign for U.S. Senate.

Since then, the Republican who promised level-headed maturity in Washington has been swept up in the tornado of Donald Trump's White House. Perdue became one of the Senate's chief defenders of a president known for schoolyard insults and who still refuses to accept his own election defeat.

Now Perdue is at the center of one of the most intense Senate races in recent memory, fighting for reelection in a Jan. 5 runoff election that will determine which party controls the Senate. It's an unexpected role for a politician described even by close allies as someone who doesn't stir strong passions.

"He's not flamboyant," said Alec Poitevint, a Georgia businessman and GOP activist who serves as Perdue's campaign chairman. "But one thing is, he's consistent. He never changes."

Perdue fell just short of the 50% threshold he needed to defeat Democrat Jon Ossoff outright on Nov. 3. Fellow Republican Sen. Kelly Loeffler is in a runoff against Democrat Raphael Warnock. If both Perdue and Loeffler lose, Democrats will control the Senate in the new Congress.

Perdue's runoff campaign has focused on ensuring Trump's base shows up to vote again. The senator has backed the president's failed effort to toss out millions of votes and overturn Democrat Joe Biden's victory.

Though Perdue hasn't repeated Trump's election fraud claims, he backed a failed Texas lawsuit that sought to invalidate Biden's victory in Georgia. Perdue also called for Georgia's Republican secretary of state to resign, citing unspecified "mismanagement" of the election.

When the president came to Georgia this month for the stated purpose of firing up support for the Republican Senate candidates, Perdue could barely get a word in. When his turn at the microphone came, the senator had to plead for a chance to speak amid the crowd's roars of "Fight for Trump!"

When Perdue first ran for the Senate, the politician of the family was his first cousin: former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, whom Trump would later pick as his agriculture secretary.

David Perdue ran on his executive experience. As CEO of Reebok in 2001, he was credited with helping revive the footwear brand. Perdue moved to Pillowtex, but couldn't save the struggling textile company from going under in 2003. He got mixed results leading Dollar General, where rapid expansion doubled stock prices but later hurt profits. Perdue resigned in 2007 as shareholders sold the retailer to private owners.

After being the boss in the private sector, and running on changing the way Congress does business, Perdue accepted his role as a junior lawmaker and mostly worked behind the scenes, said Jack Kingston, a former Georgia congressman and Republican who lost the 2014 Senate primary to Perdue.

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"He came to town with this knowledge that it's a system of seniority, it's a system of consensus," Kingston said. "That you can't just go in there and say, 'I'm a CEO of a Fortune 500 company and I want this done yesterday.'"

Perdue's profile rose as he showed an unflinching willingness to defend Trump even before he'd won the presidency. After the "Access Hollywood" recording of Trump boasting about groping women surfaced in the 2016 campaign, Perdue acknowledged that "this guy's no choir boy." Still, he said the nation needed an outsider like Trump.

Perdue spent the next four years making frequent TV appearances as an outspoken Trump ally.

"We have a person in the White House who is a person of destiny," Perdue told Capitol Hill reporters in 2017, "coming in at an important time when we need to break some eggs in Washington."

Supporters say Perdue has delivered for Georgia. He helped secure funding for a \$973 million expansion of Savannah's busy shipping channel as well as \$3 billion in disaster aid for Georgia and Florida farmers who had crops devastated by Hurricane Michael in 2018.

Some question whether Perdue used his office for personal gain. Senate financial disclosures show stock trades during the early days of the coronavirus pandemic allowed him to avoid steep losses and reap big gains.

During an October debate, Ossoff accused Perdue of downplaying the health crisis while "looking after your own assets." Perdue spokesman John Burke has said the Justice Department, the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Senate Ethics Committee all examined Perdue's trading and found no grounds for criminal charges or ethics violations.

Regardless, Perdue's stock trades remain troubling, said Beth Rotman of the nonpartisan watchdog group Common Cause.

"It looks terrible if people are coming out of sessions of Congress and getting wealthy on their own at a time when everyday Americans are suffering," Rotman said.

Perdue announced in May that his financial advisers would no longer trade individual stocks.

One of the Senate's wealthier members, Perdue lives in a gated area of Sea Island, a resort getaway that ranks among Georgia's richest communities. While campaigning, he projects a more down-home image, often wearing a blue jean jacket or posting social media photos from a casual breakfast at Waffle House.

Aside from rallies with Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, Perdue has sought to avoid the media spotlight. He ducked the runoff's only debate, leaving Ossoff to face an empty podium. Bus tour stops haven't been made public, with invitations limited to loyal supporters.

Perdue declined an interview request from The Associated Press.

Former Republican political consultant Clint Murphy said he's supporting Ossoff — in part because he sees Perdue, who hasn't held a public town hall since taking office, as too inaccessible to voters.

"The man didn't build any relationships other than with the donor class," said Murphy, now an independent who also voted for Biden. "You have a civic responsibility. And I think he's totally failed at carrying out that function."

If reelected, would Perdue's second term be his last? He has co-sponsored proposals to impose term limits, including two terms for senators, that made little headway. Burke said Perdue plans to continue that fight, but he did not answer whether Perdue would limit himself if not required by law.

"As far as I know, two terms is all he will be there," campaign chairman Poitevint said. "He's very passionate about term limits. Six years in Washington hasn't changed that."

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Associated Press writer Ben Nadler in Atlanta contributed to this report.

## Can employers make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory?

By The Associated Press undefined

Can employers make COVID-19 vaccination mandatory?

Yes, with some exceptions.

Experts say employers can require employees to take safety measures, including vaccination. That doesn't

necessarily mean you would get fired if you refuse, but you might need to sign a waiver or agree to work under specific conditions to limit any risk you might pose to yourself or others.

"Employers generally have wide scope" to make rules for the workplace, said Dorit Reiss, a law professor who specializes in vaccine policies at the University of California Hastings College of the Law. "It's their business."

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has allowed companies to mandate the flu and other vaccines, and has also indicated they can require COVID-19 vaccines.

There are exceptions; for example, people can request exemptions for medical or religious reasons.

And even though employers can require vaccinations, there are reasons they might not want to.

Tracking compliance with mandatory vaccination would be an administrative burden, said Michelle S. Strowhiro, an employment adviser and lawyer at McDermott Will & Emery. Employers would also have to manage exemption requests — not to mention legal claims that might arise.

As a result, many employers will likely strongly encourage vaccination without requiring it, Strowhiro said.

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

Read previous Viral Questions:

Will children be able to get COVID-19 vaccines?

Should I wipe down groceries during the pandemic?

Do "self-cleaning" elevator buttons really work?

## Christmas in the ICU: Decorations, lights and many tears

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

OPELIKA, Ala. (AP) — A Christmas tree stands outside the intensive care room where a man stricken by COVID-19 lies unconscious, a machine breathing for him. A few feet away, a plastic snowman adorns the door of another patient whose face is barely visible behind ventilator tubes.

The decorations are "a way to let family members know that we're trying, and we love these patients and we want them to feel like it's Christmas as much as we can," nurse Carla Fallin said, standing just outside one of the rooms at East Alabama Medical Center.

While parades, shopping and Christmas tree lightings go on around them, nurses and doctors who've spent agonizing months caring for the ill are doing what they can to get through the holiday season, which many fear will only spread the disease and add to the U.S. death toll that has surpassed 300,000.

The medical center about 60 miles northeast of Montgomery faces a new influx of COVID-19 patients as the pandemic intensifies. That means staff members can hang decorations on patients' doors in the ICU but cannot attend after-work Christmas parties. A cheerful Santa doll stands atop the desk at a nursing station, but big gatherings with relatives are out.

A nurse for five years, Fallin said Christmas just doesn't feel right this year. She and her husband did not take their two young sons to local Christmas events that drew hundreds of people, many without masks. The decorations in the ICU help lighten the mental load a little, she said, if only until another patient nears death.

The red-brick hospital is near Auburn University in the old railroad town of Opelika, a city of 30,000 that decorated its streetlights and overpasses with green garlands and red ribbons for the season. A huge Christmas tree stands near downtown boutiques, salons and restaurants where hundreds of residents crowded together for a holiday program last weekend.

East Alabama Medical Center draws patients from a mostly rural region. Many people in the city wear masks in compliance with a state order, but fewer health precautions are visible in surrounding areas.

The area was an early hot spot for the virus in the spring. Then cases eased before a summertime spike that health officials blamed on backyard cookouts and lake gatherings around July 4.

Just as in other places across the country, a surge in infections linked to Thanksgiving is now filling up

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beds at the hospital. With vaccines not yet available to the general public, hospital officials dread what might happen in January after families board airplanes for the holidays and spend hours gathered around dinner tables or Christmas trees.

Amid so much suffering and after so many tears, any ray of brightness helps, even if it's just a candy cane sticker on a ICU window, said Dr. Meshia Wallace, a pulmonary physician who works in critical care.

"Families come in, and all they're getting for the most part is bad news: 'Your family member is sick, they've moved down from the seventh floor to the ICU,'" she said. "A little bit of Christmas cheer is not going to hurt. It can only help."

Wallace is skipping her usual Christmas gathering of about 30 relatives and hopes to spend the holiday with an aunt who might drive over from Atlanta if neither is symptomatic. Dr. Ricardo Maldonado, who leads the pandemic response team at East Alabama, knows exactly what he will do for the holiday.

"Work," Maldonado said after visiting patients on a hospital floor full of COVID-19 patients. "There is so much work."

The nonprofit hospital has had to bring in nearly 60 traveling nurses to shore up staffing that has been depleted, yet requests to take on additional COVID-19 patients still come in most days from neighboring states, including Mississippi and Tennessee, said chief executive Laura Grill.

Some workers have been sickened by the virus, she said, and others retired or quit. Many, she said, are simply exhausted, both physically and emotionally, and the Christmas season isn't making things easier.

"I sat in a meeting two days ago with the nurse manager of our ICU and she just cried. She said, 'We don't know what else to do. We can look at this patient and know that they are not going to get better,'" Grill said.

Marilynn Waldon has felt the strain.

The veteran nurse oversees COVID-19 patients on a floor that has been decorated for Christmas with strings of white lights and stockings. Waldon had planned to retire this month but with the holidays approaching, she prayed and changed her mind.

"I talked to God about it, and he said, 'You're not a quitter. No. These patients got to be taken care of, and that's why you went to nursing school. So you need to stay there, do what you can do, until we get over this crisis that we're in,'" Waldon said.

## During crucial holiday season, US consumer confidence slumps

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

SILVER SPRING, Md. (AP) — A closely-watched gauge of U.S. consumer confidence tumbled in December as rising coronavirus cases dragged American optimism to its lowest level since the summer.

However, rising pessimism is now spreading during the crucial holiday season, which could make or break a number of retailers, airlines, restaurants other sector that have been hammered financially during the pandemic.

The December reading of 88.6 released Tuesday by the Conference Board is a sharp decline from last month, which was revised downward to 92.9, and it is far worse than economists had expected.

It may be an ominous sign for an economy in which consumer spending accounts for 70% of all economic activity.

The Commerce Department reported last week that U.S. retail sales fell a seasonally adjusted 1.1% in November, the biggest drop in seven months, and also worse than most were expecting. The drumbeat of weak economic data may be providing a grim preview of Christmas receipts, which can account for a quarter or more of a retailer's annual sales.

The index measuring consumers' assessment of current business and labor market conditions also fell sharply, from 105.9 last month to 90.3 in December. Consumers' short-term outlook for income, business, and labor market conditions ticked up slightly from 84.3 in November to 87.5 this month, possibly because of recent approvals for COVID-19 vaccines.

It remains to be seen how Congress' \$900 billion relief bill, which was passed Monday and too late for the survey, will affect consumer behavior this winter.

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.

## 'Charlie Brown' Christmas trees lift school, spirits

By DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — Frank Pichel's Christmas trees will probably never be chosen to light up New York's Rockefeller Center. They look more like the droopy, pitiful tree made famous in the 1965 children's animated classic, "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

But Pichel and his customers don't seem to mind in a year when little seems normal. His trees have been flying off a tiny neighborhood lot since he started selling them last month to raise money for a private middle school that provides scholarships for students from an impoverished area of Richmond.

Customer Camm Tyler, a 36-year-old digital consultant, looked over his uneven tree as he propped it up against a fence and prepared to carry it home.

"This is the perfect 2020 tree," he said.

Anna Julia Cooper Episcopal School in Richmond's East End was started in 2009 by a group of local Episcopal parishioners and priests who wanted to help children from low-income families change the trajectory of their lives. The faith-based school is funded entirely by donors and local foundations. All of its 118 students receive full scholarships.

Pichel, a commercial animator and part-time professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, doesn't have children or any other connection to the school. But after donating some athletic equipment to the school a few years ago, he decided he wanted to do something more this year.

He thought of the gangly Virginia pine trees that grow wild on a 66-acre (27-hectare) plot of land he owns about two hours west of Richmond. Would people want them for their Christmas trees, he wondered?

His trees are not like the full-branched, perfectly shaped trees many people buy for Christmas. Instead, most are scrawny and uneven-looking.

But Pichel decided to give it a try. At first, he picked out the best-looking trees on his land, thinking they would appeal to more buyers. But then he thought of the sad-looking tree in the Charlie Brown Christmas special. His trees are taller than Charlie Brown's but just as scraggly.

"When people want a Charlie Brown tree, they want the uniqueness and the weirdness. The ones with the fewest branches sold the quickest because they're even more like Charlie Brown's," Pichel said.

Pichel cut down 70 trees, loaded them into the back of his pickup truck and started selling them right after Thanksgiving from a small grassy lot he rented for \$1 from two generous owners who wanted to help. He was stunned by the response. He sold 180 trees in three weekends, raising a total of \$5,554 for the school. He let people set their own prices; most paid \$20 to \$50 for a tree.

"Some people just stopped by and said, 'I don't want a tree. I just want to make a donation,'" he said.

Rei Alvarez, an illustrator and musician, said he and his wife loved the nostalgia and "Charlie Brown aesthetic" of Pichel's trees.

"I totally grew up with it, totally," Alvarez said.

He said buying a less-than-perfect tree fits with his desire to avoid the commercialism of Christmas and to teach his 2-year-old son to appreciate the simpler things in life.

"As an artist, I know it's not what you have, it's what you do with it," he said. "You give the few branches you have a little love."

As Alvarez picked out a tree, Mary Jane D'Arville played the theme song from "A Charlie Brown Christmas" and traditional Christmas carols on a harp on the sidewalk next to Pichel's lot. D'Arville, who met Pichel at a local dog park, offered to provide Christmas music as soon as she heard what Pichel was doing for the school.

"Those trees, they represent that whole spirit of the Charlie Brown Christmas," she said.

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Head of School Mike Maruca said the community enthusiasm for Pichel's trees is attributable to "people wanting to help their neighbor," in this case, the school. He said it's a sentiment that may be stronger this year because of the devastation caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Maybe all of us are feeling a little bit like a Charlie Brown Christmas tree, given 2020," he said. "I don't think we're all feeling like robust, well-proportioned trees. We're all kind of bruised."

"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>

## **Pandemic crushes global supply chains, workers at both ends**

By LOUISE DONOVAN/The Fuller Project undefined

In her last weeks working the freight shift at the local J.C. Penney store, Alexandra Orozco took out her phone and hit record. The 22-year-old shot videos as she and her co-workers slid down a metal shoot (technically meant for empty boxes) in the store room, their heads falling back laughing, and posted them on TikTok. Another, uploaded on 13th October, shows the giant black-and-red "Everything Must go!" posters hanging from ceiling to floor, and an eerily half-empty basement section.

"Slowing losing my job," she wrote in the caption, days before the store in Delano, California shut for good, just one of 156 J.C. Penneys across the United States to close since June this year.

Orozco began working part-time at J.C. Penney when she was 18, and in nearly four years rose through the ranks from cashier to freight team associate, unloading trucks stuffed with new stock and doing inventory. Four days a week, she arrived at the store by four or five a.m. The early mornings suited her; she loved her job but crowds made her anxious. Now, since being laid off, she's stressed. She's applied for a couple of jobs - one counselling kids, the other delivering flowers - but has yet to hear back from either.

"It's so sad," she explains over the phone from her home, noise from a T.V. playing softly in the background. "I never thought this would happen. And Delano is a small place. There's not that many stores. It's hard to find jobs here."

Halfway across the world, Matefo Litali experienced upheaval, too. A skilled sewer, the 53-year-old has worked in garment factories for the past 14 years across Lesotho, a small mountainous country entirely surrounded by South Africa. Tzicc Clothing, which makes apparel for U.S.-based giants J.C. Penney and Walmart, employed the seamstress for two months before nationwide lockdown measures forced all factories to temporarily close in March. On May 6, she returned to work. The next day, at the end of her shift, she says management told her not to come back. Tzicc confirmed her last day was May 7.

"I felt powerless," she says. "The first thing that went through my mind was, 'Why me?'"

Neither woman has met, nor are they likely to meet. One woman lives in a remote agricultural town on the west coast of America, the other some 10,000 miles away in Southern Africa in one of the smallest countries on earth. Now, both of their lives - and livelihoods - are linked by a global pandemic that has crushed one of the world's supply chains and with it, economies, too. COVID-19 lockdowns have obliterated a retail sector already struggling to survive before the coronavirus hit, which has in turn contributed to the collapse of the global garment trade and wreaked havoc for millions of workers, the vast majority of them women like Orozco and Litali.

This story was reported by The Fuller Project, a global nonprofit newsroom reporting on issues that affect women.

In Lesotho, which has a population of 2.1 million, the pandemic's effects were felt fast. Over the past two decades, the country's garment industry has boomed to become its largest employer, accounting for more than 20% of Lesotho's gross domestic product. Much of this success is down to a trade deal called the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which was signed by then-President Bill Clinton in 2000,

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allowing duty-free exports to the U.S. Today, Lesotho's garment workers, 90% of whom are women, craft clothes for some of America's most iconic brands: Levis Strauss, Wrangler, Macy's and Walmart.

While Lesotho's garment industry might be lesser known compared to the powerhouses of China and Bangladesh, it's another example of an economy heavily reliant on U.S. demand. Outside of the African continent, America is the largest recipient of Lesotho's exports - accounting for almost half - according to the most recently available World Trade Organization data from 2017. And if the country has escaped relatively unscathed from the coronavirus, with just 2,065 cases recorded since the start, the impact of America's stringent lockdown measures have trickled through the industry in Lesotho down with equally devastating effect.

In the U.S, meanwhile, clothing retailers have been hit particularly hard. While J.C. Penney hasn't been profitable since 2010, the 118-year-old department store chain filed for bankruptcy in May. Six months later, it was bought out but has already reduced its workforce by over 10,000, approximately 11% of its U.S. staff, during the restructuring, a source familiar with the situation confirmed to The Fuller Project." The bankruptcies of major American retailers have stacked up this year: J.Crew, Neiman Marcus and Brooks Brothers, to name three of the 46 in 2020, according to marketing data from S&P Global.

"And when a big U.S. retailer takes a tumble," says Neil Saunders, managing director at research firm GlobalData Retail, "the effects are felt across the globe."

The U.S. is one of the world's top importers of clothing, accounting for nearly a quarter of the total global retail spend. At the beginning of the pandemic in March, as U.S. retailers cancelled or failed to pay for existing orders worth billions of dollars, the effects quickly rippled down the supply chain globally. Thousands of garment factories around the world closed leading to widespread lay-offs and suspensions of employees like Litali in Lesotho. From January to June of this year, imports of garments in the U.S. dropped by 26%, a loss of \$17 billion for factories around the world compared to the same period last year, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO).

"Even though J.C. Penney may not be profitable, it's still a pretty big business," says Saunders. "It's still placing a lot of orders with suppliers and supports a lot of jobs globally, so the fallout is extensive."

At Tzicc Clothing, which employed Litali, roughly one fifth of employees have lost their jobs since May, says Tšepang Makakole of the National Clothing Textile and Allied Workers Union (NACTWU) in Lesotho. He knows of at least six factories that have closed across the country, seeing thousands of workers lose their jobs.

"For women, it's a disaster," he adds. "Most of them working in the factories are single parents supporting their families and right now, the industry is facing a total collapse."

Litali, the seamstress, says she felt weak in the knees when she heard the news that she was suddenly unemployed. In the nineties, a flurry of Taiwanese and Chinese clothing companies moved to Lesotho, and Litali was one of the first women to be taught how to sew, she says. At Tzicc, she would sit at her table five days a week and stitch together T-shirts and gym leggings using an old, worn sewing machine. The factory is set on one level, with exposed brick walls, and packed tight with over 1,000 women.

A widow for the last eight years, Litali single-handedly supports her youngest daughter, who is 20, and her 4-year-old grandchild. During the lockdown, her employer delayed her final \$94 paycheck for three months until May. Tzicc Clothing also claimed she didn't qualify for monthly government subsidy payments totalling \$160 because she was on a probationary contract.

Malekena Ntsiki, an organizer at the Independent Democratic Union of Lesotho (IDUL), disputed both issues with Tzicc on behalf of Litali, and she says the government subsidy was intended for all workers regardless of their contract type.

The Human Resources manager at Tzicc Clothing, Masefatsa Mofolo, confirmed the company laid off staff due to limited orders and that Litali lost her job. All employees on probationary contracts were terminated during the pandemic, she said.

While she waited for her final paycheck, Litali received no income or support for three months. The family survived off food parcels donated by the local church until her salary arrived. "I got so stressed I thought I was going mad," she explains. "I would spend the whole day in my house sleeping, not doing anything."

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It got to a stage where I wouldn't even try to talk with my daughter. She would ask me: 'Are you sick? What is the problem?' and I wouldn't say anything to her. I didn't want to speak to anyone or ask for help."

At one point, she considered tying the knot with her partner. An electrician, he was paid daily for odd jobs on construction sites but this work dried up during the pandemic, too. "I thought: okay, I'm old, but I'm struggling and this person is here...maybe marriage can help somehow," she half-jokes. Together for a couple of months, the pair have since parted ways.

Back in California, Orozco occasionally walks past the J.C. Penney store in town on her way to the bank. The windows are free from sale signs, the gates locked. "It's upsetting," she says. "I was really close to the cleaning lady who worked there. She gave me remedies for my insomnia. It broke my heart to know I probably won't ever see her again."

A spokesperson for J.C. Penney declined to comment on the impact of countrywide store closures.

Although Orozco lives with her parents, she still needs to cover her car and phone bills. When her J.C. Penney store closed temporarily in mid-March in adherence with COVID-19 measures, she was out of work for three months and applied for unemployment.

She used the time to finesse her side-hustle: a make-up business. In June, Orozco launched Glossy Baby Cosmetics, selling lashes, lipglosses and clothes via Instagram. She spends hours researching the products online and then buys in bulk when she finds something she likes.

"My room is currently like a tornado," she adds of the boxes piling up.

It's still early days, and money is tighter than before. She's currently making an estimated \$200-300 per month in sales from her new online business, nearly five times less than her salary at J.C. Penney.

The layoff has taken its toll on her mental health, too. Orozco suffers from bouts of depression and often feels like giving up on her newfound entrepreneurism, though she's quickly talked out of it by her family, she says. Her 42-year-old mother, Luz, who immigrated to American from Mexico at 13-years-old and set up her own party-planning business is particularly persuasive.

Even if she did give up, Orozco's choices are limited. Just over a two-hour drive from Los Angeles, the population of Delano is roughly 50,000, and jobs are scarce, she says. The J.C. Penney was one of the few remaining department chains in town and many of her co-workers, much like Orozco, hadn't found another job by the time the store shuttered.

"Not a lot of people worked there but the store really meant something to Delano," she explains. "People are really sad. It's the only place that sold nice, branded clothes, like Levi's. And it's been here for a very long time. My mom used to go shopping with her mom there but she can't relive that memory because the store is gone."

While a rebound isn't impossible, the drop in demand for apparel shows no signs of abating, says Saunders from GlobalData. Clothing sales fell by 4.2% in October compared to the previous month, according to advance monthly sales data released by the U.S. Census Bureau.

"If this continues into 2021 and beyond, then it could have a severe impact on the apparel supply chains (long-term)," he adds. "In a low-demand environment, pricing becomes more of an issue. Players compete with each other and the fallout is (often) felt in labor in terms of working conditions, benefits, pay rates and working hours."

Today, both Litali and Orozco's lives look uncertain. In Lesotho, Litali waited patiently outside the gates of various garment factories for months in search of work. In August, she landed a job sewing jeans at Presitex, a factory close to her previous employer. But her contract is temporary, and with each passing month, she fears it won't be renewed.

After learning a kiosk in her local mall costs \$5,000 to rent for two months, Orozco is looking into more cost-effective ways of bringing her Instagram business to life. By next year, she hopes to have saved enough for a brick-and-mortar store.

"Right now I'm not sure whether to risk investing a little more into the business or pay my bills," she says. "It's stressful but it's worth it, you know? I know one day it will be worth it."

Additional research by Refiloe Makhaba Nkune. Louise Donovan is a reporter with The Fuller Project.



## US deaths in 2020 top 3 million, by far most ever counted

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — This is the deadliest year in U.S. history, with deaths expected to top 3 million for the first time — due mainly to the coronavirus pandemic.

Final mortality data for this year will not be available for months. But preliminary numbers suggest that the United States is on track to see more than 3.2 million deaths this year, or at least 400,000 more than in 2019.

U.S. deaths increase most years, so some annual rise in fatalities is expected. But the 2020 numbers amount to a jump of about 15%, and could go higher once all the deaths from this month are counted.

That would mark the largest single-year percentage leap since 1918, when tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers died in World War I and hundreds of thousands of Americans died in a flu pandemic. Deaths rose 46% that year, compared with 1917.

COVID-19 has killed more than 318,000 Americans and counting. Before it came along, there was reason to be hopeful about U.S. death trends.

The nation's overall mortality rate fell a bit in 2019, due to reductions in heart disease and cancer deaths. And life expectancy inched up — by several weeks — for the second straight year, according to death certificate data released Tuesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But life expectancy for 2020 could end up dropping as much as three full years, said Robert Anderson of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC counted 2,854,838 U.S. deaths last year, or nearly 16,000 more than 2018. That's fairly good news: Deaths usually rise by about 20,000 to 50,000 each year, mainly due to the nation's aging, and growing, population.

Indeed, the age-adjusted death rate dropped about 1% in 2019, and life expectancy rose by about six weeks to 78.8 years, the CDC reported.

"It was actually a pretty good year for mortality, as things go," said Anderson, who oversees CDC death statistics.

The U.S. coronavirus epidemic has been a big driver of deaths this year, both directly and indirectly.

The virus was first identified in China last year, and the first U.S. cases were reported this year. But it has become the third leading cause of death, behind only heart disease and cancer. For certain periods this year, COVID-19 was the No. 1 killer.

But some other types of deaths also have increased.

A burst of pneumonia cases early this year may have been COVID-19 deaths that simply weren't recognized as such early in the epidemic. But there also have been an unexpected number of deaths from certain types of heart and circulatory diseases, diabetes and dementia, Anderson said.

Many of those, too, may be related to COVID. The virus could have weakened patients already struggling with those conditions, or could have diminished the care they were getting, he said.

Early in the epidemic, some were optimistic that car crash deaths would drop as people stopped commuting or driving to social events. Data on that is not yet in, but anecdotal reports suggest there was no such decline.

Suicide deaths dropped in 2019 compared with 2018, but early information suggests they have not continued to drop this year, Anderson and others said.

Drug overdose deaths, meanwhile, got much worse.

Before the coronavirus even arrived, the U.S. was in the midst of the deadliest drug overdose epidemic in its history.

Data for all of 2020 is not yet available. But last week the CDC reported more than 81,000 drug overdose deaths in the 12 months ending in May, making it the highest number ever recorded in a one-year period.

Experts think the pandemic's disruption to in-person treatment and recovery services may have been a factor. People also are more likely to be taking drugs alone — without the benefit of a friend or family

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member who can call 911 or administer overdose-reversing medication.

But perhaps a bigger factor are the drugs themselves: COVID-19 caused supply problems for dealers, so they are increasingly mixing cheap and deadly fentanyl into heroin, cocaine and methamphetamine, experts said.

"I don't suspect there are a bunch of new people who suddenly started using drugs because of COVID. If anything, I think the supply of people who are already using drugs is more contaminated," said Shannon Monnat, a Syracuse University researcher who studies drug overdose trends.

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## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 23, the 358th day of 2020. There are eight days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 23, 1954, the first successful human kidney transplant took place at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston as a surgical team removed a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick and implanted it in Herrick's twin brother, Richard.

On this date:

In 1783, George Washington resigned as commander in chief of the Continental Army and retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Virginia.

In 1913, the Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt restored the civil rights of about 1,500 people who had been jailed for opposing the (First) World War.

In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese.

In 1948, former Japanese premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese war leaders were executed in Tokyo.

In 1962, Cuba began releasing prisoners from the failed Bay of Pigs invasion under an agreement in which Cuba received more than \$50 million worth of food and medical supplies.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1972, a 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck Nicaragua; the disaster claimed some 5,000 lives.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan (ruh-TAN') and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first non-stop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 1997, a federal jury in Denver convicted Terry Nichols of involuntary manslaughter and conspiracy for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing, declining to find him guilty of murder. (Nichols was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.)

In 2001, Time magazine named New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani its Person of the Year for his steadfast response to the 9/11 terrorist attack.

In 2003, a jury in Chesapeake, Va., sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty.

Ten years ago: Mail bombs blamed on anarchists exploded at the Swiss and Chilean embassies in Rome, seriously wounding two people. Chicago Board of Election Commissioners ruled that former White House chief of staff Rahm Emanuel was a resident of the city and therefore eligible to run for mayor.

Five years ago: Protesters blocked access to a terminal and caused significant holiday traffic delays around Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport after staging a Black Lives Matter rally that also briefly shut down part of the Mall of America; the demonstrations were organized to draw attention to the recent

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police shooting of a Black man in Minneapolis. Peggy Say, 74, who spent nearly seven years on a tireless quest for the release of her brother, AP journalist Terry Anderson, and fellow hostages from kidnappers in Lebanon, died in Cookeville, Tennessee.

One year ago: Boeing ousted CEO Dennis Muilenburg as the company remained engulfed in the crisis stemming from the crash of two of its 737 Max airliners. A court in Saudi Arabia sentenced five people to death for the killing of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of the Saudi royal family; the five were among 11 people who were put on trial over the killing.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Ronnie Schell is 89. Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 87. Actor Frederic Forrest is 84. Rock musician Jorma Kaukonen (YOR'-mah KOW'-kah-nen) is 80. Rock musician Ron Bushy is 79. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 77. U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark (ret.) is 76. Actor Susan Lucci is 74. Singer-musician Adrian Belew is 71. Rock musician Dave Murray (Iron Maiden) is 64. Actor Joan Severance is 62. Singer Terry Weeks is 57. Rock singer Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam) is 56. The former first lady of France, Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, is 53. Rock musician Jamie Murphy is 45. Jazz musician Irvin Mayfield is 43. Actor Estella Warren is 42. Actor Elvy Yost is 33. Actor Anna Maria Perez de Tagle (TAG'-lee) is 30. Actor Spencer Daniels is 28. Actor Caleb Foote is 27.