

Groton Daily Independent

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“GOOD FRIENDS HELP YOU TO FIND IMPORTANT THINGS WHEN YOU HAVE LOST THEM...YOUR SMILE, YOUR HOPE, AND YOUR COURAGE.”

-DOE ZANTAMATA

The service of
Darrel Haskell
Monday, Dec. 28, 1:00 p.m.
Paetznick-Garness
Funeral Chapel

A graphic featuring three lit candles of varying heights on the left side, casting a warm glow. On the right side, there is a portrait of an elderly man with white hair, identified as Darrel Haskell. The background is black.

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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.

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The Minnesota Vikings are officially eliminated from the playoffs after a 52-33 Christmas Day beatdown by the New Orleans Saints. After the Vikings knocked the Saints out of the playoffs two out of the last three seasons, I'm sure there was a small feeling of vindication for New Orleans. For the Vikings, it was the most points they've given up since 1963. The offense was able to move the ball well, but the defense was simply atrocious. After the game, head coach Mike Zimmer was quoted as saying the defense was "the worst I've ever had" at any point in his coaching career.



By Jordan Wright

Kirk Cousins connected on 27 of 41 throws for 291 yards and three touchdowns. It was a good effort in yet another game when he was under constant pressure - he was sacked twice and hit another nine times. Dalvin Cook averaged 4.9 yards per carry, but with the Vikings being down the whole game, Cook only carried the ball 15 times. Adam Thielen caught eight passes for 97 yards and a touchdown, Justin Jefferson caught six passes for 85 yards, and Irv Smith Jr., who was filling in for the injured Kyle Rudolph, caught six passes for 53 yards and two touchdowns.

The Vikings' defense was unable to do anything right on Christmas Day, and it all started up front. Drew Brees was only pressured on one drop back, and the Vikings' defense failed to get a single sack or tackle for a loss, while only accumulating one QB hit. It's no surprise that the Vikings' defensive line isn't playing well after losing 75 percent of the starters from 2019, but at some point someone needs to step up and that hasn't happened all season. Blake Lynch, an undrafted rookie linebacker, led the team with 10 total tackles, while Shamar Stephen had the team's only QB hit. On a positive note, Hardy Nickerson, a fourth year player who was recently added to the Vikings' roster, and rookie cornerback Harrison Hand both had an interception in the game.

Player of the game

The player of the game is Blake Lynch. After being forced into action because of all the injuries on the Vikings' defense, the undrafted rookie played well all things considered.

Looking ahead, the Vikings (6-9) travel to Detroit to take on the Lions (5-10). This will be the final game of the season for the purple and gold, and while it would be nice to get a win against a hapless Lions team, the best thing that could happen would be a Vikings loss and a better draft pick this spring. The Lions were just embarrassed by the Buccaneers on Saturday, losing 47-7. Hopefully the Vikings sit most of the starters in an effort to get some of the younger players some game time. ESPN is giving the Vikings a 68 percent chance to win. Let's hope they're wrong!

On a positive note, I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas and are having a happy and healthy holiday season. Skol!

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That's Life by Tony Bender

Forecast

Editor's note: Here's one of our favorites from 2011.

The big news around here is that Paul Smokov of rural Steele, who predicts the weather by reading pig spleens, says it is going to be a cold, snowy winter. I thought it was a nice touch that the Steele newspaper included a full color front-page picture of the actual pig spleens just in case we doubted Paul's word.

They look like Christmas stockings made of liver. As a matter of fact, pig spleens taste like liver, too, according to survivors. Now you might be thinking, "Great. Just what the world needs—a liver substitute," but I have a hunch. Pig spleens could be the next chicken gizzards. I would advise you to invest heavily in the promising fast-food pig spleens industry. You could get a spokesman like Ronald McPigSpleen and sell kids' meals with free broken toys inside.

Or you could just start a new holiday tradition. Do you know what you will get if you hang pig spleens from your fireplace mantel at Christmas? Singed cats. Also, Paul Smokov and Flaming Pig Spleens would be a great name for a rock band. I wonder if Paul is a punk rocker.

I do know that Paul may be the last pig spleen weatherman in America. After all, few colleges north of the Mason-Dixon line offer a Doctorate in Spleenology, which is only slightly less valuable than a liberal arts degree in this job market. In fact, if the art of pig spleen weather forecasting is to be given equal respect alongside meteorologists and their suspect methods like jet stream analysis and Doppler radar, the Texas Board of Education may be our only hope. Not only have they brought intelligent design into the classroom, now they are considering replacing sex education with live storks and cabbage leaves.

I decided it would be a good idea to talk to the legend Paul Smokov himself, so I dialed the Duck Inn. "Hold it," you, the intrepid reader might say, "Isn't the Duck Inn located in Venturia, ND?" True enough, but you'd be surprised whom you might find at the Duck Inn on any given day. I once saw Elvis in a booth with Scooby Doo. But there were mitigating circumstances. I think someone spiked my 19 drinks. Anyway, Steele is a long distance call, and I have a limited editorial budget.

Turns out, Paul Smokov wasn't there, but I don't give up that easy when it comes to researching breaking stories. They handed the phone to Zippy Stankmeyer, who sold me my last pig and therefore, for the purposes of this story, qualifies as an expert.

"Hey Zippy," I asked from my lounge chair, "How can you tell from a pig spleen if it's going to be a hard winter?"

"The pig dies," Zippy replied.

I could hear pool balls clacking in the background.

"And if the pig lives?"

"The Vikings win a Super Bowl."

I don't care; if I ever see a spleen-less pig, I am going straight to Las Vegas to bet the mortgage on the Vikings even if they bring back Les Steckel to coach.

Zippy went on to tell me that his grandpappy used to predict the weather with caterpillars. Perfect! My mailbox has been filled with them this fall, which near as I can figure means a bitterly cold winter.

I didn't mind the caterpillars nesting in my mailbox but it got me in trouble with the post office, so we compromised. The caterpillars could stay if they had postage. I can tell you from experience that Pitney-Bowes should not be involved in a project like this.

"How'd you come out with that caterpillar deal?" Ziggy asked a few days later.

"Not so good," I said. "Do you know how hard it is to find a caterpillar spleen?"

It turns out that most accredited meteorologists agree it will be cold and snowy, citing the La Nina effect, the evil twin of El Nino, which is characterized by warm weather. And of course there is the little-known La-Dee-Dah effect, which is characterized by indifferent weather.

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I don't mind telling you I am pretty bummed out about the forecast. I don't care if I ever see another pig spleen. However, there is one faction that is always delighted with the prediction of an apocalyptic winter, or as we call it in North Dakota, "the usual." I speak of smug snowbirds. Snowbirds love to get the newspaper, read last week's weather statistics, and gloat. Sometimes our snowbirds have a case of schadenfreude so bad they can't wait for the bad news, so they call from Arizona to find out how the weather is. It's like phone sex for old people.

The phone rings.

"Yeah."

"What are you wearing?"

"A parka..."

© Tony Bender, 2011

A Diagnosis of Cancer

When I teach medical students, I always remind them that we will see people on the very best days of their lives and the very worst days of their lives. As a result, we will see every range of emotion in our patients and feel every range of emotion ourselves. This is especially true when giving someone a diagnosis of cancer.

Telling someone they have cancer is a daunting mission. Often, the patient suspects something serious when they are asked to come into the clinic to review results in person instead of getting a letter or phone call.

I always make a point to ensure my patients are accompanied by a family member or friend. Having another person in the room to support them is important, because often the person diagnosed with cancer does not always hear or remember much after the "C word" is spoken. The word can land a visceral reaction. And, while most of us know someone who has been affected by cancer, it is difficult to imagine what it feels like to have those words directed at you, until it happens.

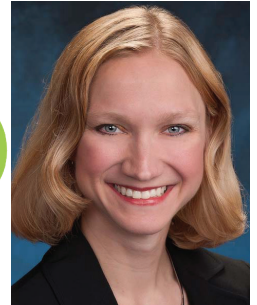
After a diagnosis of cancer is given, the next steps can happen quickly. There may be referrals to a specialist. Sometimes follow up exams and tests are done as soon as they can be scheduled, even on the day of the diagnosis. Having someone else in the room to help keep track of the information and offer support is helpful.

When the diagnosis of cancer is first spoken, there is usually one of the five emotions of grief that Elizabeth Kubler-Ross described. Most often, I see denial and anger. Later there is bargaining and depression, but on occasion there is acceptance. I have told people they have cancer only to see them smile, nod their head, and tell me that they already knew, and I confirmed their suspicions. Each person has an individual journey, and they will cycle through all these emotions, often more than once.

My hope as a primary care physician, is to never let my patients be alone in this journey. After a diagnosis of cancer, I refer my patients to specialists, but I am not done caring for the person. I let the oncologists take over in the fight against this disease. But I, and most primary care physicians, will always be there as a trusted advisor and friend who can help coordinate care and answer questions.

Jill Kruse, D.O. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.

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By Jill Kruse, DO ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives



COLLEGES PART 2: Pandemic puts college degree out of reach for more South Dakotans

By: Bart Pfankuch

The COVID-19 pandemic has further lowered the ability of low-income and minority students in South Dakota, including Native Americans, to enroll in college, obtain a degree and gain the lifelong financial and upward mobility benefits that come with higher education.

Education experts in South Dakota and around the country are increasingly worried that the COVID-19 pandemic has further expanded the long-standing educational achievement gap in which higher-income and white students do significantly better on standardized tests and in gaining access to higher education than students from lower-income and minority families.

Katharine Stevens, a researcher with the American Enterprise Institute, called the pandemic "a catastrophe on top of a catastrophe" because learning losses, technology barriers and reduced access to education have been far greater among low-income and minority students at all age levels in America in 2020.

In 2017, only 9% of minority high school graduates from first-generation college families were considered ready for college, a percentage she expects will drop even further in 2020. Greater numbers of low-income and minority students in the K-12 system were never reached by teachers when schools went to virtual learning during the pandemic. Those learning losses will result in a lack of college readiness when those students leave high school.

"It's been a devastating impact of COVID on America's most vulnerable kids," Stevens said during a webinar in December.

Other studies have shown that the pandemic has placed a much greater financial burden on low-income and minority families, many of whom rely on the restaurant, service and non-professional industries that have been hit hardest by job losses in the pandemic.

In South Dakota, that has translated to a decrease in the number of those students who were able to afford college in the fall.

Black Hills State University President Laurie Nichols said her team drilled down on data about where enrollment fell in the fall semester and found that the vast majority of losses were in lower-income and minority populations, including Native Americans.

"The students that are falling through the cracks with covid are first-generation and low-income students



Laurie Nichols

"The students that are falling through the cracks with covid are first-generation and low-income students ... you wonder if in fact this upward mobility we've been really working hard on, to elevate the whole economic situation in our state, if we're actually losing ground." -- Laurie Nichols, president of Black Hills State University

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In this video, South Dakota Board of Regents Executive Director Brian Maher discusses some of the unique challenges low-income and minority students face in trying to get an education during the pandemic. Video:

Nick Lowrey, South Dakota News Watch

and that was absolutely 100% true at BH," she said.

Nichols said she worries about potential long-term implications of a growing gap in access to higher education among marginalized populations.

"It concerns me a lot but it should be a larger concern for our state because education is such a wonderful way to raise the status of individuals economically," she said. "You wonder if in fact this upward mobility we've been really working hard on, to elevate the whole economic situation in our state, if we're actually losing ground, and I suspect this year we did lose some ground there."

Researchers have raised several serious concerns about how the pandemic has widened the achievement gap in the K-12 system. In late April, several weeks after schools closed and shifted to online learning due to COVID-19, the Rapid City Area Schools reported that a quarter of students, many in at-risk populations, had not been contacted in any way by teachers or administrators.

The so-called "learning loss" typically associated with the summer break in K-12 education has been exacerbated by the pandemic in low-income and minority populations, according to Bryan Hancock, an analyst with the McKinsey & Co. research group.

Hancock said new research shows that learning loss during the pandemic school shutdowns was

the equivalent to one to three months of additional learning loss for white students and the equivalent of three to five months of additional loss for students of color.

Results from the 2019 National Assessment of Education Progress test showed that four of five low-income students in grades 4, 8 and 12 were below proficient in reading, a subject considered a bedrock to overall learning. Other recent research showed that only 28% of high-poverty students have access to reliable internet at home compared to 82% of low-poverty students.

The learning challenges resulting from the pandemic have affected both prospective and existing college students, said Brian Maher, executive director of the Board of Regents who recently served as superintendent of the Sioux Falls schools.

Maher said that when the pandemic struck, public K-12 schools had to take extra steps to help the most vulnerable students and families stay focused on learning after a sudden shift to online teaching.

"The families that had the most disruption as the result of online learning were our neediest families, our families who were struggling the most from a socio-economic standpoint," Maher said. "We bent over backwards to give them technology and access, and oh, by the way, we also had to make sure they had food."

When students fall behind in high school, they have to make up that learning gap if and when they enter college, said Barry Dunn, president of South Dakota State University.

"We're very concerned about the difficulties that K-12 schools across the nation and here in South Dakota have faced with learning in a very disruptive environment," said Dunn. "Those children will be behind and need to catch up and we will see, I believe, for several years to come an increase in the need for remedial math, remedial English and other basic concepts that have suffered as far as learning and achievement."

The requirement to pay for and pass remedial classes in a college setting creates more barriers to higher

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Joe Rainboth

education that may be even more daunting for low-income and minority students who lack economic resources and may be prone to stigmatization. Prior to the pandemic, about 30% of incoming freshman in South Dakota had to take remedial classes that cost about \$1,000 and do not result in college credits. State data show that far fewer students who need remedial classes graduate with a degree than those who are ready for college.

Access to higher education is more challenging in South Dakota than in other states for a number of reasons. South Dakota is the only state in the nation that does not offer a needs-based scholarship to help low-income families pay for college.

Meanwhile, low-paying jobs dominate the workforce in South Dakota, which has the third-lowest average household income in the country. In 2017, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, 71% of employed South Dakota residents, nearly 300,000 people, made under \$40,000 a year, and more than 20%, about 87,000 people, made less than \$30,000 a year.

Ultimately, the rising cost of higher education and the further economic stresses placed on low-income and minority families may create a situation where a four-year degree becomes out of reach for many South Dakota families, said Joe Rainboth, enrollment director at BHSU.

"It is concerning down the road; there's definitely a disparity there that has the potential to grow larger in the future in terms of access and equity," Rainboth said. "We may see an increasing ability to have, or have not, in education and that's kind of scary to me."

Sheila Gestring, president of the University of South Dakota, said she is hopeful the state will consider creating a needs-based scholarship program in the near future. Gestring said Pell Grants, a major federal scholarship program for low-income students, has become harder to get and less effective in covering the costs of obtaining a degree.

"The Pell Grant has not increased at the pace of cost increases; It just doesn't cover enough," Gestring said. "Students are seeing this gap grow and there's an access challenge, so I really think it's going to take an investment by our state to create needs-based financial aid in order to give these individuals opportunities, but also frankly to fuel the economy."

Many colleges have developed programs to help students of color or great financial need either enroll in college or receive individual help once they arrive.

Augustana University in Sioux Falls created the Journey Scholars program to provide financial help and mentoring to attract and assist students of color. Such efforts will take on even greater importance in the near future, said Ben Iverson, enrollment director at the college.

"I do wonder whether that will increasingly be the case, choosing whether or not to go to college, for students and families as they're impacted economically by the pandemic," Iverson wrote to News Watch. "We know, of course, that first-generation and systemically non-dominant students have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic economically, so it will create even more barriers and challenges."

Concerns of a widening access gap in higher education in the state are greatest in the Native American population, South Dakota's largest minority group.

Access to a degree was limited for Native American students before the pandemic. Only 19% of Native Americans aged 18 to 24 were enrolled in college in 2019, compared to 41% of the overall U.S. population in that age group, according to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute. College enrollment among Native Americans decreased by 7% from 2017 to 2019.

Barriers to enrolling in college and obtaining a degree go beyond the significant financial challenges faced by Native American families in South Dakota, many of which are mired in generational poverty.

Logistical challenges related to transportation, computer ownership and internet accessibility are far greater in Native communities and make it harder for students to visit or attend colleges that are typically

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many miles from their homes, or to connect with online financial or education aid programs, Rainboth said.

The strong connection to community and family, and to the extended family known as "tiospaye," can also inhibit Native students from pursuing higher education away from their homes, a situation that has only worsened amid the pandemic, said Megan Red Shirt-Shaw, director of the Native Student Services program at the University of South Dakota.

"That hold to community and that hold to family is very, very strong for Native students, and then coupling that with watching a global pandemic rage through Native communities has been tremendously difficult for our Native students," Red Shirt-Shaw said. "So many already feel conflicted about putting their responsibilities to their communities on hold in order to go to college, and now that has become more critical because as they leave their communities, it could be the last time they see a relative."

Red Shirt-Shaw, an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, is new to her position at USD but has focused on improving learning outcomes and access to education for Native Americans throughout her career. Along with the financial challenges and lack of availability of state financial aid, the lack of reliable internet access continues to make it difficult for Native students to take classes online, connect with college recruiters or even send or receive emails.

"We have students who if the wind blows in the wrong direction their internet gets knocked out, so how are they supposed to feel committed to school?" Red Shirt-Shaw said, adding that Native culture thrives on face-to-face connections and does not typically embrace online interaction.

Native students also face barriers to obtaining financial aid that majority students do not, Red Shirt-Shaw said. Her research has shown that first-generation and low-income students, including many Native Americans, are denied or delayed financial assistance for minor paperwork or contractual issues at a far greater rate than other students.

For example, a Native student applying for a needs-based federal Pell Grant who has been raised by a grandparent may be asked to provide the tax forms of a legal guardian who is not part of the student's life. Signing a financial aid contract can also be emotionally difficult for Natives who have an uneasy historical relationship with the federal government, she said.

But Red Shirt-Shaw is hopeful that the continuing strong efforts of school counselors and college enrollment officials will help more Native students obtain financial aid and overcome new barriers to higher education created by the pandemic.

"This is survival," she said. "We're in survival mode, all of us, and I really want students to know that we care for them so much and just really want to serve as resources and support them."

State officials are pushing for greater numbers of students overall to use the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, or FAFSA, process to improve their ability to afford college. At a recent joint meeting of the state Board of Regents, Board of Technical Education and Board of Education Standards, an expert testified that some states require all university applicants to complete the FAFSA process, an idea which received general support from South Dakota officials.



The COVID-19 pandemic has created health, logistical and economic challenges that may make it harder for some students to attend colleges like South Dakota Mines in Rapid City, shown here. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South

Dakota News Watch



Megan Red Shirt-Shaw

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#308 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We have another very slow reporting day with the weekend compounded by the holiday; a quick scan of the states' reporting leads me to believe that, unless a whole lot of states had a radical downturn in their numbers all at once starting Friday, we have depressed reporting over the holiday. Since depressed reporting was expected, I think this is an easy answer. I expect tomorrow will be slow, as Mondays tend to be, then maybe a few relatively more normal days before we go off on another holiday weekend. It will be a bit over a week before I see the data situation returning to normal.

The effect of all this is that not only today's, but also this past week's numbers are artificially low; when three days of the week are off, that's going to skew what we're seeing for the whole week. Nonetheless, I'll report what we have and wait this out. Week-on-week, we're looking better; but for all the reasons just stated, you shouldn't trust that: Maybe we're better off, but we have no reliable way to know that. We are at 19,161,100 cases reported in the US so far in the pandemic. There were only 137,400 new cases reported today for a 0.7% increase in total cases. From Thanksgiving to Christmas, we never dropped below 150,000 daily new cases; now we've been below that twice in recent days. We've been over 90,000 cases for a solid eight weeks and over 70,000 for nine weeks. I think new cases were leveling off going into the holiday, so once we have reliable numbers again, I have some hope we will see a continuation of that trend. While growth in cases has slowed over much of the country, California is still in deep trouble, and over the last week, we're seeing continuing increases in new cases in the South. Involved states are Texas, Tennessee, Alabama, South Carolina, Georgia, and Florida; there are some major population centers there. None of these is solely due to increased testing; in each, the new case rate matches or exceeds increases in testing. Hospitalizations are exactly the same as yesterday at 117,344, well above last week.

We're down to 48 states and territories in the red zone, three in orange, and four in yellow. One-week increase in total cases was 1,511,500 (9.2%) last week and is down to 1,284,800 (7.2%) this week. Two-week increase was 3,055,400 (20.6%) last week and is 2,796,300 (17.1%) this week. We've added almost five and a half million cases since the first of the month; that's a pretty grim month. I have us at a one-week daily average new-case number of 183,542.9, well down from last week.

I track 54 states and US territories, including the District of Columbia; and the number of these showing two-week rates of increase greater than 25% is down to five. Here are the states and territories with the greatest rate of growth in cases over 14 days with their percentage increase in that time: Connecticut (38.00%), Maine (37.41% - decrease), California (35.61%), New Hampshire (31.83% - big decrease), and West Virginia (27.67% - decrease). Coming off the list this week are Ohio, Tennessee, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. We have only 17 states and territories with growth rates above the US growth rate, which is a decrease for the third consecutive week. Transmission is still very widespread, but that seems to be tapering off. More and more, this seems to be driven by California with its huge numbers and a growing problem in the South.

There were 1186 deaths reported today, a 0.4% increase to 333,197. Average daily deaths have declined; at 2638.7 last week, they're down to 2201.3 this week. This is the sixth consecutive week since spring we've reported over 10,000 deaths. States with the most per capita deaths over the past week are South Dakota, Arkansas, Pennsylvania, New Mexico, and Rhode Island. Only two states on this list this week were on it last week.

Remember all the times you've heard someone argue that this is not such a scary virus; after all, it kills only 0.1% of its victims? That's only one in 1000, practically nothing, right? Remember that? Here's a wake-up call: We're now in a place where one in 1000 Americans have died of this virus. Not one in 1000 who had the virus, one in 1000 of everyone. Close to six percent of us have been diagnosed. Turns out being in the US is a risk factor. Who knew?

Well, the Christmas travel numbers are in, and they're not good: Over a million Americans got on airplanes last Wednesday, part of over seven million who traveled in the last week; another 1.1 million traveled yesterday. AAA predicted that more than 81 million of us would travel by car for the holidays. This,

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just as case rates soar in California and the South, does not bode well for a few weeks from now. New case records were set this week in Maine and Virginia, and California has had horrid numbers. Additionally, Arizona, Wisconsin, Alabama, and West Virginia set death records this week. Pretty much no one except these travelers thought traveling was a good idea. Sigh. We will wait to see what the local group gatherings look like as new cases come in a week or two from now. With luck, the bump will be minimized by last-minute good decisions as happened to some extent after Thanksgiving. We just need to get past the New Year's Eve celebration in good order. Please seriously consider foregoing the big parties for just one more holiday. Please.

We've seen the first allergic reaction to the Moderna vaccine. It occurred in a physician in Boston. Allergic reactions are still considered to be a rare reaction.

Classic case of man running into a burning building to save a child. Except the "man" is seven-year-old Eli, and he went in to save the daughter of the family who's fostering him. The parents were able to grab their two-year-old son and Eli, but couldn't get to the toddler's bedroom which was surrounded by fire. Chris Davidson, the dad, told CNN, "The smoke and fire was so thick there was no way I could get to her. We went outside to get to her from the windows, but there was nothing for me to stand on to reach up there. So I picked up Eli, who went through the window and was able to grab her from the crib."

Just in time too: The house was consumed by fire minutes later. Eli told reporters, "I thought I couldn't do it, but then I said, 'I got her, dad. I was scared, but I didn't want my sister to die.'" Whatever else this family and this little boy go through in their lives, they will always have that one shining moment of courage that changed everything. And seeing that, we can all be sure there is just one thing we can do to change everything too; we just have to do it even if we're scared.

Be well. I'll be back tomorrow.

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December 27 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: +427 (97,390 total) Positivity Rate: 13.4%

Total Tests: 3188 (746,448 total)

Hospitalized: +28 (5561 total). 274 currently hospitalized (-15)

Avera St. Luke's: 10 (+1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 3 (+1) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (-1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 4 (-3) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 0 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +0 (1446 total)

Recovered: +821 (89,249 total)

Active Cases: -394 (6695)

Percent Recovered: 91.6%

Beadle (34) +1 positive, +15 recovered (75 active cases)

Brookings (28) +20 positive, +19 recovered (214 active cases)

Brown (57): +19 positive, +33 recovered (236 active cases)

Clark (2): +2 positive, +3 recovered (19 active cases)

Clay (11): +5 positive, +20 recovered (101 active cases)

Codington (68): +12 positive, +33 recovered (275 active cases)

Davison (52): +5 positive, +9 recovered (106 active cases)

Day (20): +6 positive, +7 recovered (43 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +5 positive, +3 recovered (53 active cases)

Faulk (11): +0 positive, +5 recovered (10 active cases)

Grant (28): +0 positive, +8 recovered (43 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +1 recovered (15 active cases)

Hughes (25): +7 positive, +17 recovered (140 active cases)

Lawrence (28): +16 positive, +32 recovered (139 active cases)

Lincoln (63): +24 positive, +69 recovered (508 active cases)

Marshall (4): +1 positive, +1 recovered (27 active

cases)

McCook (21): +1 positive, +2 recovered (42 active cases)

McPherson (1): +0 positive, +3 recovery (12 active case)

Minnehaha (259): +122 positive, +194 recovered (1675 active cases)

Pennington (128): +47 positive, +110 recovered (925 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +1 recovered (9 active cases)

Roberts (31): +6 positive, +8 recovered (94 active cases)

Spink (24): +1 positive, +5 recovered (54 active cases)

Walworth (14): +0 positive, +7 recovered (41 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 27:

- 4.9% rolling 14-day positivity
- 110 new positives
- 1,714 susceptible test encounters
- 106 currently hospitalized (-5)
- 2,023 active cases (-366)
- 1,266 total deaths (+4)

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	410	378	768	8	Substantial	27.59%
Beadle	2481	2372	5122	34	Substantial	7.63%
Bennett	351	334	1081	8	Moderate	8.22%
Bon Homme	1467	1406	1868	23	Substantial	13.89%
Brookings	2901	2658	9933	29	Substantial	7.36%
Brown	4317	4024	10998	57	Substantial	19.47%
Brule	626	601	1680	6	Substantial	19.35%
Buffalo	410	393	853	10	Moderate	13.33%
Butte	851	784	2831	18	Substantial	15.91%
Campbell	111	105	206	4	Minimal	15.38%
Charles Mix	1090	1005	3528	11	Substantial	14.81%
Clark	309	288	847	2	Substantial	5.26%
Clay	1602	1490	4478	11	Substantial	21.05%
Codington	3377	3034	8330	68	Substantial	17.47%
Corson	447	420	886	10	Substantial	41.67%
Custer	666	615	2380	9	Substantial	22.22%
Davison	2683	2525	5660	52	Substantial	15.99%
Day	523	460	1521	20	Substantial	16.05%
Deuel	404	369	986	6	Substantial	29.85%
Dewey	1255	1119	3484	12	Substantial	12.50%
Douglas	378	335	819	7	Substantial	36.00%
Edmunds	350	293	874	4	Substantial	13.13%
Fall River	440	399	2271	12	Substantial	20.80%
Faulk	310	289	590	11	Moderate	6.25%
Grant	814	743	1917	28	Substantial	30.60%
Gregory	482	435	1076	26	Substantial	26.09%
Haakon	226	185	468	7	Substantial	28.57%
Hamlin	597	522	1493	32	Substantial	13.60%
Hand	312	296	698	2	Moderate	10.34%
Hanson	308	290	600	3	Moderate	26.53%
Harding	89	82	153	1	Minimal	16.67%
Hughes	1977	1812	5517	25	Substantial	4.90%
Hutchinson	692	628	2028	16	Substantial	16.19%

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Hyde	131	129	363	1	Minimal	15.38%
Jackson	261	232	853	8	Substantial	14.71%
Jerauld	258	233	492	15	Moderate	18.18%
Jones	65	63	181	0	None	0.00%
Kingsbury	536	472	1404	13	Substantial	16.85%
Lake	1008	937	2749	16	Substantial	21.74%
Lawrence	2493	2326	7523	28	Substantial	19.06%
Lincoln	6653	6082	17249	63	Substantial	20.67%
Lyman	512	488	1700	9	Substantial	11.59%
Marshall	257	226	990	4	Substantial	20.83%
McCook	670	607	1396	21	Substantial	24.00%
McPherson	178	165	495	1	Moderate	0.75%
Meade	2180	2001	6646	24	Substantial	20.20%
Mellette	214	205	647	2	Moderate	23.53%
Miner	223	199	496	6	Moderate	26.32%
Minnehaha	24605	22671	67298	259	Substantial	15.75%
Moody	527	475	1578	14	Substantial	28.57%
Oglala Lakota	1902	1739	6167	34	Substantial	22.40%
Pennington	10909	9856	33516	128	Substantial	23.06%
Perkins	281	228	662	11	Substantial	26.15%
Potter	298	287	711	2	Moderate	4.44%
Roberts	951	826	3717	31	Substantial	21.60%
Sanborn	303	295	610	3	Moderate	4.00%
Spink	695	617	1850	24	Substantial	12.64%
Stanley	267	249	762	2	Substantial	6.67%
Sully	108	97	244	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1139	1068	3765	19	Substantial	25.00%
Tripp	620	582	1314	11	Substantial	10.71%
Turner	949	836	2365	47	Substantial	18.75%
Union	1581	1400	5348	30	Substantial	18.30%
Walworth	607	552	1607	14	Substantial	25.33%
Yankton	2465	2172	8161	24	Substantial	14.39%
Ziebach	288	245	693	7	Substantial	13.33%
Unassigned	0	0	1899	0		

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South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	3615	0
10-19 years	10736	0
20-29 years	17785	4
30-39 years	16131	12
40-49 years	13941	24
50-59 years	13834	74
60-69 years	11048	182
70-79 years	5801	309
80+ years	4499	841

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	50881	699
Male	46509	747

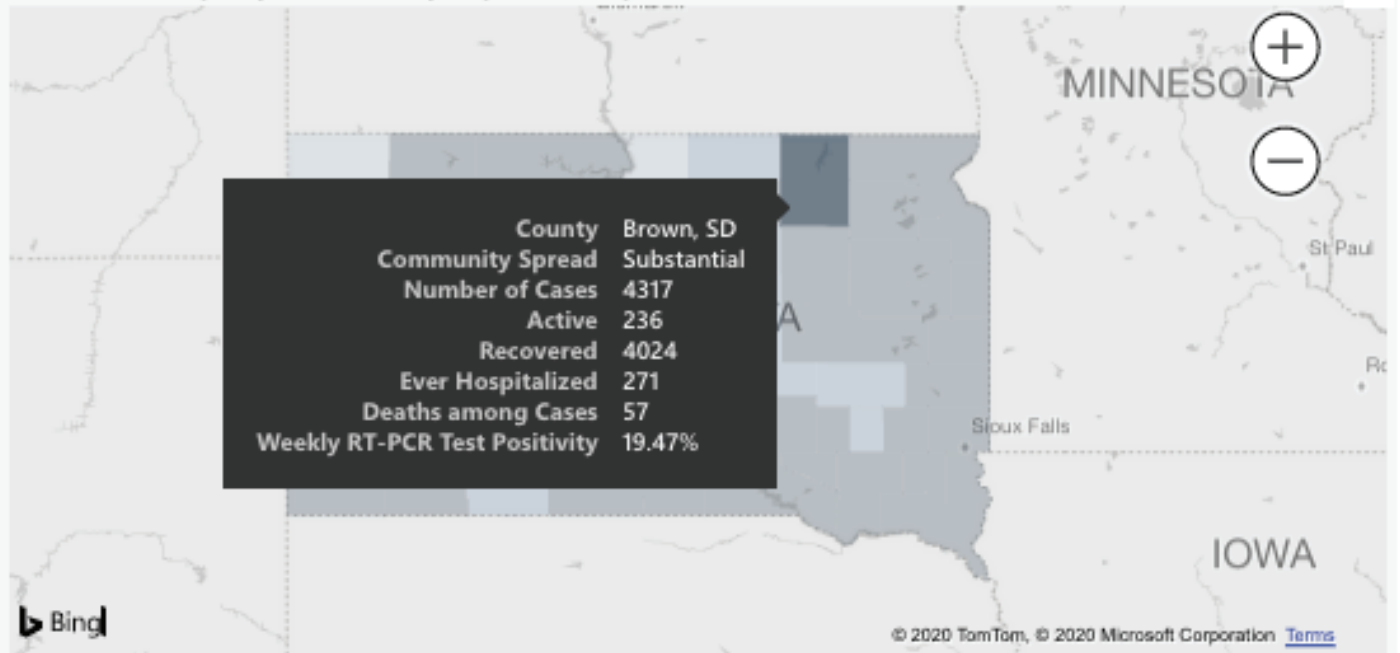
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Brown County

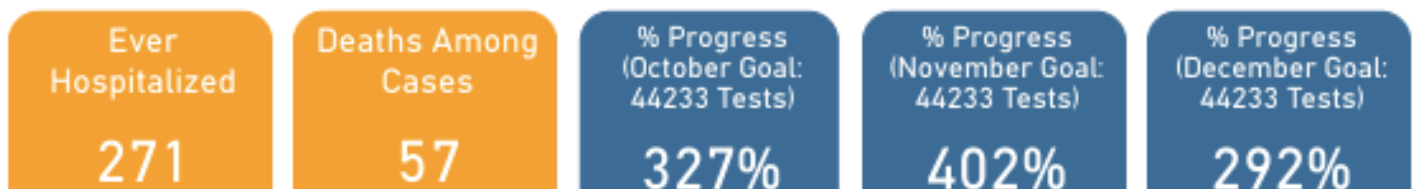


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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



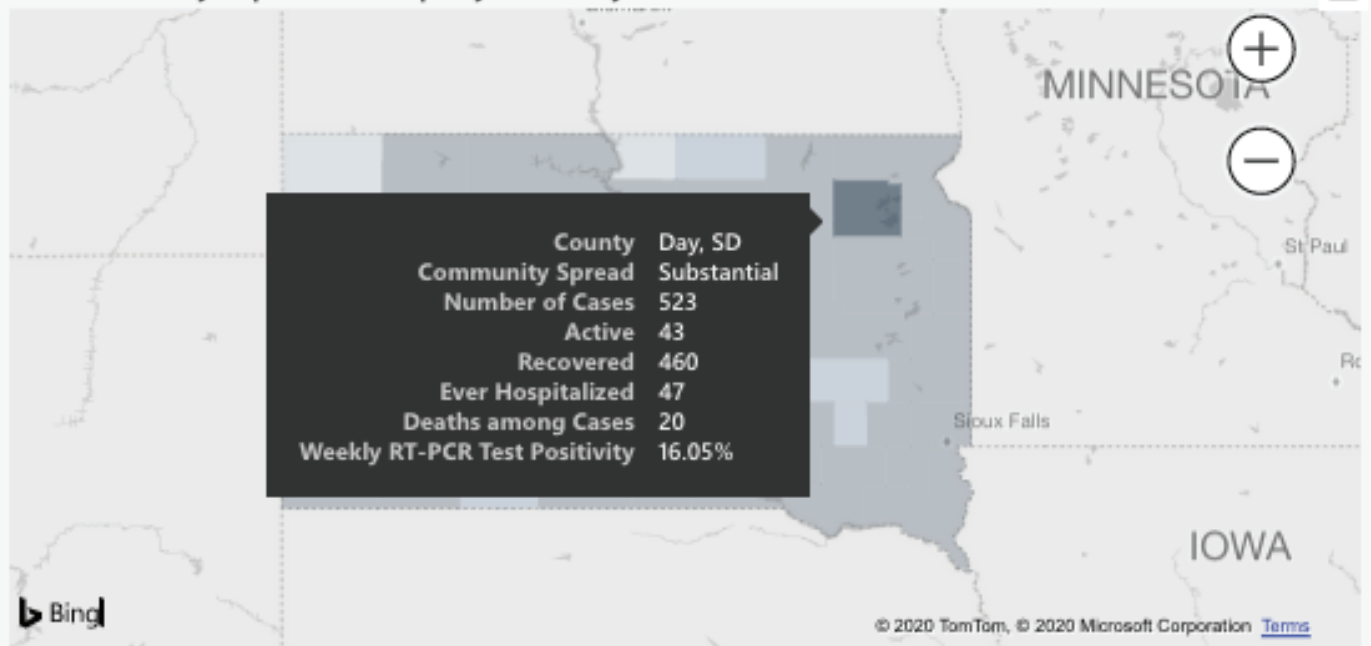
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Day County

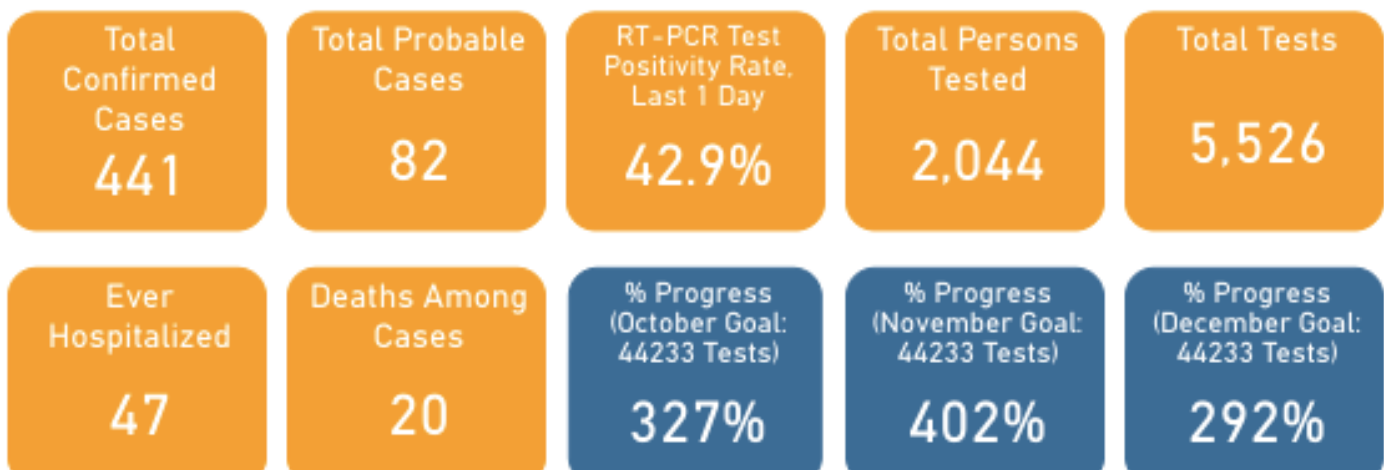


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread None Minimal Moderate Substantial

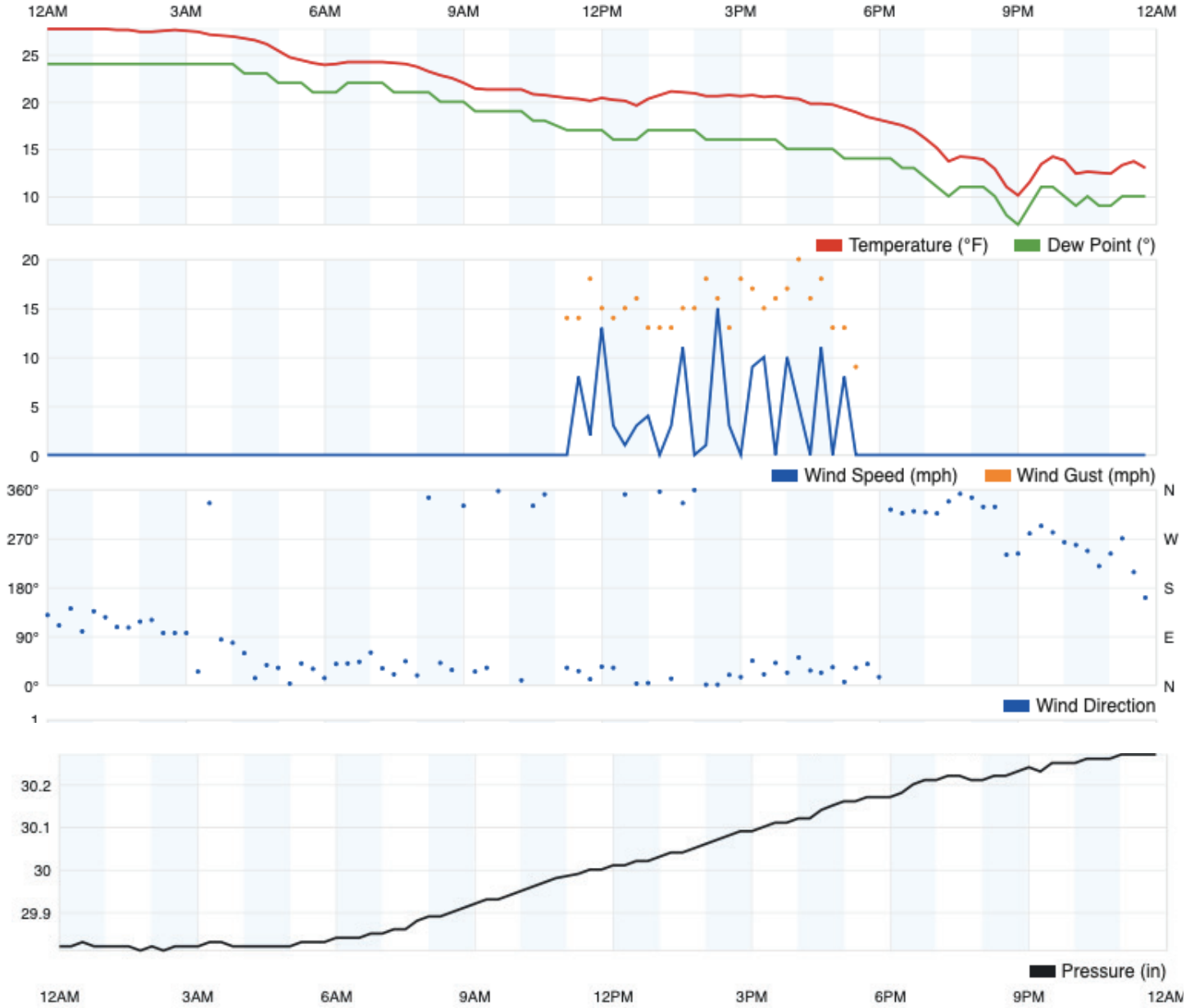
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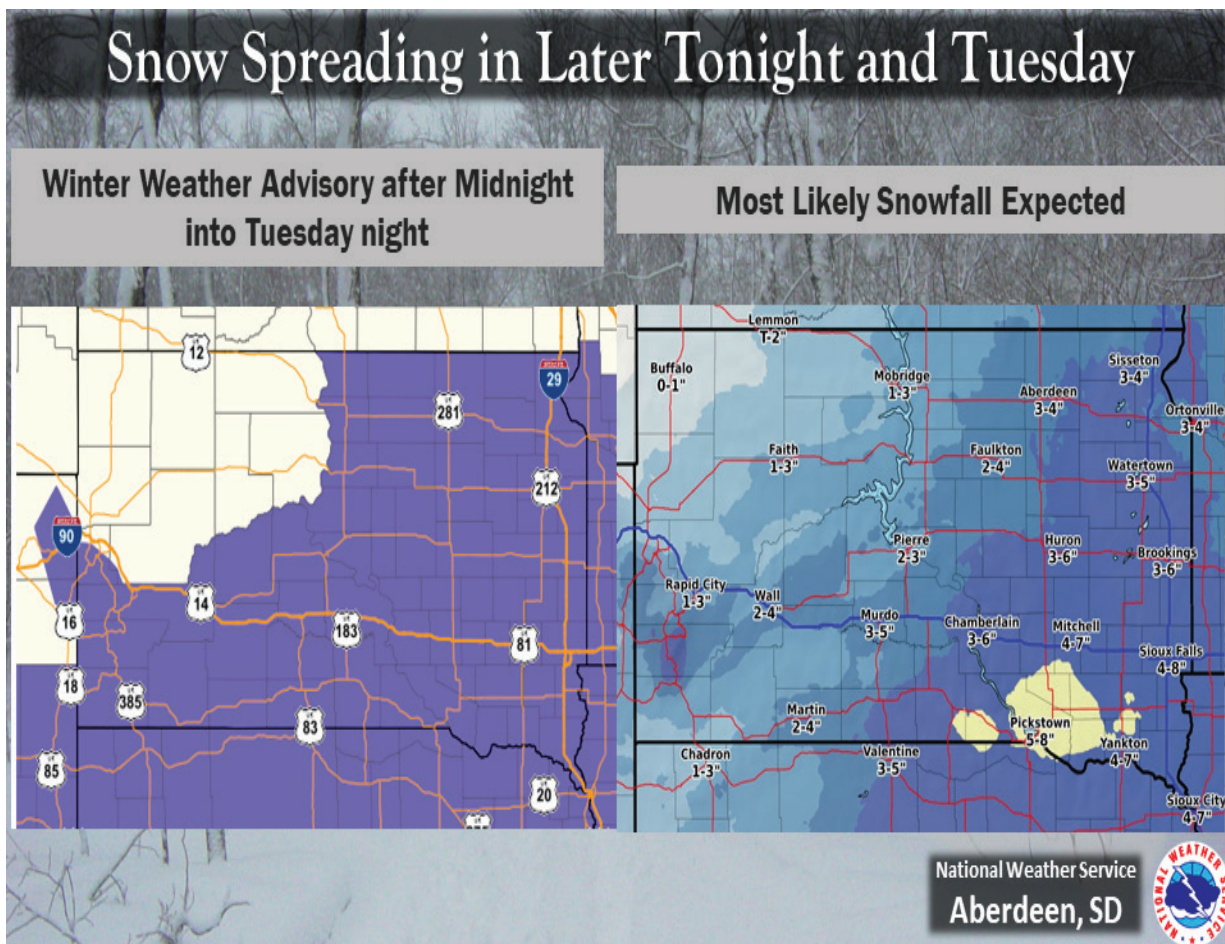
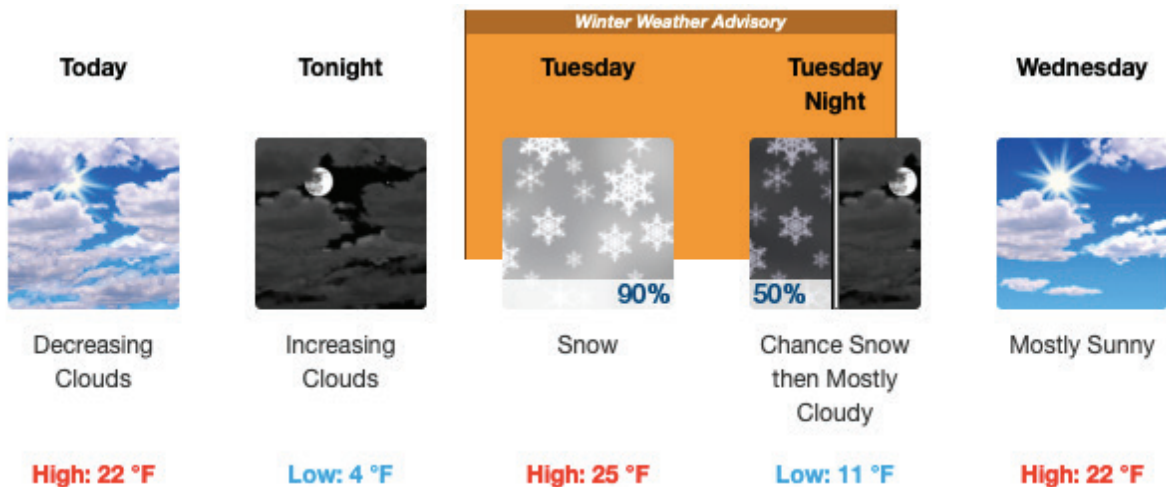
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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A Winter Weather Advisory is in effect for 2 to 5 inches of snow for later tonight into Tuesday night.

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Today in Weather History

December 28, 2000: Northwest winds of 35 to 50 mph, gusting to around 65 mph, occurred across central and north central South Dakota in the morning. The high winds resulted in blizzard conditions at some locations just east of the Missouri River. Further east, in northeast South Dakota, northwest winds of 30 to 50 mph combined with newly fallen snow to generate blizzard conditions from the morning into the early afternoon hours. Travel was terrible in many places, and many motorists found themselves in ditches. There were also several non-injury accidents.

December 28, 1879: Tay Bridge is the main-line railway across the Tay River in Scotland, between the city of Dundee and the suburb of Wormit in Fife. During the evening hours of December 28, 1879, winds were said to blow at right angles to the bridge. Witnesses said the storm was as severe as they had seen in 20 to 30 years. The winds at Glasgow and Aberdeen were measured at 71 mph. Winds were estimated to be 80 mph in Dundee. A passenger train departed at 7:13 pm was said to disappear three minutes later. The train was found at the bottom of the river, along with the high rafters and much of the ironwork of their supporting piers. There were no survivors. The Court of Inquiry report concluded that "The fall of the bridge was occasioned by the insufficiency of the cross bracing and its fastenings to sustain the force of the gale."

1839 - The third storm in two weeks hit the northeastern U.S. It brought two more feet of snow to Hartford, CT, and Worcester, MA. Whole gales swept the coast causing many wrecks. (David Ludlum)

1897 - The temperature at Dayville, OR, hit 81 degrees to establish a state record for December. (The Weather Channel)

1924 - Iowa experienced its coldest December morning of record. Morning lows averaged 25 degrees below zero for the 104 weather stations across the state.

1955 - Anchorage, AK, was buried under 17.7 inches of snow in 24 hours, a record for that location. (28th-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1958 - Albuquerque, NM, received 14.2 inches of snow to establish a 24 hour record. (28th-29th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in the Upper Mississippi Valley and the Upper Great Lakes Region. Up to twenty inches of snow buried southern Minnesota, and 20 to 40 mph northwesterly winds produced snow drifts six feet high, and reduced visibilities to near zero at times in blowing snow. There were a thousand traffic accidents in Michigan during the storm, resulting in thirty-five injuries. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Strong winds behind a cold front claimed three lives in eastern Pennsylvania, and injured a dozen others in eastern Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey and Maryland. Winds gusted to 87 mph at Hammon-ton NJ and in the Washington D.C. area. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Squalls continued to bring snow to the Great Lakes Region, with heavy snow reported near Lake Superior and Lake Ontario. Syracuse NY received 8.5 inches of snow to push the total for the month past their previous December record of 57 inches. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2003 - A severe snow storm hit northern California and southern Oregon. As much as 2 feet of snow fell along Interstate 5 closing a 150-mile stretch of the interstate, stranding hundreds of travelers. Winds from the storm caused power outages to more than 200,000 customers in California and Oregon. One man died of a heart attack after helping other drivers. (CNN)

2004 - Los Angeles (downtown) broke a daily rainfall record for the month of December (5.55 inches). This was the third wettest calendar day in Los Angeles since records began in 1877.

2005 - An outbreak of severe thunderstorms across portions of the southeast United States on the 28th produced hail, high winds and a few tornadoes. The states of Georgia and Tennessee were the most affected. (NCDC)

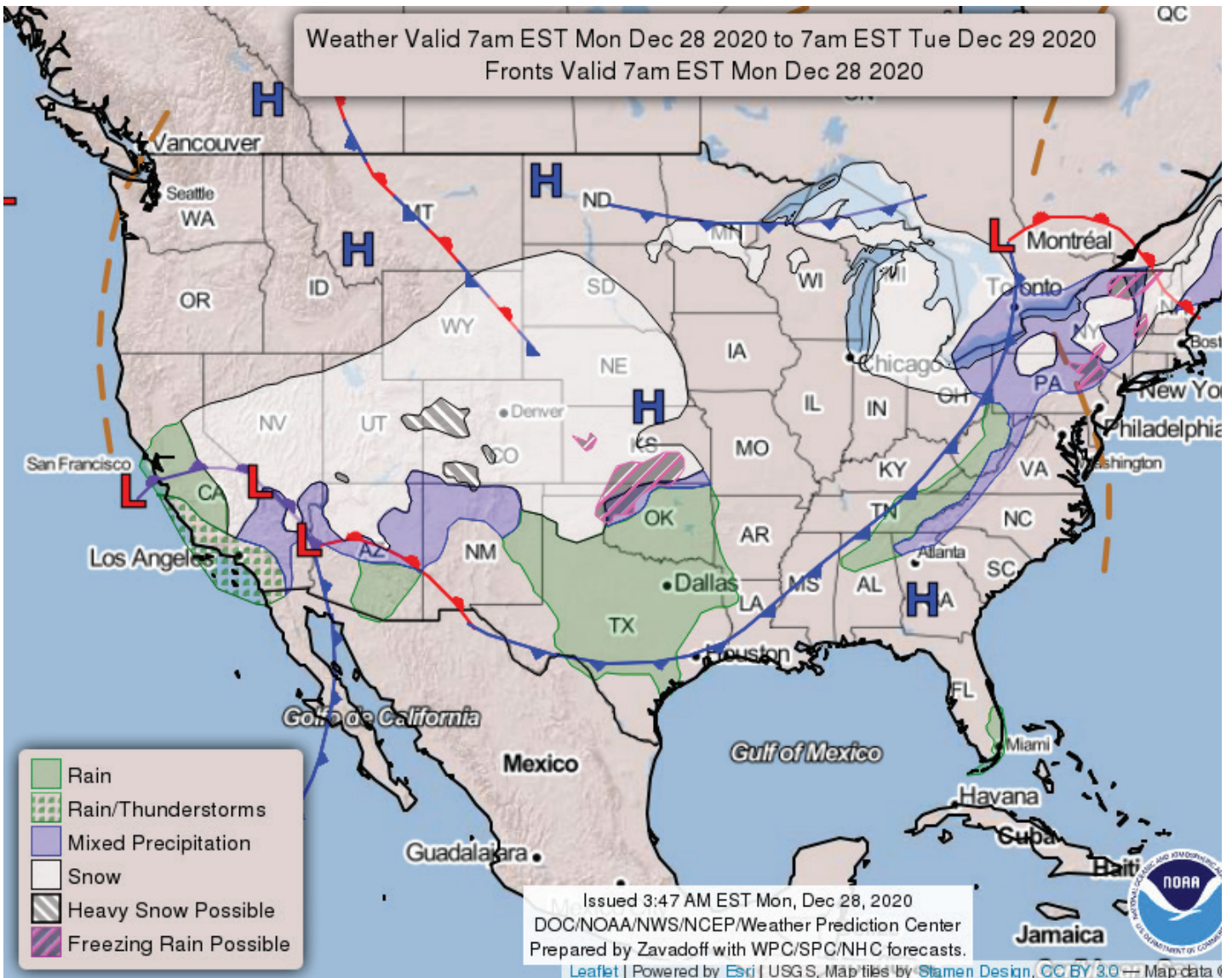
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 27.7 °F
Low Temp: 10.1 °F
Wind: 20 mph
Precip: .00

Record High: 57° in 1898
Record Low: -24 in 1924
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 3°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.45
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.65
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 4:58 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:13 a.m.



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WHY PARENTING MATTERS

There is limited information in Scripture that describes the home life of Jesus. Every now and then we get a glimpse of something. But there can be little doubt that God and His teachings were at the center of everything.

We read that "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man." No doubt His knowledge of and reverence for the Law and Prophets shaped His life and His reverence and relationship with His Heavenly Father and others.

Luke's Gospel tells us about a family trip to the temple. On the way home, they noticed that He was not with them. When they returned to the temple they found Him listening to and answering questions of the learned teachers. At the tender age of twelve Jesus demonstrated to others the deep understanding of God's Word that obviously came from His parents.

Mary and Joseph realized that they were obligated to God for the welfare and wellbeing of His one and only Son. While He was waiting to begin His public ministry He listened to their teachings and followed their examples of godly living.

Parents can never overlook or underestimate the influence and impact they have on their children. Parents must follow the example of Joseph and Mary in raising their children.

Prayer: We pray, Father, that parents will realize the important gift of a child and the trust You place in them to raise them to know, love, trust, obey and serve You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

News from the Associated Press

Southeastern Minnesota record store proves to be destination

By DAN GREENWOOD Mankato Free Press

MANKATO, Minn. (AP) — If it wasn't for an MTV contest nearly 30 years ago, Tune Town in Mankato may never have come to fruition.

Owner Carl Nordmeier had been working in the music department at the Lake Street Target in Minneapolis in the early '90s when an option to transfer to Mankato was on the table. But when he moved into an apartment near Minnesota State University, that job fell through. Nordmeier's other source of revenue, as a weekend DJ, wasn't enough to cover the bills.

Frustrated with the corporate nature of Target's music department, he had already started to consider opening his own music store when he was still living in the Twin Cities. But it wasn't until he entered an MTV-sponsored contest to win a record store that the plan really started to take hold.

"I said, 'If I don't win this, I'm going to move back home with Mom and Dad in Morristown, save up money and open my own record store,'" he said.

Nordmeier didn't win that contest, and by 1993, he had saved up enough from a factory job to open Tune Town in Faribault using his own used CD collection to fill the shelves before moving his store to Mankato in 1997.

At the time, Tune Town had a lot of competition in Mankato. There was Ernie November downtown, Musicland at the old Madison East Shopping Center and Disc Jockey at River Hills Mall.

Today, Tune Town is the only record store in town.

The digital era of downloading music and the economic recession hit the record store industry particularly hard in 2010. Tune Town, which was in the River Hills Mall at the time, was no exception.

"In 2010, our sales dropped by 30-40%," Nordmeier said. "I was draining my bank account. The River Hills Mall let you put your rent on your credit card, so I maxed out all of my credit cards."

That year, as he was cruising around town looking for a new, more affordable and centralized location, Nordmeier saw a for-rent sign at 630 N. Riverfront Drive in Old Town. Tune Town has been there since, eventually expanding in back and into the building's basement, where customers can find everything from jazz and classical to vintage country in addition to independent metal, punk and indie rock collections upstairs.

The new location proved to be a destination, as it gained a reputation not just locally but throughout the region, attracting customers from northern Iowa, Sioux Falls, South Dakota and the Twin Cities. Nordmeier said the resurgence of vinyl continues to expand every year, the Mankato Free Press reported.

"About five years ago, I really started to notice it," he said. "We've been stocking vinyl for probably 20 years, but this year vinyl sales have finally surpassed CD sales at Tune Town."

Employee Andy Sundwall, who has been working at Tune Town off and on for 15 years, said the vinyl craze has attracted a younger customer base to the store in recent years.

"Pretty much everything is released on vinyl now, which is pretty cool to see," Sundwall said. "It's been crazy to see it pick up and have new generations of kids coming in and buying stuff again."

Tune Town also celebrates Record Store Day twice a year, usually with live bands, complimentary beer and coffee, and hundreds of exclusive vinyl records to sell. First celebrated in 2008 to shine a light on the unique subculture of independent record stores, the biannual event celebrated in April and again on the Friday after Thanksgiving now has a roster of about 1,400 independent record stores participating internationally.

While the event took a few years to gather traction, Nordmeier said Record Store Day combined with the vinyl resurgence was key to keeping his business afloat.

"We try to stock a lot of product and I want to make sure we have everything that people want," Nordmeier said. "A lot of places that do Record Store Day would only get one or two pieces of something and

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it would be sold out. I try to bring as much stuff as I can, and whatever is left over it will gradually sell.”

Used records and CDs have also played a big role in drawing customers into the store to sell, donate or buy used albums, CDs and DVDs.

“We’re constantly taking stuff in. I had a feeling it was going to be pretty crazy this year once we re-opened (after stay-at-home order) because people were home cleaning and getting rid of things,” he said. “On average we’ll take a collection every day, but lately it’s been three to four collections every day.”

Nordmeier compares opening up a new collection of music to Christmas Day, and regular customers routinely flock to the store to sift through the new batches of used CDs and records on display, looking for that perfect gem.

“It brings people into the store every week,” Nordmeier said. “It always gives me a thrill when someone comes in and they freak out because they’ve found something they’ve been looking for for years and are so happy.”

Sundwall said they get a lot of customers who come in specifically without a goal, just to spend time browsing and see what they can find.

“A lot of people come here with no expectations on what they’re planning to try and find unless it’s a brand-new release,” he said. “They just want to dig through everything and see what pops up; usually they are pleasantly surprised.”

Talking music with customers is one of the most rewarding parts of the job, said Nordmeier, and Sundwall said working at the store has exposed him to music that he never would have experienced if he hadn’t worked here.

“There’s a lot of stuff I never would have given the chance,” Sundwall said. “Just hearing Carl or somebody else in the store recommending something – some of those have become my favorite bands ever.”

After 27 years in the record store business, Nordmeier still enjoys going to work every day, and he can’t imagine doing anything else.

“As long as I keep doing what I love and making a living at it, I’ll be happy,” he said.

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

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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.

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

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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.

South Dakota continues to see steady drop in COVID-19 cases

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials on Sunday reported 427 new positive COVID-19 tests, lifting the total number of confirmed cases to 88,648.

The state has seen a steady drop in cases since taking over the top spot nationwide earlier this month. There were about 743 new cases per 100,000 people in South Dakota over the past two weeks, which ranks 25th in the country for new cases per capita, according to John Hopkins University researchers.

One in every 336 people in South Dakota tested positive in the past week.

The total number of people who have died after contracting COVID-19 remained at 1,446, with no fatalities reported in the Sunday update. The most recent statistics by The COVID Tracking Project list the state at fifth highest per capita with about 164 deaths per 100,000 people.

The number of hospitalizations dropped by 15 from the last report, to 274.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

Record permits sold for Black Hills motorized vehicle usage

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — The U.S. Forest Service says it sold a record number of trail permits this year for motorized vehicle usage in the Black Hills area of South Dakota.

Corbin Herman, the service's motorized trail coordinator, said the agency sold more than 30,000 trail permits for motorcycles, utility terrain vehicles and all-terrain vehicles. That's an increase of more than 10,000 permits sold from last year and significantly more than the agency has sold in the past, Herman said.

Herman said the increase is due to the growing popularity of the trails and the coronavirus pandemic, which drove more people to seek outdoor recreation, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

"I would say a big percentage of that is due to COVID," Herman said. "If you look at the trends over the last few years, it's kind of been trending up anyway. So it's probably a combination of both."

The most popular trails, he said, were for the Nemo and Rochford areas in the Northern Black Hills.

The motorized trail permit season in South Dakota runs from May 15 to Dec. 15, weather permitting. The Black Hills National Forest includes more than 3,600 miles of roads with more than 600 miles of trails for ATV, UTV and other off-road vehicles.

The Latest: Finland latest nation to find UK virus variant

By The Associated Press undefined

HELSINKI — Finland has become the latest European country to report a case of the more contagious coronavirus variant first identified in Britain.

Health officials said Monday that a Finnish citizen who had recently arrived from Britain for a Christmas

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holiday was diagnosed with the new COVID-19 variant in the southeast Kymenlaakso region over the weekend.

The person's recent connections were traced and his family members have been isolated. Finnish health officials said they believed the variant hasn't spread further.

Authorities have urged all those who arrived from Britain since Dec. 7 to get a coronavirus test. Last week, Finland halted all scheduled flights with Britain until early January.

Nordic neighbors Sweden and Norway reported their first cases of the new COVID-19 variant on Saturday and Sunday, respectively. Denmark reported its first such case earlier in December.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

— Trump has signed a massive COVID-19 relief bill for Americans but his foot-dragging has caused a lapse in unemployment benefits for millions

— Virus deaths in Germany top 30,000; lockdown may be extended past Jan. 10.

— Russia is now giving its coronavirus vaccine to people over 60

— AstraZeneca's chief says researchers believe its vaccine will be effective against a new variant of the virus driving a rapid surge in infections in Britain

— China sentences former lawyer who reported virus news to four years in prison

— Pacific islands work to counter virus-induced food shortages by promoting gardens

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HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

BERLIN — Germany's confirmed death toll in the coronavirus pandemic has topped 30,000 as the country hopes its lockdown will bring down case numbers.

The national disease control center, the Robert Koch Institute, said Monday that another 348 deaths were reported over the past 24 hours, bringing the country's total to 30,126.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases rose by 10,976 to 1.65 million. That increase is much lower than a week ago, but lower testing and reporting over the Christmas period likely accounts for much of the difference.

Germany had a relatively low death rate in the first phase of the pandemic but has seen hundreds of deaths per day in recent weeks. Among major European nations, Italy, the U.K., France and Spain still have higher death tolls.

A shutdown that was deepened on Dec. 16 with the closure of schools and most shops is scheduled to remain in place until Jan. 10 and appears likely to be extended.

JAKARTA — Indonesia announced Monday that it will temporarily ban foreigners from entering the country for 14 days starting on Jan. 1 to fight the spread of the new, more infectious variant of COVID-19.

Indonesian Foreign Affairs Minister Retno Marsudi made the announcement in a press conference.

Foreigners that would arrive in Indonesia from Monday to Thursday will be allowed to enter by showing a negative result from a coronavirus test with 48 hours of their departure. They will do another test upon arrival at the airport in Indonesia. If the second test is negative, they will still have to complete a mandatory quarantine for five days and do another test after the quarantine.

"They will be allowed to continue the visit to Indonesia if the test shows negative result," Marsudi added.

Indonesia reported 5,854 new COVID-19 on Monday and 215 more deaths in the last 24 hours, bringing the country's overall death toll to 21,452.

WARSAW, Poland — Poland is stepping up anti-COVID-19 restrictions for three weeks starting Monday, including a ban on relocation during New Year's Eve celebrations that has provoked controversy.

Under a recent government regulation, the Poles were forbidden from changing their locations between

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7 p.m. on Dec.31 until 6 a.m. on Jan.1, in what was widely criticized and ridiculed as a "curfew." But Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki says there will be "no curfew," but instead the government is appealing for people to remain in one place during the New Year celebrations and to use no fireworks, which usually draw crowds of spectators . Only five guests can be invited to a party.

The biggest regret for Poles is that ski slopes close Monday until Jan. 17, along with nightclubs, pools, gyms and shopping malls.

People arriving from outside the European Union face a 10-day quarantine, while railway travel across the EU border is suspended. Poland has seen over 27,000 deaths in the pandemic.

BEIJING — A Chinese court on Monday sentenced a former lawyer who reported on the early stage of the coronavirus outbreak to four years in prison on charges of "picking fights and provoking trouble," one of her lawyers said.

The Pudong New Area People's Court in the financial hub of Shanghai gave the sentence to Zhang Zhan following accusations she spread false information, gave interviews to foreign media, disrupted public order and "maliciously manipulated" the outbreak.

Zhang, 37, traveled to Wuhan in February and posted on various social media platforms about the outbreak that is believed to have emerged in the central Chinese city late last year.

She was arrested in May amid tough nationwide measures aimed at curbing the outbreak and heavy censorship to deflect criticism of the government's initial response. Zhang reportedly went on a prolonged hunger strike while in detention, prompting authorities to forcibly feed her, and is said to be in poor health.

MOSCOW -- Moscow has started offering a domestically developed coronavirus vaccine to people older than 60 after Russia's Health Ministry cleared it for use among the elderly.

Earlier this month, mass vaccination against COVID-19 started in Russia with the Sputnik V vaccine, which is still undergoing advanced tests among tens of thousands of people needed to ensure its safety and effectiveness. Front-line workers, such as doctors and teachers, were the first in line to get the shots, and until Saturday only those aged 18-60 were allowed to be vaccinated.

On Saturday, the Health Ministry cleared Sputnik V for use among those older than 60. In Moscow, the elderly can sign up for immunizations starting Monday.

Russia has been widely criticized for giving Sputnik V regulatory approval in August after it was tested only on a few dozen people

Russian authorities have reported more than 55,000 deaths. Russia has been swept by a rapid resurgence of the outbreak this fall, with confirmed infections and deaths significantly exceeding those reported in the spring.

TOKYO — Japan on Monday reported a first victim of the coronavirus from the Japanese parliament — Yuichiro Hata, who has served transport minister under the leadership of a now-defunct opposition party.

Hata, 53, was pronounced dead at a Tokyo hospital Sunday when he arrived after developing a fever. His autopsy confirmed the COVID-19 was the direct cause of his death, said Tetsuro Fukuyama, secretary general of the Constitutional Democratic Party of Japan, where Hata was a member of.

Hata was the son of late former prime minister Tsutomu Hata, who headed the opposition-led government in 1994.

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump has signed a \$900 billion pandemic relief package, ending days of drama over his refusal to accept the bipartisan deal that will deliver long-sought cash to businesses and individuals and avert a federal government shutdown.

The massive bill includes \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September and contains other end-of-session priorities such as an increase in food stamp benefits.

The signing Sunday, at his private club in Florida came amid escalating criticism over his eleventh-hour demands for larger, \$2,000 relief checks and scaled-back spending even though the bill had already passed

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the House and Senate by wide margins.

His foot-dragging resulted in a lapse in unemployment benefits for millions struggling to make ends meet and threatened a government shutdown in the midst of a pandemic.

NICOSIA, CYPRUS — Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades said the countdown has started for defeating an “invisible enemy” after receiving the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine against the coronavirus.

Anastasiades got the shot at a Nicosia health center on Monday, a day after elderly nursing home residents and front-line medical staff were the first to be inoculated.

Praising health care workers for their efforts to help beat back the spread of COVID-19, Anastasiades pleaded with citizens to continue abiding by virus restrictions — including a night-time curfew — despite a pervading sense of fatigue and a curb on individual freedoms.

Anastasiades said Cyprus will procure enough of the vaccine to inoculate the entire population of around 1.1 million, including Turkish Cypriot citizens who live in the ethnically split country’s breakaway north.

BRUSSELS — At 102 years old, Josepha Delmotte will be the first Belgian resident to receive a COVID-19 vaccination in the French-speaking region of Wallonia.

The first COVID-19 vaccinations in the country with 11.5 million inhabitants are taking place Monday in three care homes located across the three main Belgian regions — the Brussels-Capital region, Wallonia and Flanders.

Belgium has been hard hit by the pandemic and reported nearly 639,000 confirmed cases, including 19,200 deaths. More than half of the victims died in nursing homes and the government decided that the elderly and front-line medical workers would receive the vaccine first.

Like other EU countries, Belgium is using the vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech, which has been approved by Europe’s medicines regulator.

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Coronavirus infections have barely touched many of the remote islands of the Pacific, but the pandemic’s fallout has been enormous, disrupting the supply chain that brings crucial food imports and sending prices soaring as tourism wanes.

With a food crisis looming, many governments have begun community initiatives to help alleviate shortages: extending fishing seasons, expanding indigenous food gathering lessons and bolstering seed distribution programs that allow residents greater self-reliance.

“We initially started with 5,000 seeds and thought we would finish them in nine months’ time. But there was a very big response, and we finished distributing the seeds in one week,” said Vinesh Kumar of Fiji’s Agriculture Ministry.

The project provides residents with vegetable seeds, saplings and basic farming equipment to help them grow their own home gardens.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has confirmed its first cases of a more contagious variant of COVID-19 that was first identified in the United Kingdom.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said Monday the cases have been confirmed in a family of three people who came to South Korea on Dec. 22.

They arrived a day before South Korea halted air travel from Britain until Dec. 31 to guard against the new version of the virus. The three people, who reside in the U.K., are under quarantine in South Korea.

South Korea on Monday registered 808 new coronavirus cases, raising its national caseload to 57,680 with 819 deaths. The government said Sunday it would wait another week before determining whether to enforce its toughest physical distancing rules in the greater Seoul area that officials worry would further hurt the economy.

SYDNEY — Authorities have banned New Year’s Eve revelers from congregating in Sydney’s downtown

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harborside to see the celebrated fireworks due to the pandemic risk.

New South Wales state Premier Gladys Berejiklian said on Monday people who live in the city center can invite up to 10 guests to their homes to celebrate. The guests will have to apply for permits to enter the area.

Australia's largest city recorded five new cases of COVID-19 connected to a cluster in the northern beaches region, bringing the total to 126 infections since Dec. 10.

Around 1 million people usually congregate on the harbor to see the annual fireworks.

COLOMBO, Sri Lanka — Sri Lanka's government announced Monday that cinemas will be allowed to reopen throughout the country on Jan. 1 after being closed for three months because of the coronavirus.

The reopening, which will require the following of strict health guidelines, is part of the island nation's efforts to return to normalcy despite lockdowns in different parts of the country.

Patrons will be required to wear face masks and have their body temperatures taken before entering the cinemas. Seats will be kept vacant between patrons and cinemas can admit only 25% of their normal capacity. Consumption of food and drinks will not be allowed.

Sri Lanka has confirmed 41,053 coronavirus cases, including 191 fatalities.

LOS ANGELES — State officials are expected to extend the strictest stay-at-home orders in central and Southern California as hospitals there are quickly running out of intensive care unit beds for coronavirus patients ahead of the presumed post-holiday surge.

The situation is already dire, and the worst is expected to come in the next few weeks after Christmas and New Year's travelers return home.

California hit 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases on Christmas Eve.

State stay-at-home orders for the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California are set to expire Monday. State officials say the orders are likely to be extended but did not make a definitive ruling Sunday afternoon.

'I would never go back': Horrors grow in Ethiopia's conflict

By NARIMAN EL-MOFTY and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

HAMDAYET, Sudan (AP) — One survivor arrived on broken legs, others on the run.

In this fragile refugee community on the edge of Ethiopia's Tigray conflict, those who have fled nearly two months of deadly fighting continue to bring new accounts of horror.

At a simple clinic in Sudan, one doctor-turned-refugee, Tewodros Tefera, examines the wounds of war: Children injured in explosions. Gashes from axes and knives. Broken ribs from beatings. Feet scraped raw from days of hiking to safety.

On a recent day, he treated the shattered legs of fellow refugee Guesh Tesla, a recent arrival.

The 54-year-old carpenter came bearing news of some 250 young men abducted to an unknown fate from a single village, Adi Aser, into neighboring Eritrea by Eritrean forces, whose involvement Ethiopia denies. Then in late November, Guesh said he saw dogs feeding on the bodies of civilians near his hometown of Rawyan, where he said Ethiopian soldiers beat him and took him to the border town of Humera.

There, he said, he was taken to a courthouse he said had been turned into a "slaughterhouse" by militia from the neighboring Amhara region. He said he heard the screams of men being killed, and managed to escape by crawling away at night.

"I would never go back," Guesh said.

Such accounts remain impossible to verify as Tigray remains almost completely sealed off from the world more than 50 days since fighting began between Ethiopian forces, backed by regional militias, and those of the Tigray region that had dominated the country's government for nearly three decades.

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, last year's Nobel Peace Prize winner for political reforms that also marginalized Tigray leaders, continues to reject global "interference" amid pleas to allow unimpeded humanitarian access and independent investigations. The conflict has shaken Africa's second-most populous

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country, with 110 million people, and threatens to fray Abiy's peacemaking in the turbulent Horn of Africa.

"I know the conflict has caused unimaginable suffering," Abiy wrote last week but argued that "the heavy cost we incurred as a nation was necessary" to hold the country together.

No one knows how many thousands of people have been killed in Tigray since the fighting began on Nov. 4, but the United Nations has noted reports of artillery strikes on populated areas, civilians being targeted and widespread looting. What has happened "is as heartbreaking as it is appalling," U.N. human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said last week.

Now refugees are arriving from areas deeper inside Tigray amid reports that fighting continues in some locations. These newer arrivals have more severe trauma, the doctor Tewodros said, with signs of starvation and dehydration and some with gunshot wounds.

It is the accounts of refugees like Tewodros and Guesh, and civilians who remain in Tigray, that eventually will reveal the scope of abuses that often are carried out along ethnic lines.

"Everyone looks at you and points out the part of you that doesn't belong to them," said Tewodros, who is of both Tigrayan and Amhara backgrounds. "So if I go to Tigray, they would pick up that I'm Amhara because Amhara is not a part of them. When I go to Amhara, they would pick up the part of Tigray because Tigray is not a part of them."

Such differences have become deadly. Many ethnic Tigrayan refugees have accused ethnic Amhara fighters of targeting them, while survivors of one massacre last month in the town of Mai-Kadra say Tigrayan fighters targeted Amhara. Other attacks followed.

Abraham Minasbo, a 22-year-old trained dancer, said Amhara militia members dragged him from his home in Mai-Kadra on Nov. 9 and beat him in the street with a hammer, an axe, sticks and a machete, then left him for dead. Scars now slope across the right side of his face and neck. He was only treated six days later, by Tewodros in Sudan.

Another patient, 65-year-old farmer Gebremedhin Gebru, was shot while trying to run from Amhara militia members in his town of Ruwasa. He said he lay there for two days until a neighbor found him. People "will be hit if they are seen helping" the wounded, Gebremedhin said.

For Tewodros, the conflict has been one civilian casualty after another since shelling began in early November as he worked at a hospital in Humera. Some shelling came from the north, he said, the direction of nearby Eritrea.

"We didn't know where to hide," he said. "We didn't know what to do."

Fifteen bodies arrived at the hospital that first day, and eight the next, he said. Then, as shelling continued, he and colleagues fled, transporting wounded patients on a tractor to the nearby community of Adebay. They abandoned that town when fighting intensified.

Tewodros and colleagues hid for two days in the forest, hearing gunfire and shouting, before walking for more than 12 hours, hiding from military convoys, and crossing a river into Sudan. There, he accepted a volunteer position with the Sudanese Red Crescent Society treating fellow refugees.

"Where we are now is extremely unsafe," he said of the reception center near the border, citing the Amhara fighters who approach the riverbank and threaten the refugees. The militias "are more dangerous than the Ethiopian national forces," he said. "They are more insane and crazy."

He doesn't know what lies ahead for his wife and two small children in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. He hasn't seen them in 10 months, and the children always ask him when he can come home.

Ethiopia's prime minister often speaks of "medemer," or national unity, Tewodros said, in a country with more than 80 ethnic groups. "Medemer would have been me. Medemer would have been my kids." But he no longer knows if his children, also of mixed ethnicity, have any future in the country.

Guesh, a father of three, knows even less about what's to come. He left his wife and three children behind a month ago in Adi Aser village, where a farmer was giving them shelter. Now, like many refugees torn from their families, he doesn't know if they are alive or dead.

Every time he sees another new refugee arriving in Sudan, he holds out photos of his family, so emotional he can hardly speak. In this conflict that remains so much in the shadows, he now relies on strangers to

know their fate.

Hadero reported from Atlanta. Cara Anna in Nairobi contributed.

UK warns of 'bumpy' post-Brexit transition despite deal

By JILL LAWLESS and RAF CASERT Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — First came the Brexit trade deal. Now comes the red tape and the institutional nitty gritty. Four days after sealing a free trade agreement with the European Union, the British government warned businesses to get ready for disruptions and "bumpy moments" when the new rules take effect on Thursday night.

Businesses were scrambling Monday to digest the details and implications of the 1,240-page deal sealed by the EU and the U.K. on Christmas Eve.

EU ambassadors, meanwhile, gave their unanimous approval Monday to the Brexit trade deal with the U.K. Germany, which holds the EU presidency, said the decision came during a meeting to assess the Christmas Eve agreement.

"Green light," said Germany's spokesman Sebastian Fischer.

The approval had been expected ever since all EU leaders warmly welcomed it. It still needs approval from the EU's legislature, which is expected to come in February. The U.K.'s House of Commons is expected to approve it on Wednesday.

The U.K. left the EU almost a year ago, but remained within the bloc's economic embrace during a transition period that ends at midnight Brussels time -- 11 p.m. in London -- on Dec. 31.

The agreement, hammered out after nine months of tense negotiations, will ensure Britain and the 27-nation bloc can continue to trade in goods without tariffs or quotas. That should help protect the 660 billion pounds (\$894 billion) in annual trade between the two sides, and the hundreds of thousands of jobs that rely on it.

But the end to Britain's membership in the EU's vast single market and customs union will still bring inconvenience and new expenses for both individuals and businesses — from the need for tourists to have travel insurance to the millions of new customs declarations that firms will have to fill out.

"Businesses will need to make sure that they're ready for new customs procedures and we as individuals will need to make sure that our passports are up to date because they need to have at least six months before expiry on them in order to be able to travel abroad," said Michael Gove, the British Cabinet minister in charge of Brexit preparations.

"I'm sure there will be bumpy moments but we are there in order to try to do everything we can to smooth the path," he told the BBC.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government argues that any short-term disruption from Brexit will be worth it, because the U.K. will now be free to set its own rules and strike new trade deals around the world.

Yet an ominous preview of what could happen if U.K.-EU trade faces heavy restrictions came this month when France briefly closed its border with Britain because of a highly transmissible new variant of the coronavirus sweeping through London and southern England. Thousands of trucks were stuck in traffic jams or parked at a disused airfield near the English Channel port of Dover for days and supermarkets warned that some goods, including fresh produce would soon run short.

Even after France relented and agreed to let in truckers who tested negative for the virus, the backlog of 15,000 drivers who now needed tests took days to clear.

Hardline pro-Brexit legislators in Johnson's Conservative Party are poring over the agreement to see whether it meets their goal of a decisive break from the bloc. The main opposition Labour Party says the deal will hurt Britain's economy but it will back it anyway because it is better than a chaotic no-deal split on Jan. 1.

Despite the deal, uncertainty hangs over huge chunks of the relationship between Britain and the EU.

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The agreement covers trade in goods, but leaves the U.K.'s huge financial services sector in limbo, still uncertain how easily it can do business with the bloc after Jan. 1. The British territory of Gibraltar, which sees thousands of workers cross over daily from Spain, is also in limbo since it was not included in the deal.

And Brexit deal has angered one of the sectors the government stressed it would protect: fishing. The economically minor but hugely symbolic issue of fishing rights was a sticking point in negotiations, with maritime EU nations seeking to retain access to U.K. waters, and Britain insisting it must control its seas.

Under the deal, the EU will give up a quarter of the quota it catches in U.K. waters, far less than the 80% that Britain initially demanded. The system will be phased in over 5 1/2 years, after which the quotas will be reassessed.

"I am angry, disappointed and betrayed," said Andrew Locker, chairman of Britain's National Federation of Fishermen's Organizations. "Boris Johnson promised us the rights to all the fish that swim in our exclusive economic zone and we have got a fraction of that."

Casert reported from Brussels. Geir Moulson in Berlin contributed to this story.

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

Saudi women's rights activist sentenced to nearly 6 years

By AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — One of Saudi Arabia's most prominent women's rights activists was sentenced on Monday to nearly six years in prison under a vague and broadly-worded law aimed at combating terrorism, according to state-linked media.

Loujain al-Hathloul's case, and her imprisonment for the past two and a half years, have drawn criticism from rights groups, members of the U.S. Congress and European Union lawmakers.

Al-Hathloul was among a handful of Saudi women who openly called for the right to drive before it was granted in 2018 and for the removal of male guardianship laws that had long stifled women's freedom of movement and ability to travel abroad.

State-linked Saudi news outlet Sabq reported that al-Hathloul was found guilty by the kingdom's anti-terrorism court on charges including agitating for change, pursuing a foreign agenda, using the internet to harm public order and cooperating with individuals and entities that have committed crimes according to anti-terror laws. She has 30 days to appeal the verdict.

A rights group called "Prisoners of Conscience" that focuses on Saudi political detainees said that al-Hathloul could be released as early as the end of March 2021 based on time served. She has been imprisoned since May 2018 and 34 months of her sentencing will be suspended.

The judge ordered her to serve five years and eight months in prison for violating anti-terrorism laws, according to Sabq, which said its reporter was allowed inside the courtroom during Monday's session.

Sabq reported that the judge said the defendant had confessed to committing the crimes and that her confessions were made voluntarily and without coercion. The judge said the verdict was issued in the presence of the prosecutor, the defendant, a representative from the government's Human Rights Commission and a handful of select local media representatives.

In-betweenland: As 2020 slips away, an American snapshot

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

GLENSHAW, Pa. (AP) — The enormous signs, selling for just \$9.99, greet shoppers at the suburban supermarket's entryway, carrying a holiday message that means something very different this year: "GATHER," they shout, even as the state's governor urges citizens to do precisely otherwise.

To come together or to stay apart: one of the countless, sometimes excruciating dilemmas that Americans find themselves caught between as a disheartening year is finally and enthusiastically shown the door.

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They're caught between presidents, one of whom is clear that he really doesn't want to go away. They're between a ragged year of pandemic and either a successful vaccine or another chapter of upheaval. They're between people on one side who say the country's crashing and burning – and people on the other side who say the same thing.

As most years wind to their ends, people in the United States press pause on life's movie — if we can. We take stock, review successes and mistakes, make resolutions, vow it will be better this time.

This year, buffeted by these December whirlwinds, Americans find themselves at a crossroads unlike any other in our history. This time around, though, the republic itself is caught in that in-betweenland right alongside us — exhausted by the year, stumbling to its conclusion. Hopeful, but unsure, about what comes next.

Those who find their wisdom in song lyrics might find one 1970s hit appropriately captures the times: "Clowns to the left of me. Jokers to the right. Here I am, stuck in the middle with you."

A year ends. Another begins. Just like always. Yet like nothing ever before.

This year, this moment of purgatory when American life perches between an unimaginably scrambled 2020 and a 2021 filled with unabashed hope, is different.

"Don't let yourself surrender to the fatigue," President-elect Joe Biden said a few weeks ago. He was referring to the pandemic. He might as well have been talking about the entire year.

As the December holidays inch along, the in-between moments are many and mystifying:

— After 10 months of pandemic and lockdown, angst and anger and economic upheaval and death by the hundreds of thousands of souls, Americans are poised to receive — or to refuse to receive — vaccines that could mark the beginning of the end.

— As a new president prepares to take office, the current one — a disputatious man who has upended uncounted political, social and civic norms during his one term in office — persists in his evidence-free insistence that he won the election.

— Control of Congress is in the balance and will be until Jan. 5, when runoff elections in Georgia will decide the majority in the U.S. Senate — and impact uncounted chunks of 2021.

— The centuries-long march toward American racial equality lurched forward vigorously in 2020 before the momentum paused or, at least, slowed — and produced some ugly backlash. What comes next?

— Cultural polarization, its flames licking high from the bottomless propane tank that is social media, has split society into what feels like a million little pieces. There's no obvious route back in 2021 — and, some have argued, there should not be.

Yet fragmentation — sometimes the natural byproduct of democracy, which is messy and diverse by design — does not necessarily serve Americans well in this case.

Unlike almost all other nations, the United States was created not around centuries of common culture. Instead, it has been stories that form the ties that bind: the city upon a hill. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. All men are created equal. Go west, young man.

What 2020 revealed (and what some Americans have long said) is that those tales are not as true or inclusive as some would believe — that while this land embodies and nurtures some of those traits, swallowing the American story whole is a self-blinding endeavor.

Unfortunately, the opposite is disruptive, too. The national fragmentation, exacerbated by 2020's challenges, is confusing, combustible and complex.

"We're not living in the same country, we're not reading the same news, we're not seeing the same story," says John Baick, a historian at Western New England University. "There is no narrative. There are only counternarratives. And people — are they even looking at narratives? Or are they just following some hyperlinks?"

The cacophony has placed the bizarrely tangential alongside the momentous, sometimes at equal volume. The result: a fun-house mirror of American life. "We're obviously in the Matrix," people say, citing their "2020 Bingo" cards.

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It's easy to believe such a conclusion when an unexplained metal monolith appears in the Utah desert. When a network releases a movie featuring a sexy Colonel Sanders. When Ronald Reagan, dead 16 years, summons us to arms from the latest version of "Call of Duty."

When 2020 has been so discombobulating that Pantone decides its new color of the year is actually two hues — a gray and a deep yellow, designed to be "practical and rock solid but at the same time warming and optimistic."

"We need to feel that everything is going to get brighter — this is essential to the human spirit," Pantone says. No argument there.

What happens next? Is there a "back to normal"? A new normal? Something else? Is this just a moment in American life, or something more extended?

Two things happened in the United States recently, both of which offer potential insight.

The first: Last month, the news surfaced that Roadside America, one of rural Pennsylvania's most enduring attractions, was closing after eight decades. The place, born of one man's childhood memories, grew into a model railroad landscape that filled an entire building. Now its detailed miniature representations of American life in the early and mid-20th centuries are being dismantled and auctioned off beginning Monday.

What a metaphor for 2020: the nation we once knew, split into fragments and scattered to the winds. This is the pessimistic storyline.

Yet Lyon Gardiner Tyler Jr.'s death in October at age 95 suggests a counternarrative.

Tyler was the grandson of the 10th president, John Tyler, who was born in 1790. His brother, Harrison Ruffin Tyler, is still living.

Think about that. Three generations of Americans spanning 230 years. Nearly the entire history of the United States playing out over three lifetimes.

Yes, time feels out of joint these days. Yes, the lack of distinct markers in American life in 2020 — full-on Christmas celebrations, entire sports seasons, a normal year's spikes and valleys — has suspended us in a cloudy amber of COVID and fear and contentiousness.

"Our memories of this moment are going to be muddled and confused," says Jennifer Talarico, a psychology professor at Lafayette College who studies how people remember their lives, and how public events affect that. "We're going to be left with this vague notion that's going to be hard to articulate, hard to describe, hard to capture for those folks that haven't been through it."

Yet those who fret about the republic crumbling ignore the convulsions of death and ugliness that Americans have navigated in 244 years. They forget that moments ebb into other moments. That things continue and, sometimes, improve. That a man walks the Earth today whose grandfather had living memories of the George Washington administration.

From that vantage point, the United States is barely a teenager. Left alone, it will eat junk food and scroll its phone until 3 a.m. It will test boundaries and taunt others with whom it disagrees. It won't do the dishes or take out the garbage. Sometimes, it will seem to have no future other than playing Xbox, watching "The Bachelorette" and eating Flamin' Hot Cheetos.

Remember, though, as 2021 creeps in: Teenagers are the ultimate embodiment of in-betweenness — caught between two confusing eras, never quite sure what of yesterday to retain and what of the future to grab at and make real.

And teenagers, of course, grow up.

Eventually.

Ted Anthony, director of digital innovation for The Associated Press, has been writing about American culture since 1990. Follow him on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/anthonyted>

Each year 1,000 Pakistani girls forcibly converted to Islam

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

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KARACHI, Pakistan (AP) —

Neha loved the hymns that filled her church with music. But she lost the chance to sing them last year when, at the age of 14, she was forcibly converted from Christianity to Islam and married to a 45-year-old man with children twice her age.

She tells her story in a voice so low it occasionally fades away. She all but disappears as she wraps a blue scarf tightly around her face and head. Neha's husband is in jail now facing charges of rape for the underage marriage, but she is in hiding, afraid after security guards confiscated a pistol from his brother in court.

"He brought the gun to shoot me," said Neha, whose last name The Associated Press is not using for her safety.

Neha is one of nearly 1,000 girls from religious minorities who are forced to convert to Islam in Pakistan each year, largely to pave the way for marriages that are under the legal age and non-consensual. Human rights activists say the practice has accelerated during lockdowns against the coronavirus, when girls are out of school and more visible, bride traffickers are more active on the Internet and families are more in debt.

The U.S. State Department this month declared Pakistan "a country of particular concern" for violations of religious freedoms — a designation the Pakistani government rejects. The declaration was based in part on an appraisal by the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom that underage girls in the minority Hindu, Christian, and Sikh communities were "kidnapped for forced conversion to Islam... forcibly married and subjected to rape."

While most of the converted girls are impoverished Hindus from southern Sindh province, two new cases involving Christians, including Neha's, have roiled the country in recent months.

The girls generally are kidnapped by complicit acquaintances and relatives or men looking for brides. Sometimes they are taken by powerful landlords as payment for outstanding debts by their farmhand parents, and police often look the other way. Once converted, the girls are quickly married off, often to older men or to their abductors, according to the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan.

Forced conversions thrive unchecked on a money-making web that involves Islamic clerics who solemnize the marriages, magistrates who legalize the unions and corrupt local police who aid the culprits by refusing to investigate or sabotaging investigations, say child protection activists.

One activist, Jibran Nasir, called the network a "mafia" that preys on non-Muslim girls because they are the most vulnerable and the easiest targets "for older men with pedophilia urges."

The goal is to secure virginal brides rather than to seek new converts to Islam. Minorities make up just 3.6 percent of Pakistan's 220 million people and often are the target of discrimination. Those who report forced conversions, for example, can be targeted with charges of blasphemy.

In the feudal Kashmir region of southern Sindh province, 13-year-old Sonia Kumari was kidnapped, and a day later police told her parents she had converted from Hinduism to Islam. Her mother pleaded for her return in a video widely viewed on the internet: "For the sake of God, the Quran, whatever you believe, please return my daughter, she was forcibly taken from our home."

But a Hindu activist, who didn't want to be identified for fear of repercussions from powerful landlords, said she received a letter that the family was forced to write. The letter claimed the 13-year-old had willingly converted and wed a 36-year-old who was already married with two children.

The parents have given up.

Arzoo Raja was 13 when she disappeared from her home in central Karachi. The Christian girl's parents reported her missing and pleaded with police to find her. Two days later, officers reported back that she had been converted to Islam and was married to their 40-year-old Muslim neighbor.

In Sindh province, the age of consent for marriage is 18 years old. Arzoo's marriage certificate said she was 19.

The cleric who performed Arzoo's marriage, Qasi Ahmed Mufti Jaan Raheemi, was later implicated in at least three other underage marriages. Despite facing an outstanding arrest warrant for solemnizing Arzoo's marriage, he continued his practice in his ramshackle office above a wholesale rice market in downtown Karachi.

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When an Associated Press reporter arrived at his office, Raheemi fled down a side stair, according to a fellow cleric, Mullah Kaifat Ullah, one of a half-dozen clerics who also performs marriages in the complex. He said another cleric is already in jail for marrying children.

While Ullah said he only marries girls 18 and above, he argued that "under Islamic law a girl's wedding at the age of 14 or 15 is fine."

Arzoo's mother, Rita Raja, said police ignored the family's appeals until one day she was videotaped outside the court sobbing and pleading for her daughter to be returned. The video went viral, creating a social media storm in Pakistan and prompting the authorities to step in.

"For 10 days, the parents were languishing between the police station and government authorities and different political parties," Nasir, the activist, said. "They were not being given any time... until it went viral. That is the real unfortunate thing over here."

Authorities have stepped in and arrested Arzoo's husband, but her mother said her daughter still refuses to come home. Raja said she is afraid of her husband's family.

The girl who loved hymns, Neha, said she was tricked into the marriage by a favorite aunt, who told Neha to accompany her to the hospital to see her sick son. Her aunt, Sandas Baloch, had converted to Islam years before and lived with her husband in the same apartment building as Neha's family.

"All Mama asked when we left was 'when will you be back?'" remembered Neha.

Instead of going to the hospital, she was taken to the home of her aunt's in-laws and told she would marry her aunt's 45-year-old brother-in-law.

"I told her I can't, I am too young and I don't want to. He is old," Neha said. "She slapped me and locked me up in a room."

Neha told of being taken before two men, one who was to be her husband and the other who recorded her marriage. They said she was 19. She said she was too frightened to speak because her aunt threatened to harm her two-year-old brother if she refused to marry.

She learned of her conversion only when she was told to sign the marriage certificate with her new name — Fatima.

For a week she was locked in one room. Her new husband came to her on the first night. Tears stained her blue scarf as she remembered it:

"I screamed and cried all night. I have images in my mind I can't scratch out," said Neha. "I hate him."

His elder daughter brought her food each day, and Neha begged for help to escape. Although the woman was frightened of her father, she relented a week after the marriage, bringing the underage bride a burqa — the all-covering garment worn by some Muslim women — and 500 rupees (about \$3). Neha fled.

But when she arrived home, Neha found her family had turned against her.

"I went home and I cried to my Mama about my aunt, what she said and the threats. But she didn't want me anymore," said Neha.

Her parents feared what her new husband might do to them, Neha said. Further, the prospects of marriage for a girl in conservative Pakistan who has been raped or married before are slim, and human rights activists say they often are seen as a burden.

Neha's family, including her aunt, all refused to talk to the AP. Her husband's lawyer, Mohammad Saleem, insisted that she married and converted voluntarily.

Neha found protection at a Christian church in Karachi, living on the compound with the pastor's family, who say the girl still wakes screaming in the night. She hopes to go back to school one day but is still distraught.

"At the beginning my nightmares were every night, but now it is just sometimes when I remember and inside I am shaking," she said. "Before I wanted to be a lawyer, but now I don't know what I will do. Even my mama doesn't want me now."

Mired in crises, North Korea's Kim to open big party meeting

By HYUNG-JIN KIM and KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

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SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Coronavirus restrictions that have significantly limited his public appearances. Warning signals for an economy battered by pandemic-related border closings and natural disasters. The impending departure of a U.S. president who said he “fell in love” with him.

As North Korean leader Kim Jong Un grapples with the toughest challenges of his nine-year rule, he’s set to open a massive ruling Workers’ Party congress next month to try to muster stronger public loyalty to him and lay out new economic and foreign policies.

While few question Kim’s grip on power, there is still room for things to get worse, especially if the world fails to find a quick way out of the COVID-19 crisis. That would prolong North Korea’s self-imposed lockdown and could possibly set conditions for an economic perfect storm that destabilizes food and exchange markets and triggers panic among the public.

The congress, the first in five years, is the ruling party’s top decision-making body. At the 2016 congress, Kim put himself in front, reaffirming his commitment to developing nuclear weapons and announcing an ambitious economic development plan. Five years later, experts say Kim doesn’t have many options other than to further squeeze his populace for more patience and labor.

“When we get into the specifics, there’s really nothing new the North could present at the congress in terms of developing its economy,” said Hong Min, an analyst at Seoul’s Korea Institute for National Unification. “The country will continue to close its borders as long as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and the international sanctions will persist, so there’s no visible room for a breakthrough.”

Kim entered this year with a declaration of “frontal breakthrough” against punishing U.N. sanctions after his high-stakes diplomacy with President Donald Trump fell apart in 2019 over a U.S. refusal to offer extensive sanctions relief in return for limited denuclearization measures.

But Kim’s drive faced an immediate setback. Later in January, North Korea was forced to seal off its international borders, including one with China — its biggest trading partner and aid benefactor — after COVID-19 emerged there.

As a result of the border closure, North Korea’s trade volume with China in the first 10 months of this year fell by 75%. That led to a shortage of raw materials that plunged the North’s factory operation rate to its lowest level since Kim took power in late 2011, and a four-fold price increase of imported foods like sugar and seasonings, South Korea’s spy agency told lawmakers recently.

For several months, North Korea also restricted the use of U.S. dollars at markets, only to make its local currency, the won, appreciate sharply, triggering mounting public complaints. Authorities executed a high-profile currency trader in Pyongyang in October as a scapegoat, according to Ha Tae-keung, one of the lawmakers who was briefed by South Korea’s National Intelligence Service, or NIS.

Lim Soo-ho, an analyst at an NIS-run think tank, said North Korea likely aimed to reassert government control over markets amid the pandemic. He said such a step is doomed to fail because people are likely to exchange only a portion of their foreign currency savings for won in anticipation that the clampdown will eventually end.

Lim said if the COVID-19 pandemic continues for most of 2021, the North’s economy could face a crisis unseen since a devastating famine that killed hundreds of thousands of North Koreans in the 1990s.

During next month’s congress, North Korea will likely call for another “frontal breakthrough” to bolster its internal strength and build up a more self-reliant economy. But as long as the pandemic continues, the North will have to settle for modest economic goals while focusing on its anti-virus efforts, the Seoul-based Institute for Far Eastern Studies said in a report.

North Korea has steadfastly claimed to be coronavirus-free, though it said it has intensified what it called “maximum” anti-epidemic steps. Outside experts are highly skeptical of the North’s zero-virus case claim but agree the country hasn’t experienced a widespread outbreak.

“Why did they raise their anti-epidemic steps if they really haven’t had any patients? It doesn’t make any sense,” said Kim Sin-gon, a professor at Korea University College of Medicine in Seoul. “But they’ve imposed a higher level of anti-virus steps than any other country, so it’s likely that there aren’t many patients there.”

North Korea’s public healthcare infrastructure remains in shambles, with many hospitals still using equip-

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ment built in the 1960s and 1970s. This keeps North Korean officials vigilant because "they know they'll suffer tremendous damage if they lower their guard even little bit," said Kang Young-sil, an analyst at Seoul's University of North Korean Studies.

Since the pandemic began, North Korea has isolated people with suspected coronavirus symptoms, flown out foreign nationals and reportedly locked down one region after another. In some extreme measures detected by Seoul, the North banned fishing at sea, executed an official for violating regulations on the entrance of goods from abroad, and fatally shot and burned a South Korean official found floating on an object in waters near the Koreas' disputed western maritime border.

"North Korea is very sensitive and nervous amid the pandemic, and it's making irrational, bizarre moves," said Nam Sung-wook, a professor at South Korea's Korea University.

Kim Jong Un, 36, has been hunkering down. He's appeared in public 53 times this year to observe weapons tests, visit areas hit by typhoons and preside over high-level meetings, according to Seoul's Unification Ministry, compared to an average of 103 appearances over the past four years.

Despite the deadlocked nuclear talks, North Korea likely hoped for the reelection of Trump, who met with Kim three times, giving him his long-desired legitimacy on a global stage. Trump once said he exchanged "love letters" with Kim and that "we fell in love."

Instead of the top-down summitry used by Kim and Trump, President-elect Joe Biden will likely want working-level negotiators to sort out details and confirm North Korea's denuclearization commitment before he would meet with Kim. North Korea also is probably not an overriding priority for Biden, who faces several pressing domestic issues such as the coronavirus, an economy hammered by the pandemic, and racial disparities.

Some experts say North Korea may opt for its time-honored strategy of conducting missile tests to draw U.S. attention like it did during past presidential transition periods in Washington. Others expect the North to avoid big provocations that could diminish the prospect for early talks with the Biden administration.

Satellite imagery provided by Maxar, a Colorado-based satellite imagery company, shows thousands of people assembled in formation at Pyongyang's main square on Saturday, likely rehearsing for upcoming celebrations. South Korea's spy agency earlier said North Korea would hold a military parade in January in a demonstration of its military strength targeting the Biden administration.

Kim's government has acknowledged that the sanctions, the pandemic, and the typhoons and summer floods that wiped out crops have created "multiple crises." But experts say China will help North Korea because it won't likely let its neighbor suffer a humanitarian disaster that could cause a refugee influx over their border.

"Kim has been battered by a one-two punch — the U.N. sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic," Nam said. "But China is by his side and supporting him."

Amid pandemic, Pacific islands work to offset food shortages

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Coronavirus infections have barely touched many of the remote islands of the Pacific, but the pandemic's fallout has been enormous, disrupting the supply chain that brings crucial food imports and sending prices soaring as tourism wanes.

With a food crisis looming, many governments have begun community initiatives to help alleviate shortages: extending fishing seasons, expanding indigenous food gathering lessons and bolstering seed distribution programs that allow residents greater self-reliance.

"We initially started with 5,000 seeds and thought we would finish them in nine months' time. But there was a very big response, and we finished distributing the seeds in one week," said Vinesh Kumar, head of operation for Fiji's Agriculture Ministry.

The project provides residents with vegetable seeds, saplings and basic farming equipment to help them grow their own home gardens.

Fiji resident Elisabeta Waqa said she had contemplated starting a garden before the pandemic, but --

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with no job, extra time at home and seeds from the ministry and friends -- finally took action.

Looking to have "zero financial investment," Waqa collected buckets, crates and other potential planters discarded on the side of the road and in the trash. Soon her yard transformed into containers of green beans, cucumber, cabbage and other produce.

"When I started harvesting about two, three weeks later, that's when I realized: My gosh, this is a hobby people have had for so long. I thought about just how much money I could save my doing this," Waqa said.

Geographically isolated with limited arable land and increased urbanization, many of the Pacific island countries and territories have seen their populations shift from traditional agriculture-based work to tourism. The trend has created an increased reliance on imported food such as corned beef, noodles and other highly processed foods instead of the traditional diet of locally grown items like nutrient-rich yams and taro.

Eriko Hibi, director of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Liaison Office in Japan, called the shift a "triple burden" of health issues: undernutrition, micronutrient deficiencies and obesity.

When the pandemic hit, nearly all the countries in the region closed their borders. Shipping supply chains — including fertilizer for farms and food — were disrupted, causing prices to rise. In Suva, Fiji, the cost of some fresh fruits and vegetables rose by up to 75% during the first weeks.

At same time, tourism — which Hibi said accounts for up to 70% of some countries' gross domestic product — came to a halt, leaving thousands unemployed with decreased access to food.

"It's not just about the availability of the prices in the market but also the purchasing power of the consumers, which has gone down," Hibi said.

In Tuvalu, the government held workshops teaching youth indigenous food production methods such as taro planting and sap collection from coconut trees. In Fiji, the government extended fishing season of coral trout and grouper that could be sold for income or used as food. Numerous governments encouraged residents to move back to rural areas that had stronger independent food resources.

Tevita Ratucadre and his wife moved back to a rural village in Fiji to save on rent and food costs after being laid off from the hotel where they worked because of COVID-19.

In the city, "you have to buy everything with money, even if you have to put food on the table," Ratucadre said. "In the village you can grow your own things."

Having watched his parents farm when he was a child, Ratucadre said he was able to remember how to plant and grow cassava stems from a neighbor. He now grows enough food for his family, he said.

"When I used to work, I used to buy whatever I wanted to eat when I'd go to the supermarket," he said. "Now I have to plant and eat whatever I've planted."

Mervyn Piesse, a research manager at Australian-based research institute Future Directions International, said it was too early to know what the potential health benefits could be but regional diets might shift away from imports to more fresh food, even after the pandemic.

"There is, I think, a movement in parts of the Pacific for people to actually start thinking about, 'If we can grow food ourselves during a global pandemic, why can't we do the same thing at normal times?'" Piesse said.

Waqa said she has already made up her mind — though she's begun working again, she's taught her older children how to take care of the garden and harvest produce while she's gone.

"Now I save money on food, know where my food is coming from and just feel more secure about having food," she said. "I don't want to go back to the way things were before."

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After naming bombing suspect, focus turns to motive

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press
NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — With federal officials having identified the man believed to be behind Nashville's Christmas Day bombing, authorities now turn to the monumental task of piecing together the mo-

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tive behind the explosion that severely damaged dozens of downtown buildings and injured three people.

While officials on Sunday named Anthony Quinn Warner, 63, as the man behind the mysterious explosion in which he was killed, the motive has remained elusive.

"These answers won't come quickly and will still require a lot of our team's efforts," FBI Special Agent Doug Korneski said at a Sunday news conference. "Though we may be able to answer some these questions as our investigation continues, none of those answers will be enough by those affected by this event."

In just a few days, hundreds of tips and leads have been submitted to law enforcement agencies. Yet thus far, officials have not provided information on what possibly drove Warner to set off the explosion.

David Rausch, the director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, told reporters on Sunday that Warner had not been on the radar before Christmas.

Furthermore, officials have not provided insight into why Warner selected the particular location for the bombing, which damaged an AT&T building and continued to wreak havoc on cellphone service and police and hospital communications in several Southern states as the company worked to restore service.

Forensic analysts were reviewing evidence collected from the blast site to try to identify the components of the explosives as well as information from the U.S. Bomb Data Center for intelligence and investigative leads, according to a law enforcement official who said investigators were examining Warner's digital footprint and financial history, as well as a recent deed transfer of a suburban Nashville home they searched.

The official, who was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity, said federal agents were examining a number of potential leads and pursuing several theories, including the possibility that the AT&T building was targeted.

Korneski said Sunday that officials were looking at any and all motives and were interviewing acquaintances of Warner's to try to determine what may have motivated him.

The bombing took place on a holiday morning well before downtown streets were bustling with activity and was accompanied by a recorded announcement warning anyone nearby that a bomb would soon detonate. Then, for reasons that may never be known, the audio switched to a recording of Petula Clark's 1964 hit "Downtown" shortly before the blast.

Warner, who public records show had experience with electronics and alarms and who had also worked as a computer consultant for a Nashville realtor, had been regarded as a person of interest in the bombing since at least Saturday, when federal and local investigators converged on the home linked to him.

Federal agents could be seen looking around the property, searching the home and the backyard. A Google Maps image captured in May 2019 had shown a recreational vehicle similar to the one that exploded parked in the backyard, but it was not at the property on Saturday, according to an Associated Press reporter at the scene.

On Sunday morning, police formally named Warner as being under investigation.

Officials said their identification of Warner relied on several key pieces of evidence, including DNA found at the explosion site. Investigators had previously revealed that human remains had been found in the vicinity.

In addition, investigators from the Tennessee Highway Patrol recovered parts from the RV among the wreckage from the blast, and were able to link the vehicle identification number to an RV that was registered to Warner, officials said.

"We're still following leads, but right now there is no indication that any other persons were involved," Korneski said. "We've reviewed hours of security video surrounding the recreation vehicle. We saw no other people involved."

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes. Suddenly the warning stopped, and "Downtown" started playing.

The RV exploded shortly afterward, sending black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops.

Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T

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that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

But on Sunday, just blocks from where the bombing took place, tourists had already begun to fill the sidewalks on Lower Broadway, a central entertainment district. Some took selfies while others tried to get as close as possible to the explosion site, blocked by police barricades.

Earlier Sunday, the officers who responded provided harrowing details, at times getting choked up reliving the moments that led up to the blast.

"This is going to tie us together forever, for the rest of my life," Metro Nashville police Officer James Wells, who suffered some hearing loss due to the explosion, told reporters at a news conference. "Christmas will never be the same."

Officer Brenna Hosey said she and her colleagues knocked on six or seven doors in nearby apartments to warn people to evacuate. She particularly remembered a startled mother of four children.

"I don't have kids but I have cousins and nieces, people who I love who are small," Hosey said, adding she had to plead with the family to leave the building as quickly as possible.

Balsamo and Tucker reported from Washington. Associated Press journalists Scott Stroud and Mark Humphrey in Nashville contributed to this report.

A divided nation asks: What's holding our country together?

By TAMARA LUSH, JOSH BOAK, NICHOLAS RICCARDI and CLAIRE GALOFARO Associated Press
Elections are meant to resolve arguments. This one inflamed them.

Weeks after the votes have been counted and the winners declared, many Americans remain angry, defiant and despairing. Millions now harbor new grievances borne of President Donald Trump's baseless claims of election fraud. Many Democrats are saddened by results that revealed the opposition to be far more powerful than they imagined.

And in both groups there are those grappling with larger, more disquieting realizations: The foundations of the American experiment have been shaken — by partisan rancor, disinformation, a president's assault on democracy and a deadly coronavirus pandemic.

There is a sense of loss.

It burdens even the winners. In North Carolina, a soon-to-be state lawmaker whose victory made history says he is struck by how little feels changed. In Michigan, a suburban woman found her feminism in the Trump era only to see her family torn by the election outcome.

In a Pennsylvania town, the simple things still feel fraught. Plans for a small-town Christmas market spiraled into a bruising fight over public health and politics.

"What is holding our country together?" wonders Charisse Davis, a school board member in the Atlanta suburbs, where the election has not ended. A pair of Senate runoffs on Jan. 5 will decide which party controls the U.S. Senate.

Davis may get her answer soon. A vaccine has brought hope and a chance for a nation to approve it can do big things again. New leadership in Washington may change the tone.

But now, at the end of 2020, many Americans say the experiences of the past four years have made them look at their neighbors — and their country — in a different light.

It's been a tumultuous few months for Ricky Hurtado. The 32-year-old son of Salvadoran immigrant won a seat in the North Carolina state legislature as a Democrat representing a suburban slice of Alamance County.

Hurtado's wife, Yazmin Garcia, earned her U.S. citizenship six days before the election. The couple drove directly from the immigration office where she became a citizen to the nearest early voting site, so she could register on the spot and cast a ballot for her husband.

But Hurtado still can't shake the feeling that, despite all this, little changed. He'd hoped to be part of a Democratic wave that took back his state legislature, hold seats on the state Supreme Court and the U.S.

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Senate. Instead, Democrats fell short in all those efforts. Trump won North Carolina just as he did in 2016.

"The election certainly makes it feel like Alamance and North Carolina voted for the status quo," Hurtado said. "It feels like we haven't moved in any given direction."

"I won, but as a citizen of North Carolina who's deeply invested in North Carolina, I feel like I lost."

The win made Hurtado the first Latino Democrat ever elected to the state legislature.

After the election, he was flooded with texts and in-person congratulations from well-wishers, including one immigrant mother at an event who told him: "For you to win here, in Alamance County, is so important for my children."

Still, Hurtado is struggling to understand how there was a shift among Latinos toward Trump in the election. The president's strong performance with Cuban Americans in South Florida narrowed the traditional Democratic edge in Miami-Dade County and helped put Florida in Trump's column. In Texas, Trump won tens of thousands of new supporters in predominantly Mexican American communities along the border.

It didn't shock Hurtado. Political opinions are shaped by more than family heritage, race or gender or political party.

"It shows you, your identities are complex," he said.

In the Pennsylvania college town of Slippery Rock, population 3,600, the annual Christmas market was supposed to be the bright spot in a dismal year.

Republican Mayor Jondavid Longo donated his salary — \$88 a month after taxes — to help pay for the market that drew 25 vendors and 500 people. He hoped the outdoor event would bring holiday cheer and a much-needed injection of cash to the town's struggling businesses. Perhaps, he figured, a cozy event would also drown out any bitter feelings about the presidential election and the pandemic.

But neither politics nor the pandemic could be escaped.

Things began to devolve on Twitter. Photos surfaced showing few people in masks, leading to criticism that the event might have spread the novel coronavirus.

The mayor said his critics were Democrats and that he believed the market did little in terms of infection. Critics could note that the death toll from the pandemic in rural Butler County has jumped more than four-fold since the Nov. 3 election to roughly 170 people.

"We were outside so I thought things were reasonable," Longo said. "COVID was only an issue for individuals who were trying to stoke the flames of fear and discontent."

Trump won Butler County handily in November, evidence of his campaign to supercharge turnout in rural, conservative places as he cedes ground in the cities and suburbs. It wasn't enough to win Pennsylvania — or other industrial swing states — as President-elect Joe Biden's campaign also managed to motivate even more hard-to-reach voters. But the strategy will have a lasting impact as the physical distance between Democratic areas and Republican areas grows wider.

Longo says the election has changed politics in his town, surfacing resentments from voters on both sides. The lingering tensions now overshadow issues once considered local — such as funding the police and libraries.

"Party politics from the national stage have seeped down into the cracks and crevices of small towns like Slippery Rock," Longo said. "It's really difficult to close the gap and bridge the divide."

In Cobb County, Georgia, Davis popped a bottle of champagne, despite a nagging sense of sadness, then packed the family into the car to head into downtown Atlanta and join thousands dancing in the street.

She decided to just enjoy victory on the Saturday that news organizations called the presidential race for Biden.

"We'll go back to worrying about humanity tomorrow," she said to her family as they climbed in the car. And then tomorrow arrived, and the worry roared back.

Davis, who serves on the school board in suburban Cobb County, was part of a wave of Black women elected to public office in recent years. Women like her led the charge that ushered Biden to an unlikely victory in Georgia.

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"We won, but it doesn't really feel like we did," she said.

Trump immediately began sowing doubts about the vote, tossing out specious claims of fraud. Tens of millions of Americans — 36 percent of Republicans in a recent Fox News poll — now believe the claims that the election was rigged and he was the rightful winner.

"I think the election was totally paid for and rigged by the Democrats. I believe there was huge amounts of fraud and representation and illegal processing," said Pamela Allen, a 72-year-old retiree from Holiday, Florida, who has supported Trump since he came down the escalator in Trump Tower in 2015 to announce his candidacy.

Allen, who worked as a poll watcher in Pasco County, said she saw no problems on Election Day.

"Here in Pasco I have to admit it was very well done," she said. But she believes things she's seen on the conservative Trump-favored Newsmax about alleged voter fraud in other states. She is "baffled" as to why Attorney General William Barr hasn't arrested anyone, and "amazed" that the Supreme Court didn't rule in Trump's favor. Barr, viewed by Democrats as a staunch Trump loyalist, instead made clear he had seen no evidence of widespread fraud.

Allen believes that if Biden takes office, he will retire quickly, leaving the presidency to Vice President-elect Kamala Harris. She also thinks House Speaker Nancy Pelosi will become vice president. However, Allen hopes Trump will prevail prior to Inauguration Day, Jan. 20.

"I would support martial law if that is what he believes he needs to do. I would support absolutely anything Donald Trump proposes to keep the government going in the direction we were going in. As opposed to Biden running the country, absolutely," she said.

Trump's efforts to toss out votes came in heavily Black cities, which to Davis represents an ugly history of trying to repress Black voices. She watched a recent debate, when Kelly Loeffler, one of the two Republican senators in runoffs to retain their seats, refused to say Trump lost.

How, Davis worries, can a country recover from that?

"Do we have a democracy or do we not?" she said.

In her county, formerly a Republican stronghold, the election marked an extraordinary transition: Democrats won victories in most countywide offices, including sheriff, district attorney and a majority on the Board of Commissioners, which is now governed solely by women, most of them Black.

But that blue wave stopped short of flipping the seven-member school board. Davis, one of three Democrats, will remain in the minority. The impact of those results quickly made itself clear to her: Just after the election, the school board split along party and racial lines to vote to disband a committee it had created to review the names of its schools. Some of the schools are named after a Confederate general and a member of a slave-owning family.

"If Democrats say something, then the other side has to be against it. That's just where we are," Davis said. "I don't know how we get past this."

In suburban Michigan, a coalition of suburban women achieved what they set out to do — help evict Trump from the White House. But Lori Goldman, in Oakland County, Michigan, who runs the group Fems for Dems, can't shake the sense that their mission now is more critical than it's ever been.

"We got rid of this blight, this cancer," said Goldman, 61. "We cut him out. But we know that cancer has spread, it's spread to soft tissue, other organs. And now we have to save the rest of the body."

Trump isn't gone, not really, she said. She is horrified at the number of Americans who believe his unsubstantiated claims of widespread voter fraud.

"That's a dangerous, dangerous place to be in," she said. "This country is in a lot of trouble."

It feels to her that the United States is caught in a period of great transition. The bright, progressive future she longs for seems inevitable. But she thinks a large portion of America would prefer to turn back the clock.

Trump called people like her the "suburban housewives of America," and tried to appeal to them by spreading fear about Black Lives Matter protesters, crime and low-income housing. Still, Biden won 54% of suburban voters, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of the electorate.

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Goldman can't understand why 74 million Americans voted for Trump. She went on national television and said she was ashamed that most of her own relatives were among them. Now some of her siblings don't want to talk to her anymore.

To her, this is a microcosm of one of the greatest challenges this country has faced: that tribalized politics has pitted people against each other in a way far more profound than ever before. It is no longer Republicans versus Democrats. It has splintered families and friends.

She weeps when she talks about the rift.

Riccardi reported from Denver; Lush from Tampa, Florida; Galofaro from Louisville; and Boak from Baltimore.

Trump signs massive measure funding government, COVID relief

By JILL COLVIN, LISA MASCARO and ANDREW TAYLOR Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump has signed a \$900 billion pandemic relief package, ending days of drama over his refusal to accept the bipartisan deal that will deliver long-sought cash to businesses and individuals and avert a federal government shutdown.

The massive bill includes \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September and contains other end-of-session priorities such as an increase in food stamp benefits.

The signing Sunday, at his private club in Florida came amid escalating criticism over his eleventh-hour demands for larger, \$2,000 relief checks and scaled-back spending even though the bill had already passed the House and Senate by wide margins. The bill was passed with what lawmakers had thought was Trump's blessing, and after months of negotiations with his administration.

His foot-dragging resulted in a lapse in unemployment benefits for millions struggling to make ends meet and threatened a government shutdown in the midst of a pandemic. But signing the bill into law prevents another crisis of Trump's own creation and ends a standoff with his own party during the final days of his administration.

It was unclear what, if anything, Trump accomplished with his delay, beyond angering all sides and empowering Democrats to continue their push for higher relief checks, which his own party opposes.

In his statement, Trump repeated his frustrations with the COVID-19 relief bill for providing only \$600 checks to most Americans instead of the \$2,000 that his fellow Republicans already rejected. He also complained about what he considered unnecessary spending by the government at large.

"I will sign the Omnibus and Covid package with a strong message that makes clear to Congress that wasteful items need to be removed," Trump said in the statement.

While the president insisted he would send Congress "a redlined version" with items to be removed under the rescission process, those are merely suggestions to Congress. The bill, as signed, would not necessarily be changed.

Democrats, who have the majority in the House, immediately vowed to prevent any cuts. Democrats "will reject any rescissions" submitted by the president, said Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., in a statement.

Lawmakers now have breathing room to continue debating whether the relief checks should be as large as the president has demanded. The Democratic-led House supports the larger checks and is set to vote on the issue Monday, but it's expected to be ignored by the Republican-held Senate where spending faces opposition. For now, the administration can only begin work sending out the \$600 payments.

Republicans and Democrats swiftly welcomed Trump's decision to sign the bill into law.

"The compromise bill is not perfect, but it will do an enormous amount of good for struggling Kentuckians and Americans across the country who need help now," said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky. "I thank the President for signing this relief into law."

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., called the signing "welcome news for the fourteen million Americans who just lost the lifeline of unemployment benefits on Christmas weekend, and for the millions more

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struggling to stay afloat during this historic pandemic and economic crisis.”

But others slammed Trump’s delay in turning the bill into law. In a tweet, Rep. Gerry Connolly, D-Va., accused Trump of having “played Russian roulette with American lives. A familiar and comfortable place for him.”

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he would offer Trump’s proposal for \$2,000 checks for a vote in Senate — putting Republicans on the spot.

“The House will pass a bill to give Americans \$2,000 checks. Then I will move to pass it in the Senate,” Schumer tweeted. “No Democrats will object. Will Senate Republicans?”

Democrats are promising more aid to come once President-elect Joe Biden takes office, but Republicans are signaling a wait-and-see approach.

Congress will push ahead Monday, with the House expected to vote to override Trump’s veto of an annual must-pass Defense bill, confronting the president on another big issue in the final days of the session. The Senate is expected to follow on Tuesday.

In the face of growing economic hardship, spreading disease and a looming shutdown, lawmakers spent Sunday urging Trump to sign the legislation immediately, then have Congress follow up with additional aid. Aside from unemployment benefits and relief payments to families, money for vaccine distribution, businesses and more was on the line. Protections against evictions also hung in the balance.

“What the president is doing right now is unbelievably cruel,” said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt. “So many people are hurting. ... It is really insane and this president has got to finally ... do the right thing for the American people and stop worrying about his ego.”

Republican Sen. Pat Toomey of Pennsylvania said he understood that Trump “wants to be remembered for advocating for big checks, but the danger is he’ll be remembered for chaos and misery and erratic behavior if he allows this to expire.”

Toomey added: “So I think the best thing to do, as I said, sign this and then make the case for subsequent legislation.”

The same point was echoed by Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican who’s criticized Trump’s pandemic response and his efforts to undo the election results. “I just gave up guessing what he might do next,” he said.

Republican Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois said too much is at stake for Trump to “play this old switcheroo game.”

“I don’t get the point,” he said. “I don’t understand what’s being done, why, unless it’s just to create chaos and show power and be upset because you lost the election.”

Washington had been reeling since Trump turned on the deal. Fingers pointed at administration officials, including Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, as lawmakers tried to understand whether they were misled about Trump’s position.

“Now to be put in a lurch, after the president’s own person negotiated something that the president doesn’t want, it’s just — it’s surprising,” Kinzinger said.

Kinzinger spoke on CNN’s “State of the Union,” and Hogan and Sanders on ABC’s “This Week.”

Mascaro and Taylor reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Alexandra Olson in New York contributed to this report.

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Mascaro and Taylor reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Alexandra Olson in New York contributed to this report.

The Latest: Driver charged after truck stopped in Tennessee

By The Associated Press undefined

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The Latest on the Christmas Day bombing in downtown Nashville:

9 p.m.

A sheriff’s office in Tennessee says the driver of a box truck that was heard playing audio at a convenience store outside of Nashville has been booked into jail on felony charges.

The Rutherford County Sheriff’s Office says members of a church and customers at the nearby market where the white box truck was spotted Sunday morning heard the driver playing audio “similar to what was heard” before a recreational vehicle exploded in downtown Nashville on Christmas Day.

Sgt. Steve Craig says deputies were called to investigate reports of the truck driver playing audio “loudly” outside the market, and later learned that the man was also accused of similar actions outside a church during a service.

The sheriff’s office said in a statement that 33-year-old driver James Turgeon has been detained and charged with two counts of felony filing a false report and one count of tampering with evidence. Officials say Turgeon received the evidence tampering charge because he “damaged the speaker system wiring intentionally.”

The Tennessee Highway Patrol has said a robot was sent to investigate the truck and no device was found.

Turgeon is being held on \$500,000 bond, authorities said.

7:15 p.m.

A sheriff’s office in Tennessee says federal and state authorities did not discover a device after checking a “suspicious” box truck parked at a convenience store outside of Nashville.

The Rutherford County Sheriff’s Office said in a social media post Sunday night that dispatchers received a call about the white box truck parked at a market in Rutherford County at around 10:30 a.m. Officials say it was playing audio “similar to what was heard” before a recreational vehicle exploded in downtown Nashville on Christmas Day.

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Law enforcement officials shut down a section of highway in neighboring Wilson County as authorities sent out a robot to investigate.

"No device was detected," Tennessee Highway Patrol Lt. Bill Miller said.

Officials say the driver left the parking lot and was pulled over and detained by authorities.

Rutherford County Sheriff Mike Fitzhugh says the investigation is ongoing.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives says specialists worked with the state highway patrol at the scene. The FBI and other local agencies also assisted.

6 p.m.

AT&T says it's making progress in its round-the-clock efforts to restore service cut off by the Christmas Day bombing in Nashville.

The company suffered widespread outages in Tennessee and other states after a bomb in a recreational vehicle exploded near one of its facilities in downtown Nashville.

CEO Jeff McElfresh said in a statement that 96% of its wireless service has been restored, along with 60% of AT&T's business services and 86% of the company's consumer broadband and entertainment services. He says the company's goal is to restore all service by late Sunday.

The facility in question was significantly damaged by the blast and then incurred fire and water damage that took out a number of backup power generators. Service was disrupted across parts of Tennessee, Kentucky and Alabama.

Authorities say they believe the man responsible for planting the bomb in the vehicle died in the blast. He was identified as 63-year-old Anthony Quinn Warner.

5:05 p.m.

Authorities say the man suspected of setting off a bomb in a recreational vehicle that rocked downtown Nashville on Christmas Day died in the explosion.

U.S. Attorney Don Cochran identified the suspect on Sunday as Anthony Quinn Warner.

Investigators said they used DNA to identify the remains as Warner's. The FBI said they also matched the RV's vehicle identification number to a registration belonging to Warner.

Federal agents and police had searched a home in suburban Nashville associated with Warner.

Authorities did not immediately provide details about a potential motive.

Douglas Korneski, the special agent in charge of the FBI's office in Memphis, said there was no indication anyone aside from Warner was involved in the bombing. Three people were injured and dozens of buildings were damaged.

3 p.m.

Authorities in Tennessee have shut down a road east of Nashville after stopping a box truck that they said had been playing audio "similar to what was heard" before a recreational vehicle exploded in downtown Nashville on Christmas Day.

The Rutherford County Sheriff's Office says on Twitter that law enforcement officials had shut down a section of highway in Wilson County, just east of Nashville, on Sunday to investigate a white box truck parked on the side of the road. Authorities had sent out a robot to investigate the vehicle as officials stood far back, monitoring the situation.

Sheriff's officials said the truck had been playing the audio when it was parked at a convenience store around 10:30 a.m. at the Crossroads Market in Walter Hill. The driver left the parking lot and was pulled over by deputies in nearby Wilson County. Officials said the driver has been detained by law enforcement.

A Wilson County dispatcher said the road that was shut down was Murfreesboro Road between Cedar Forest Road and Richmond Shop Road.

Deputies said they had also evacuated residents in the area as they continued to investigate.

Before the RV blew up, it blared a recorded warning calling for people to evacuate, and then the 1964

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song "Downtown" by Petula Clark. Sheriff's officials did not specify what the box truck was playing.

1:15 p.m.

Nashville Police say a Tennessee man named Anthony Quinn Warner is under investigation in connection with the Christmas Day bombing that rocked downtown Nashville.

Metro Nashville Police Department Spokesman Don Aaron confirmed Warner's identity Sunday. Federal and state investigators are trying to determine who set off a bomb inside a recreational vehicle Friday morning, injuring three people and damaging more than 40 businesses. They are also working to identify human remains found at the scene.

Separately, a law enforcement official told The Associated Press that federal investigators have started examining Warner's digital footprint and financial history. They are also examining a recent deed transfer of a home in suburban Nashville.

The official could not discuss the case publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The official said forensic analysts are reviewing evidence collected from the blast site to try to identify the components of the explosives and are also reviewing information from the U.S. Bomb Data Center for intelligence and investigative leads.

Federal agents are examining a number of potential leads and pursuing several theories, including the possibility that an AT&T building was targeted. The bomb caused damage that affected communications in several states.

9:30 a.m.

AT&T says it has been rerouting service to other facilities as the company works to restore a building that sustained heavy damage after a bomb exploded in downtown Nashville on Christmas Day.

The company said in a statement Sunday morning that mobile service has been restored to many areas that were affected by the blast. The company says it is bringing in resources to help recover affected wireline voice and data services and expects to have 24 additional trailers of disaster recovery equipment at the site by the end of the day.

The building's commercial power connections were damaged and forced offline after a bomb planted in a recreational vehicle parked nearby detonated Friday morning. Customers lost communications not only in Tennessee but in states including Kentucky, Alabama and Georgia.

The company says power has been restored to four of the building's floors. While three feet of water was pumped out of the building's basement on Saturday, access to the lower floors is still limited. Elevators, beams and columns and the building's facade were also damaged.

The Latest: Japan's PM seeks to enforce virus measures

By The Associated Press undefined

TOKYO — Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga says he plans to submit legislation that will make coronavirus measures legally binding for businesses, punish violators and include economic compensation as his government struggles to slow the ongoing upsurge.

Japan had a state of emergency in April and May with non-binding requests for people to stay home and business to close, but people have become complacent about the pandemic and store owners have become less cooperative due to the economic impact.

Suga said experts are discussing the legislation to make coronavirus more effectively enforced and hoped to submit the bill for parliamentary approval "as soon as possible" next year.

Suga also reiterated his request for the public to spend "quiet" year-end and New Year holidays and stick to mask-wearing and hand-washing amid concerns of a new variant of the coronavirus that has spread in Britain and detected at airports and in Tokyo last week.

Japan is barring entry of all non-resident foreign nationals as a precaution against a new and potentially

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more contagious variant, from Monday through Jan. 31.

Suga's government has been unable to slow the ongoing upsurge of the infections despite his requests for basic preventive measures.

His government has been criticized for delaying measures for weeks due to apparent reluctance to hurt the pandemic-hit economy, with recent media surveys showing about 30-point decline in his support ratings since he took office in September.

Japan has 220,236 cases, with 3,252 deaths as of Sunday, the health ministry said.

THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

The EU has launched a huge vaccine rollout, aimed at projecting a unified message that the vaccine is safe and Europe's best chance to emerge from the pandemic and the economic devastation of lockdowns. South Africa became the latest country to reach 1 million confirmed cases and is expected to go back to more virus restrictions. In the U.S., unemployment benefits have expired for millions as President Donald Trump appears no closer to signing an end-of-year COVID relief and spending bill, despite urging from lawmakers from both parties. America's top infectious disease expert expects the general U.S. population will be getting immunized widely by late March or early April. The outlook is much bleaker for many poorer nations, where war and instability are posing huge challenges to vaccination plans.

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has confirmed its first cases of a more contagious variant of COVID-19 that was first identified in the United Kingdom.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency said Monday the cases have been confirmed in a family of three people who came to South Korea on Dec. 22.

They arrived a day before South Korea halted air travel from Britain until Dec. 31 to guard against the new version of the virus.

The three people, who reside in the U.K., are under quarantine in South Korea.

South Korea on Monday registered 808 new coronavirus cases, raising its national caseload to 57,680 with 819 deaths. It's the second day in a row that South Korea's daily tally has marked below 1,000. The country logged 1,241 cases on Christmas Day, the biggest daily jump in South Korea since the pandemic began, and 1,132 on Saturday.

In recent weeks, South Korea has been grappling with a sudden spike in infections tied to hospitals, nursing homes, churches, a prison, family gatherings and various other sites. The government on Sunday said it will spend another week before determining whether to enforce its toughest physical distancing rules in the greater Seoul area that officials worry would further hurt the economy.

SYDNEY — Authorities have banned New Year's Eve revellers from congregating in Sydney's downtown harborside to see the celebrated fireworks due to the pandemic risk.

New South Wales state Premier Gladys Berejiklian said on Monday people who live in the city center can invite up to 10 guests to their homes to celebrate. The guests will have to apply for permits to enter the area.

Australia's largest city recorded five new cases of COVID-19 connected to a cluster in the northern beaches region, bringing the total to 126 infections since Dec. 10.

Around 1 million people usually congregate on the harbor foreshore to see the fireworks that center on the Sydney Harbor Bridge.

LOS ANGELES — State officials are expected to extend the strictest stay-at-home orders in central and

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Southern California as hospitals there are quickly running out of intensive care unit beds for coronavirus patients ahead of the presumed post-holiday surge.

The situation is already dire, and the worst is expected to come in the next few weeks after Christmas and New Year's travelers return home.

California hit 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases on Christmas Eve.

State stay-at-home orders for the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California are set to expire Monday. State officials say the orders are likely to be extended but did not make a definitive ruling Sunday afternoon.

OLYMPIA, Wash. — Washington state will spend \$54 million to provide one-time payments to nearly 100,000 gig and self-employed workers cut off from unemployment benefits because of the impasse over the federal COVID-19 relief and spending bill.

Gov. Jay Inslee announced Sunday that the payments of \$550 each, roughly the equivalent of two weeks' worth of benefits, will be issued later this week.

They will go to people who have been receiving benefits under the federal Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program, which was set up to provide unemployment benefits to workers who normally do not qualify for them.

The program expired Saturday.

The program would be extended until March 14, 2021, if President Donald Trump signs the relief bill into law.

BALTIMORE — The U.S. has now topped 19 million coronavirus cases since the pandemic began, data compiled by Johns Hopkins University shows.

America exceeded that mark on Sunday, just six days after it reached 18 million. The nation's case numbers have more than doubled in less than two months.

COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. also have been rising, and now total more than 332,000. That's more than one death for every 1,000 Americans. The U.S. population as of Saturday was about 331 million, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The United States accounts for about 4% of the world's population, but close to 24% of its total coronavirus cases and 19% of its COVID-19 deaths. Health experts believe many cases have gone unreported, however, both in America and internationally.

JOHANNESBURG - South Africa's COVID-19 spike has taken the country to more than 1 million confirmed cases on Sunday and President Cyril Ramaphosa called an emergency meeting of the National Coronavirus Command Council.

The country's new variant of the coronavirus, 501.V2, is more contagious and has quickly become dominant in many areas of the resurgence, according to experts.

With South Africa's hospitals reaching capacity and no sign of the new surge reaching a peak, Ramaphosa is expected to announce a return to restrictive measures designed to slow the spread of the disease.

"We are not helpless in the face of this variant," infectious disease specialist Dr. Richard Lessells told The Associated Press. "We can change our behavior to give the virus less opportunities to spread." He said it's most important to avoid contact with others in indoor, enclosed spaces.

South Africa announced a cumulative total of 1,004,431 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Sunday evening. That number includes 26,735 deaths.

JERUSALEM — Israel has entered its third nationwide coronavirus lockdown — with much of the economy again shutting down as infection numbers surge.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the lockdown will be for two weeks, though it could be extended if infection rates don't come down. But with the country simultaneously pressing ahead with an aggressive vaccination campaign, he is optimistic Israel will be able to lift its pandemic restrictions soon.

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Israel, a country of 9 million people, started rolling out coronavirus vaccinations last week and has already inoculated 280,000 people, according to the Health Ministry. That makes it one of the world's leaders in administering vaccinations on a per-capita basis.

The lockdown that began Sunday includes the shutdown of most non-essential businesses, limitations on gatherings and movement from people's homes and reduced public transit. Schools and kindergartens will remain open for the time being.

Israel has recorded over 400,000 cases of the coronavirus since March, and more than 3,220 deaths. But the infection rate has shot up in recent weeks after the government started easing restrictions put in place in September.

ISTANBUL— Turkey's health minister says a shipment of vaccines from Chinese biopharmaceutical company Sinovac has been delayed in Beijing customs.

Minister Fahrettin Koca tweeted Sunday that a COVID-19 case in Beijing customs and high alert against infections there caused the delay.

The minister had said earlier this week the first shipment of CoronaVac would be en route to Turkey Sunday night. He said the delay would be "one or two days."

The vaccines were initially expected to arrive after Dec. 11. Turkey has signed a deal for 50 million doses of the vaccine.

ROME — Italy added another 305 victims to its official coronavirus death toll on the same day it joined the rest of the European Union in launching a massive vaccination campaign.

Another 8,913 people tested positive Sunday, far fewer than in recent days. But with the Christmas holiday weekend, far fewer tests were conducted.

Italy leads Europe in the official COVID-19 death toll with 71,925 victims, though officials say the true toll is far higher due to missed infections early on and testing limitations.

Italy on Sunday began administering the first Pfizer-BioNTech vaccines to health care workers who have been on the front lines of the pandemic since Italy in late February became the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe.

PARIS — France started its first coronavirus vaccinations Sunday at a nursing home northeast of Paris, in one of the country's poorest regions, as part of a Europe-wide vaccination rollout.

"An intense moment, carrying so much hope," tweeted the head of the Paris region public health service, Aurelien Rousseau.

A 78-year-old woman identified only by her first name, Mauricette, was given France's first vaccine shot in the town of Sevran. Later in the day, vaccinations will be given at the Champmaillot home in Dijon.

Polls suggest that people in France are a bit skeptical of the new vaccines, so France's government has been cautious in its messaging and is not making the vaccines obligatory. The government hopes to be able to vaccinate up to 27 million of its 67 million people by summer.

HONOLULU — City officials say about 20% of Honolulu's 4,500 first responders have received the Moderna coronavirus vaccine.

Hiro Toiya, the city's emergency management director, says 936 first responders received their shots Tuesday and Wednesday.

Honolulu Police Department officers represented 649 of the vaccines, 173 vaccines were given to firefighters with the Honolulu Fire Department and 114 vaccines were distributed to paramedics, emergency medical technicians and lifeguards with the Department of Emergency Services.

Between 60% to 70% of first responders are expected to receive the voluntary coronavirus vaccine.

ROME — European Union nations kicked off a coordinated effort Sunday to give COVID-19 vaccinations

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to the most vulnerable among the bloc's nearly 450 million people, marking a moment of hope in the continent's battle against the worst public health crisis in a century.

Health care workers, the elderly and leading politicians got some of the first shots across the 27-nation bloc to reassure the public that the vaccinations are safe and represent the best chance to emerge from the pandemic.

"It didn't hurt at all," said Mihaela Anghel, a nurse at the Matei Bals Institute in Bucharest who was the first person to get the vaccine in Romania. "Open your eyes and take the vaccine."

In Rome, five doctors and nurses wearing white scrubs sat in a semi-circle at the Spallanzani infectious diseases hospital to receive their doses.

ZAGREB, Croatia — A 81-year-old care home resident on Sunday became the first person to receive COVID-19 vaccine in Croatia.

Top officials attended as Branka Anicic received the vaccine before cameras. She says it felt great to be the first in Croatia to receive the vaccine and urged others to do the same.

Croatia's Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic says the vaccines first will go to those who are the most vulnerable and exposed to the virus. He expressed hope most people will agree to vaccination.

Croatian media have reported that many among Croatia's 4.2 million people remain skeptical regarding the vaccines, even among doctors. Authorities have launched a campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated.

MADRID— Two women, a 96-year-old resident and a worker at a nursing home, became the first Spaniards to receive the coronavirus vaccine on Sunday morning.

The Los Olmos nursing home is located in Guadalajara near the distribution hub that vaccine maker Pfizer has in central Spain 70 kilometers (43 miles) northeast of Madrid.

"Let's see if we can all behave and make this virus go away," said Araceli Hidalgo, the elderly resident, after receiving her injection.

"I am proud (to receive the vaccine)," said Mónica Tapias, the 48-year-old worker. "What we want is for as many people as possible to get vaccinated. We have lost some residents here to COVID, and that has been very sad. Let's see if this can finally finish with this."

Army trucks escorted by police cars left the company warehouse before sunrise to distribute loads of the vaccine to all the regions of mainland Spain. Military airplanes or helicopters flew crates of doses to Spain's Canary Islands, Balearic Islands, and its north African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

PRAGUE — Prime Minister Andrej Babis has kicked off the coronavirus vaccination in the Czech Republic. Babis became the first Czech to receive a shot of the vaccine in Prague's military hospital during the Czech public television's live broadcast on Sunday morning.

"There's nothing to worry about," Babis told reporters before a ceremonious start of the vaccination program. "Everything's fine," he added after getting a shot.

World War II veteran, the 95-year-old Emilie Repikova, sitting next to the prime minister, was the second.

The medical personnel in four hospitals in Prague and two in the second largest city of Brno will get vaccinated by the first batch of almost 10,000 vaccines by Germany's BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer in three days. The second batch of 19,500 vaccines expected to arrive next week will be distributed in all regions across the country.

The Czech Republic had 670,599 confirmed cases of coronavirus with 11,044 deaths.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea has decided not to immediately enforce its toughest distancing rules in the greater Seoul area despite a surge in fresh infections.

The Seoul area, which has been the heart of a recent viral resurgence, is currently under the second highest distancing rules. There have been calls for raising the restrictions to the highest level as the cur-

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rent curbs haven't showed much significant effects. But the government was reluctant to do so because of worries about the economy.

Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said Sunday the government will maintain the current level restrictions in the Seoul area until Jan. 3 and that it'll see how the outbreak develops this week before determining whether to adjust the curbs. He says the third highest level of distancing rules imposed in other regions will also remain in place until Jan 3.

Kwon says South Korea has logged an average of 999 new cases each day last week, 690 of them in the Seoul area.

Earlier Sunday, South Korea reported 970 new cases, bringing the total to 56,872, with 808 deaths.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The Persian Gulf state of Oman has launched its COVID-19 inoculation campaign, with the sultanate's health minister receiving the first dose of the Pfizer vaccine.

State-run media reported that the first batch of 15,600 doses was flown in industrial freezers to Muscat International Airport last week to vaccinate a priority group of older adults, health care workers and those with underlying health conditions starting on Sunday.

Another 28,000 doses of the vaccine by American drugmaker Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech are expected to arrive next month.

Oman says it aims to vaccinate 60% of its roughly 5 million people.

The virus outbreak in Oman has infected over 128,000 people and killed more than 1,400.

TOKYO — Japan is barring entry of all non-resident foreign nationals as a precaution against a new and potentially more contagious coronavirus variant that has spread across Britain.

The Foreign Ministry says the entry ban will start Monday and last through Jan. 31.

Last week, Japan banned non-resident foreigners coming from Britain and South Africa after confirming the new variant in seven people over the last two days — five from Britain who tested positive at airports and two others in Tokyo.

Japan is also suspending the exemption of a 14-day quarantine for Japanese nationals and resident foreigners that began in November. The entrants now must carry proof of a negative test 72 hours prior to departure and self-isolate for two weeks after arrival.

Japan is struggling with surging cases since November. It has confirmed a total of 217,312 cases including 3,213 deaths, up 3,700 from the previous 24-hour period. Tokyo alone reported 949 cases, setting a new record, despite calls by experts for people to spend a "quiet" holiday season.

TORONTO — Officials in Canada's most populous province have confirmed the first two known Canadian cases of a more contagious variant of COVID-19 that was first identified in the United Kingdom.

The province's associate chief medical officer says that the cases are a couple from Durham Region, just east of Toronto, with no known travel history, exposure or high-risk contacts.

The new variant is believed to spread more easily and faster than the original version of the disease but is not believed to be more deadly.

The provincial government said in a news release that is no evidence to suggest that the vaccines approved by Health Canada will be any less effective against the new variant.

US officials: Suspect in Nashville explosion died in blast

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The man believed to be responsible for the Christmas Day bombing that tore through downtown Nashville blew himself up in the explosion, and appears to have acted alone, federal officials said Sunday.

Investigators used DNA and other evidence to link the man, identified as Anthony Quinn Warner, to the mysterious explosion but said they have not determined a motive. Officials have received hundreds of tips

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and leads, but have concluded that no one other than Warner is believed to have been involved in the early morning explosion that damaged dozens of buildings and injured three people.

"Nashville is considered safe," said Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake. "There are no known threats against this city."

In publicly identifying the suspect and his fate, officials disclosed a major breakthrough in their investigation even as they acknowledged the lingering mystery behind the explosion, which took place on a holiday morning well before downtown streets were bustling with activity and was accompanied by a recorded announcement warning anyone nearby that a bomb would soon detonate.

Then, for reasons that may never be known, the audio switched to a recording of Petula Clark's 1964 hit "Downtown" shortly before the blast.

Investigators have not uncovered a singular motive for the act nor was it revealed why Warner had selected the particular location for the bombing, which damaged an AT&T building and has continued to wreak havoc on cellphone service and police and hospital communications in several Southern states as the company worked to restore service.

Authorities said Warner, 63, was not known to law enforcement before the Christmas blast.

Warner, who public records show had experience with electronics and alarms and who had also worked as a computer consultant for a Nashville realtor, had been regarded as a person of interest in the bombing since at least Saturday when federal and local investigators converged on a home in suburban Nashville linked to him.

Federal agents could be seen looking around the property, searching the home and the backyard. A Google Maps image captured in May 2019 had shown a recreational vehicle similar to the one that exploded parked in the backyard, but it was not at the property on Saturday, according to an Associated Press reporter at the scene.

On Sunday morning, police formally named Warner as being under investigation.

Officials said their identification of Warner relied on several key pieces of evidence, including DNA found at the explosion site. Investigators had previously revealed that human remains had been found in the vicinity.

In addition, investigators from the Tennessee Highway Patrol recovered parts from the RV among the wreckage from the blast, and were able to link the vehicle identification number to an RV that was registered to Warner, officials said.

"We're still following leads, but right now there is no indication that any other persons were involved," said Douglas Korneski, special agent in charge of the FBI's Memphis field office. "We've reviewed hours of security video surrounding the recreation vehicle. We saw no other people involved."

Police were responding to a report of shots fired Friday when they encountered the RV blaring a recorded warning that a bomb would detonate in 15 minutes. Suddenly the warning stopped, and Clark's hit, "Downtown," started playing.

The RV exploded shortly afterward, sending black smoke and flames billowing from the heart of downtown Nashville's tourist scene, an area packed with honky-tonks, restaurants and shops.

Buildings shook and windows shattered streets away from the explosion near a building owned by AT&T that lies one block from the company's office tower, a landmark in downtown.

Forensic analysts were reviewing evidence collected from the blast site to try to identify the components of the explosives as well as information from the U.S. Bomb Data Center for intelligence and investigative leads, according to a law enforcement official who said investigators were examining Warner's digital footprint and financial history, as well as a recent deed transfer of the home they searched in suburban Nashville.

The official, who was not authorized to discuss an ongoing investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity, said federal agents were examining a number of potential leads and pursuing several theories, including the possibility that the AT&T building was targeted.

Korneski said Sunday that officials were looking at any and all motives and were interviewing acquaintances of Warner's to try to determine what may have motivated him.

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Meanwhile, just blocks from where the bombing took place, tourists had already begun to fill the sidewalks Sunday on Lower Broadway, a central entertainment district. Some took selfies while others tried to get as close as possible to the explosion site, blocked by police barricades.

Earlier Sunday, the officers who responded provided harrowing details, at times getting choked up reliving the moments that led up to the blast.

"This is going to tie us together forever, for the rest of my life," Officer James Wells, who suffered some hearing loss due to the explosion, told reporters at a news conference. "Christmas will never be the same."

Officer Brenna Hosey said she and her colleagues knocked on six or seven doors in nearby apartments to warn people to evacuate. She particularly remembered a startled mother of four children.

"I don't have kids but I have cousins and nieces, people who I love who are small," Hosey said, adding she had to plead with the family to leave the building as quickly as possible.

Balsamo and Tucker reported from Washington. Associated Press writer Scott Stroud and photographer Mark Humphrey in Nashville contributed to this report.

Man charged in Illinois bowling alley shooting that killed 3

ROCKFORD, Ill. (AP) — A U.S. Army special forces sergeant based in Florida has been charged in an apparently random shooting at an Illinois bowling alley that left three people dead and three wounded, authorities said Sunday.

Winnebago County State's Attorney J. Hanley said Duke Webb, 37, has been charged with three counts of murder and three counts of first-degree attempted murder in the shooting at Don Carter Lanes, in Rockford, on Saturday evening. While no bowling is currently allowed due to state-imposed coronavirus restrictions, a bar linked to the business was legally open.

Webb was taken into custody shortly after the shooting at around 7 p.m., Rockford Police Chief Dan O'Shea said at a news conference Sunday morning.

"I am very confident the officers that were on the scene in the building were able to stop further violence," O'Shea said.

He said the three who died were all men, aged 73, 65 and 69, but did not provide names.

Additionally, he said, a 14-year-old boy was shot in the face and airlifted to a hospital in Madison in stable condition, and a 16-year-old girl who was shot in the shoulder was treated at a hospital and released. A 62-year-old man underwent surgery overnight after suffering multiple gunshot wounds and is in critical condition, the chief said.

The suspect has no known ties to the victims, O'Shea said.

"We believe this was a completely random act, and there is no prior meeting or any kind of relationship between the suspect and any of the victims in this case," O'Shea said. He did not provide information on what led up to the shooting.

The U.S. Army said Webb is a Special Forces Assistant Operations and Intelligence Sergeant assigned to 3rd Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), located at Camp Bull Simons, Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. He joined the Army in 2008 and was on leave Saturday.

"We are shocked and saddened to learn about this tragic event and our thoughts and prayers are with the families of those killed and wounded," Col. John W. Sannes, commander of 7th Special Forces Group, said in a statement.

Maj. Gen. John Brennan, commander of 1st Special Forces Command (Airborne), said in a statement Sunday night that Webb's alleged actions were "abhorrent" and not representative of the Special Forces Regiment. He said actions described in reports were "shocking" and "completely out of character" with Webb's 12 years of honorable service.

The bowling alley was closed at the time of the shooting, in accordance with restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, O'Shea said. But a bar upstairs was open. The chief said the upstairs venue has double doors that open to the outside, ensuring the bar is in compliance with Illinois'

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COVID-19 mitigation guidance.

Up to 25 people were at Don Carter Lanes when the shooting happened, but most of them escaped or hid, O'Shea said. He declined to say whether the shootings happened in the bar or elsewhere in the building, saying those details would come out in court. The teens who were wounded were picking up food at the carryout section of the bowling alley, he said.

He said the suspect tried to conceal his weapons before his arrest, and that he was apprehended without officers firing a shot.

"Most of the incident was captured on surveillance video from inside the business," O'Shea said, adding that investigators are studying captured images.

O'Shea said investigators are in touch with the Army. He didn't explain why the Florida man was in Illinois. The Army said it will provide full assistance in the police investigation.

The Rockford Register Star reported that 2020 has been the deadliest year on record for homicides in the city of about 170,000 residents about 80 miles (130 kilometers) northwest of Chicago. Thirty-five people have been killed in the city this year, breaking the previous record of 31 in 1996.

"As we come to the end of this most difficult year and we look ahead at this New Year upon us, we know that this type of violence needs to stop," Mayor Tom McNamara said. "... And today, with the eyes of the country upon us, we need to show as Rockfordians how we respond to an incident such as this, as one Rockford, supporting one another."

Warnock and Loeffler work to consolidate voters for runoff

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — When Georgia Republican Kelly Loeffler and Democrat Raphael Warnock advanced to the Jan. 5 U.S. Senate runoff, they faced the immediate challenge of winning over the 2 million voters who chose one of the 18 other candidates in November's election.

Polls show they have largely succeeded, and that could give Loeffler, the incumbent, a small advantage.

Republican U.S. Rep. Doug Collins came in third in the November vote that ended with the Republican candidates winning 48,000 more votes than the Democratic candidates. In Georgia's second runoff election, Republican U.S. Sen David Perdue started with an even wider lead, having won 88,000 more votes in November than Democrat Jon Ossoff. Since he didn't get a majority, however, Perdue was forced into a runoff.

Turnout could be the deciding factor.

Through Wednesday, nearly 2.1 million voters had cast ballots, roughly on pace with the Nov. 3 general election. It's unclear how the Christmas holiday will affect the pace of balloting. In-person early voting runs as late as Dec. 31 in some counties. On Sunday night, President Donald Trump tweeted that he would visit Georgia on Jan. 4, the eve of the runoff, for a rally in support of Perdue and Loeffler.

One thing helping line voters up is the decision of the candidates in both races to run as tickets, with joint appearances and advertisements. J. Miles Coleman of the University of Virginia Center for Politics said the joint effort has helped Warnock wrap up Democratic voters.

"He and Ossoff have done a better job of running as a ticket," Coleman said. "I think overall that's going to benefit Warnock and help him consolidate some of his support."

With the candidates running as tickets, it's unlikely the parties will split the seats. Two wins would put Democrats in control of the U.S. Senate with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris breaking a 50-50 tie. A split or two GOP wins would keep Republicans in control.

Deborah Jackson, a former mayor of the Atlanta suburb of Lithonia, came in fourth in November, the runner-up Democrat behind Warnock. She benefitted from being a Black woman, a known quantity in the Democratic stronghold of DeKalb County and the first Democrat listed on a ballot so long that Warnock had to remind supporters to go all the way down to find his name.

"I had tangible and practical experience," Jackson said. "I think some people were interested in that."

She said some people were offended that leading state and national Democrats tried to clear the field

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for Warnock, but said she's still supporting him without reservation.

"The Democrats need to be in control of the Senate, or at least there needs to be a balance," Jackson said.

At least one of Jackson's supporters agrees. Laura Durojaiye of Stonecrest said she's already voted for Warnock.

"I think he'll get all her votes," Durojaiye said, saying she thinks Warnock is someone who will learn in the Senate and back her priorities of addressing climate change and societal inequity.

Shane Hazel, the Libertarian who won the key sliver of votes that forced Perdue and Ossoff into a runoff, said his voters may sit the runoff out, telling Hazel "they will never vote for anybody out of fear again."

One of the top early voting counties in the state is Rabun — in Georgia's northeastern corner — where Trump and Perdue both won 78% of the vote.

"I'm convinced the Democrats could run Mother Teresa and get 20%," said Ed Henderson, secretary of the Rabun County Republican Party.

As in the other counties in his northeast Georgia congressional district, Collins was the top vote-getter in the Senate special election.

"This was Collins country," Henderson said.

Collins, though, has been a strong supporter of Loeffler and Perdue.

Although nearly 40% of Rabun's registered voters have already cast ballots, Henderson said he worries that Trump's ceaseless attacks on the integrity of Georgia's presidential election will hurt Republican turnout there, citing the "godlike reverence" residents have for the president.

"My biggest problem this election cycle is there is a distrust of the system," Henderson said, saying a handful of hardcore Republicans have told him they are sitting the election out, saying they believe Trump was cheated, despite little credible evidence of wrongdoing.

Henderson also frets that Loeffler has never been to his county, so far from Atlanta that many watch out-of-state television.

"It would be greatly helpful if they would come up here in person and tell our voters they would like to get our vote," Henderson said of the Republican candidates.

Democrats have their own trouble. Early voting is lagging in Georgia's smaller urban areas including Savannah, Augusta, Macon and Columbus, and Democratic vote totals have been disappointing in rural areas.

"The Democrats have really struggled to turn out Black voters in rural parts of the state," Coleman said. "Are the Democrats going to be able to do well enough in the rural parts of the state?"

Baseball Hall of Famer, knuckleballer Phil Niekro dies at 81

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Writer

ATLANTA (AP) — Phil Niekro threw a pitch that baffled hitters and catchers.

Heck, he didn't even know where it was going most of the time.

But the knuckleball carried Niekro to more than 300 wins, earned him a spot in the Baseball Hall of Fame and gave him a nickname that stuck for the rest of his life.

Knucksie.

The longtime stalwart of the Atlanta Braves rotation died after a lengthy fight with cancer, the team announced Sunday. He was 81.

The Braves said Niekro died Saturday night in his sleep. He lived in the Atlanta suburb of Flowery Branch, where a main thoroughfare bears his name.

He was the seventh Hall of Famer to die this year, the most sitting members to pass away in a calendar year, according to spokesman Jon Shestakofsky. The others were Lou Brock, Whitey Ford, Bob Gibson, Al Kaline, Joe Morgan and Tom Seaver.

"These names, and these men, will be remembered forever in Cooperstown," Shestakofsky said.

Niekro won 318 games over his 24-year career, which finally ended in 1987 at age 48 after he made one final start for the Braves. The right-hander was a five-time All-Star who had three 20-win seasons with Atlanta.

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Dale Murphy, who won two straight NL MVP awards as a teammate of Niekro's, was among those who mourned his death.

"Knucksie was one of a kind," Murphy wrote on Twitter. "Friend, teammate, father and husband. Our hearts go out to Nancy Niekro, the kids and grandkids. So thankful for our memories and time together. We'll miss you, Knucksie."

Braves first baseman Freddie Freeman, this year's NL MVP, described himself as "heartbroken."

"An amazing pitcher but an even better man!" Freeman said on Twitter. "Thanks you Phil for all the laughs and wonderful memories over the years."

Niekro also pitched for the New York Yankees, Cleveland Indians and Toronto Blue Jays late in his career. Incredibly, he had 121 wins after his 40th birthday.

"We are heartbroken on the passing of our treasured friend," the Braves said in a statement. "Knucksie was woven into the Braves fabric, first in Milwaukee and then in Atlanta. Phil baffled batters on the field and later was always the first to join in our community activities. It was during those community and fan activities where he would communicate with fans as if they were long lost friends."

A statue of Niekro delivering his trademark pitch is located outside of Truist Park, the Braves' stadium.

Niekro didn't make it to the big leagues until 1964, when he pitched 10 games in relief for the then-Milwaukee Braves. He made only one start over his first three years in the big leagues but finally blossomed as a starter in 1967 — the Braves' second year in Atlanta — when he went 11-9 and led the National League with a 1.87 ERA.

With a fluttering knuckleball that required catchers to wear an oversized mitt, Niekro went 23-13 as the Braves won the first NL West title in 1969. He was runner-up to Seaver for the Cy Young Award, the closest he ever came to capturing pitching's premier prize though he finished in the top six of the balloting four other times.

Niekro also had 20-win seasons in 1974 and 1979, despite pitching for a team that fell on hard times after its appearance in the inaugural NL Championship Series, where the Braves were swept in three games by New York's Amazin' Mets.

Niekro also led the league in losses for four straight seasons, losing 20 games in both 1977 and '79.

He finished with a career record of 318-274 and a 3.35 ERA. Niekro was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1997.

His younger brother, Joe, also had a long baseball career with an arsenal that included the knuckleball. He won 221 games over 22 years in the big leagues, making the Niekros baseball's winningest set of siblings, with a total of 539 victories, just ahead of Gaylord and Jim Perry.

Joe Niekro died in 2006 at age 61.

Phil Niekro pitched a no-hitter in 1973 but his most memorable game with the Braves came in 1982, when the team started the season with 13 consecutive wins and improbably won the NL West title by a single game to send Niekro to the playoffs for only the second time in his career.

On the final weekend of the season, the 43-year-old Niekro pitched a three-hit shutout and hit a two-run, eighth-inning homer that led Atlanta to a crucial 4-0 victory over the San Diego Padres.

Niekro finished 17-4 with a 3.61 ERA in 35 starts, but he didn't get a decision in his only start of the NL Championship Series against the St. Louis Cardinals as the Braves were again swept in three straight games. He never made it to the World Series.

Niekro picked up his 300th win in 1985 while pitching for the Yankees. He reached the milestone by shutting out the Blue Jays 8-0.

Philip Henry Niekro was born in Blaine, Ohio, and learned the knuckleball from his father, who played for a coal-mining team in eastern Ohio.

"He was a very good pitcher," Niekro told ESPN in an interview after his playing days were over. "He hurt his arm one spring, didn't warm up good enough, couldn't throw a fastball anymore. Another coal miner taught him how to throw the knuckleball."

The elder Niekro passed it on to his son, who learned to grip the ball with his fingernails on the seams.

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That kept the ball from spinning, causing it to move in all sorts of confounding ways on its way to the plate. "He threw it to me one day," Niekro said of his father. "I asked him what it was. He showed me how to hold it. Didn't know what it was, didn't know anything about it except that I liked it.

"I never knew how to throw a fastball, never learned how to throw a curveball, a slider, split-finger, whatever they're throwing nowadays. I was a one-pitch pitcher."

Well, that wasn't entirely true.

In his 300th victory, Niekro said he didn't throw a knuckleball until the final batter, using it to strike out former teammate Jeff Burroughs to end the game. At the time, Knucksie was the oldest pitcher in baseball history to toss a shutout, a mark since broken by Jamie Moyer.

"I always wanted to pitch a whole game without throwing knuckleballs because people thought I couldn't get people out without throwing them," Niekro said afterward, with brother Joe sitting alongside him in Toronto.

After going 11-10 with a 3.97 ERA in 1983, Niekro had an acrimonious split from the Braves, who wanted him to retire so they could focus on their younger pitchers.

But Niekro was far from done. He won 16 games each of the next two seasons with the Yankees and even made the All-Star Game for the final time. He picked up 11 more wins with Cleveland in 1986 before his knuckler finally ran out of steam.

Niekro started 1987 with the Indians and was traded to Toronto in August, only to be let go by the Blue Jays after getting roughed up in three starts. He decided to retire but only after returning to Atlanta to make his final start in a Braves uniform.

Niekro lasted just three-plus innings, giving up six hits, six walks and five runs before he left the mound for the final time to a raucous ovation from the crowd at Atlanta-Fulton County Stadium.

While the knuckler was his trademark, Niekro was an all-around athlete. He won five Gold Glove awards and was a decent hitter for a pitcher, wracking up seven homers and 109 RBIs.

Niekro remained active in the Braves organization after his retirement, taking part in alumni activities and often serving as a special instructor at spring training. He managed Atlanta's Triple-A farm team for one season, but struggled in the role. He also guided the Colorado Silver Bullets, a barnstorming women's baseball team sponsored by Coors.

Niekro is survived by his wife, Nancy, sons Philip, John and Michael, and two grandchildren, Chase and Emma.

Longevity was the hallmark of Niekro's career, which was spent largely in obscurity pitching for Braves teams that rarely managed a winning season.

The knuckleball put little stress on his right arm, so he made at least 30 starts every season from 1968-86 — excluding the strike-shortened 1981 campaign — and finished with 245 complete games in his career. He was even able to make infrequent relief appearances, earning 29 saves.

In 1979, at age 40, Niekro made a career-high 44 starts, completing 23 of them. He went 21-20 with a 3.39 ERA for a dismal Braves team that finished 66-94.

He remains the last pitcher to both win and lose 20 games in a season.

In this era where teams value velocity above all other traits, the knuckleball has essentially become extinct. "There's nobody around who can teach how to throw a knuckleball," Niekro said in the ESPN interview. "There's very few pitching coaches that I worked with that actually came out on the mound and told me what I was doing wrong with the knuckleball. Because they just didn't know.

"I was on my own."

Follow Paul Newberry on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/pnewberry1963> His work can be found at <https://apnews.com/search/paulnewberry>

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Fauci: US taking hard look at variant of coronavirus

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health officials believe the coronavirus mutation that set off alarms in parts of Britain is no more apt to cause serious illness or be resistant to vaccines than the strain afflicting people in the United States but it still must be taken “very seriously,” the government’s top infectious disease expert said Sunday.

Dr. Anthony Fauci endorsed the decision of U.S. officials to require negative COVID-19 tests before letting people from Britain enter the U.S. He declined to weigh in on whether that step should have been taken sooner. He said the variant strain is something “to follow very carefully” and “we’re looking at it very intensively now.”

He said: “Does it make someone more ill? Is it more serious virus in the sense of virulence? And the answer is, it doesn’t appear to be that way.” British officials are telling their U.S. colleagues it appears that the vaccines being rolled out will be strong enough to deal with the new variant but, Fauci said, “we’re going to be doing the studies ourselves.”

Fauci said the U.S. is at a critical phase of the pandemic, with the worst probably still ahead. He predicted the general population would be getting immunized widely by late March or early April — beyond the front-line workers, older people and certain other segments of the public given priority for the vaccines.

Fauci spoke on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

Workers install 192 crystals on Times Square New Year’s ball

NEW YORK (AP) — Workers installed 192 glittering Waterford crystal triangles on Times Square’s New Year’s Eve ball Sunday in preparation for a pandemic-limited celebration that will lack the usual tightly packed crowds of revelers.

The ball is a 12-foot geodesic sphere covered with 2,688 crystal triangles of various sizes. Some new crystals are swapped in every year. This year’s addition features a new “Gift of Happiness” design represented by a sunburst of bright cuts radiating outward.

The ball blazing with 32,256 LED lights will be dropped at 11:59 p.m. on New Year’s Eve to ring in 2021. Performances at the event will be designed for TV audiences watching from home.

South Africa on verge of new virus rules as it hits 1M cases

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — South Africa’s COVID-19 spike has taken the country to more than 1 million confirmed cases on Sunday and President Cyril Ramaphosa called an emergency meeting of the National Coronavirus Command Council.

The country’s new variant of the coronavirus, 501.V2, is more contagious and has quickly become dominant in many areas of the resurgence, according to experts.

With South Africa’s hospitals reaching capacity and no sign of the new surge reaching a peak, Ramaphosa is expected to announce a return to restrictive measures designed to slow the spread of the disease.

“We are not helpless in the face of this variant,” infectious disease specialist Dr. Richard Lessells told The Associated Press. “We can change our behavior to give the virus less opportunities to spread.” He said it’s most important to avoid contact with others in indoor, enclosed spaces.

South Africa announced a cumulative total of 1,004,431 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Sunday evening. That number includes 26,735 deaths in a country of 60 million people.

“One million cases is a serious milestone, but the true number of cases and deaths is almost certainly much higher,” Lessells said.

“We have seen the new variant spread rapidly,” he said, pointing out that genomic sequencing shows it has become dominant in the coastal provinces of Western Cape, Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. It is not yet certain if the variant is as dominant in the inland Gauteng province, which includes Johannesburg and is the country’s most populous province.

“As people return from holidays at coastal areas, we can expect them to bring the variant with them,”

said Lessells. "We can also expect travelers to take the variant with them across the borders to other African countries."

The mutation of the COVID-19 virus has made it bind more efficiently to cells within our bodies, say experts.

Vaccinations haven't yet reached South Africa, although Ramaphosa has said that he expects 10% of the country's 60 million people to be inoculated in the first months of 2021.

South Africa's seven-day rolling average of daily new cases has nearly doubled over the past two weeks from 10.24 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 12 to 19.86 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 26. The number of deaths has also nearly doubled with the seven-day rolling average of daily deaths in South Africa has risen over the past two weeks from 0.25 deaths per 100,000 people on Dec. 12 to 0.48 deaths per 100,000 people on Dec. 26.

Central African Republic votes amid fears of unrest

By JEAN FERNAND KOENA Associated Press

BANGUI, Central African Republic (AP) — Central African Republic held presidential and legislative elections Sunday amid fears of violence after a campaign period marked by fighting between rebels and government forces.

Voters came out in large numbers in the capital, while in other parts of the country fewer people went to polling stations because of fears of violence or boycotts by the rebel coalition.

Some polling stations remained open late to allow more voters to cast their ballots.

Despite calls from the opposition to delay the vote amid the insecurity, the Constitutional Court rejected a postponement.

President Faustin-Archange Touadera, seeking a second term, tried to reassure candidates and voters that the voting would be secure. This is the central African country's first election since a peace deal was signed between the government and 14 rebel groups in February 2019, although fighting continues.

"The vote is a right, a right for Central Africans. Each person has the power in the constitution of this country ... each citizen has the right to freely choose his leaders," Touadera said after casting his ballot. "This is quite important for the Central African Republicans who are searching to get out of these moments of crisis ... the right way ... for the development, the well-being of our country and our population. It is democracy, it is the free choice of the leaders by the people."

Touadera criticized the perpetuation of violence, saying it has dragged the country into chaos and adding that measures will be taken accordingly.

Three peacekeepers from Burundi were killed and two others wounded Friday by armed combatants. The U.N. retook the town of Bambari last week from rebels. Rebel groups have also seized several towns near the capital, Bangui, and after forming a coalition, boycotted the vote in some parts of Central African Republic.

The U.N. Special Representative for Central African Republic, Mankeur Ndiaye, said he considered the elections in the capital of the country a "success."

"We have observed that the process is going very well, with calm and serenity in Bangui. The population has gone out in large numbers to exercise their right to vote," Ndiaye said. He said, however, that there were incidents in some regions where ballot boxes were burned and rebel groups tried to prevent people from voting.

Catherine Samba-Panza, who was Central African Republic's transitional president from 2014 to 2016 voted.

"I came to prove my determination in a context where there are a lot of rumors. I voted and I encourage my children to vote," she said.

The presence of international forces gave many voters reassurance, according to voter Ousmane Haroun.

"The presence of the MINUSCA (U.N. mission) soldiers reassures us," he said. "There is security, and I think it will be a stimulus for the undecided."

One of the main opposition candidates, Anicet Georges Dologuélé, voted Sunday at Bangui's Town Hall.

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"We are determined to turn the Touadera era," he said.

However, in other parts of Central African Republic, violence kept voters from the polls.

Many residents of the town of Bangassou in the nation's southeast were fleeing because of the fighting, residents said.

"My wife and children crossed to the other side of the bank towards Congo because of the violence," said Christian Kombro a teacher from the town.

The government blames the unrest on former President Francois Bozize, who returned from exile a year ago and has been blocked from running in the election. He has been accused of joining up with armed groups to destabilize the country and launch a coup.

Bozize on Sunday stated his support for the coalition and their boycott of the vote.

"Stay home I beg you all ... The organization of botched elections is dedicated to its failure," he said, calling for dialogue.

Rwanda and Russia have each sent hundreds of troops to the country to support the government.

Sixteen candidates are running for president, including three women. More than 1,500 candidates are running for 140 seats in the national assembly. More than 1.86 million voters are registered, but more than 598,000 refugees in neighboring countries will not be able to vote, according to the U.N.

Parties in the Democratic Opposition Coalition known as COD-2020 last week said seven of its candidates pulled out of the election, citing the violence. The parties had wanted the vote to be delayed, alleging poor preparations and an electoral body influenced by the president.

Experts warn of a strong chance of further violence if the opposition doesn't accept the election results.

The mineral-rich Central African Republic has faced deadly inter-religious and inter-communal fighting since 2013, when predominantly Muslim Seleka rebels seized power from Bozize after long claiming marginalization. Resistance to Seleka rule eventually led to Muslims being targeted en masse, with some beaten to death, mosques destroyed and tens of thousands forced from the capital in 2014.

Despite a 2019 peace agreement between the government and 14 rebel groups, intermittent violence and human rights abuses have continued.

The most recent insecurity began after the Constitutional Court rejected the candidacy of Bozize, on the grounds that he did not satisfy the "good morality" requirement.

Bozize, who took power in a coup in 2003 and ruled until 2013, faces an international arrest warrant for "crimes against humanity and incitement of genocide." He also faces U.N. sanctions for his alleged role in supporting the anti-Balaka groups that resisted the Seleka in 2013.

AP journalist Carley Petesch in Dakar, Senegal contributed to this report.

'Believe in science': EU kicks off COVID-19 vaccine campaign

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Doctors, nurses and the elderly rolled up their sleeves across the European Union to receive the first doses of the coronavirus vaccine Sunday in a symbolic show of unity and moment of hope for a continent confronting its worst health care crisis in a century.

Weeks after the U.S., Canada and Britain began inoculations with the same vaccine, the 27-nation bloc staged a coordinated rollout aimed at projecting a unified message that the shot was safe and Europe's best chance to emerge from the pandemic.

For health care workers who have been battling the virus with only masks and shields to protect themselves, the vaccines represented an emotional relief as the virus continues to kill. But it was also a public chance for them to urge Europe's 450 million people to get the shots amid continued vaccine and virus skepticism.

"Today I'm here as a citizen, but most of all as a nurse, to represent my category and all the health workers who choose to believe in science," said Claudia Alivernini, 29, the first person to be inoculated at the Spallanzani infectious disease hospital in Rome.

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Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz called the vaccine, which was developed in record time, a “game-changer.”

“We know that today is not the end of the pandemic, but it is the beginning of the victory,” he said.

Italian virus czar Domenico Arcuri said it was significant that Italy’s first doses were administered at Spallanzani, where a Chinese couple visiting from Wuhan tested positive in January and became Italy’s first confirmed cases.

Within weeks, northern Lombardy became the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe and a cautionary tale of what happens when even wealthy regions find themselves unprepared for a pandemic. Lombardy still accounts for around a third of the dead in Italy, which has the continent’s worst confirmed virus death toll at nearly 72,000.

“Today is a beautiful, symbolic day: All the citizens of Europe together are starting to get their vaccinations, the first ray of light after a long night,” Arcuri told reporters.

But he cautioned: “We all have to continue to be prudent, cautious and responsible. We still have a long road ahead, but finally we see a bit of light.”

The vaccine developed by Germany’s BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer started arriving in super-cold containers at EU hospitals on Friday from a factory in Belgium. Each country was only getting a fraction of the doses needed — fewer than 10,000 in the first batches for some countries — with the bigger rollout expected in January when more vaccines become available. All those getting shots Sunday have to come back for a second dose in three weeks.

Ursula von der Leyen, head of the European Union’s Executive Commission, said with additional vaccines in development, the EU will have more shots than necessary this year and could share its surplus with the western Balkans and Africa.

“Europe is well positioned,” she insisted.

In the Los Olmos nursing home in the Spanish city of Guadalajara, northeast of Madrid, 96-year-old resident Araceli Hidalgo and a caregiver were the first Spaniards to receive the vaccine.

“Let’s see if we can all behave and make this virus go away,” Hidalgo said.

The Los Olmos home suffered two confirmed COVID-19 deaths and another 11 deaths among residents with symptoms who were never tested.

The Czech Republic was spared the worst of the pandemic in the spring only to see its health care system near collapse in the fall. In Prague, Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis received his shot at dawn Sunday and asserted: “There’s nothing to worry about.” Sitting next to him was World War II veteran Emilie Repikova, who also received a shot.

Altogether, the EU’s 27 nations have recorded at least 16 million coronavirus infections and more than 336,000 deaths — huge numbers that experts say still understate the true toll of the pandemic due to missed cases and limited testing.

The vaccination campaign should ease frustrations that were building up, especially in Germany, as Britain, Canada and the United States kicked off their inoculation programs with the same vaccine weeks earlier.

As it turned out, some EU immunizations began a day early in Germany, Hungary and Slovakia. The operator of a German nursing home where dozens were vaccinated Saturday, including a 101-year-old woman, said “every day that we wait is one day too many.”

In France, where many question the safety of vaccines, the French government has been cautious in its messaging and keen to ensure that it is not seen as forcing vaccinations on the public. France’s first vaccination at a nursing home in a poor area outside of Paris on Sunday was not broadcast on live television as it was elsewhere in Europe and no government ministers attended.

“We didn’t need to convince her. She said ‘yes, I’m ready for anything to avoid getting this disease,’” said Dr. Samir Tine, head of geriatric services for the Sevrans nursing home where France’s first shot went to 78-year-old Mauricette.

“It’s an important day,” Tine said. “We are very eager to have a new weapon at our disposal and we are very eager to rediscover our normal lives.”

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Among the politicians who got shots Sunday to promote a wider acceptance of vaccinations was Bulgarian Health Minister Kostadin Angelov. "I can't wait to see my 70-year-old father without fear that I could infect him," Angelov said.

After he got his shot, Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis declared Sunday "a great day for science and the European Union."

"We hope that, with time, even those of our fellow citizens who are suspicious of vaccination will be convinced it is the right thing to do," he said.

Meanwhile, a new virus variant that has been spreading rapidly around London and southern England has now been detected in France, Italy, Spain, Canada and Japan. The new variant, which British authorities said is much more easily transmitted, has prompted many countries to restrict travel from Britain.

Japan announced it would temporarily ban all non-resident foreigners from entering through Jan. 31 as a precaution against the U.K.'s new variant.

Germany's BioNTech has said it's confident that its vaccine works against the new U.K. variant, but added that further studies are needed.

The European Medicines Agency on Jan. 6 will consider approving another vaccine made by Moderna, which is already being used in the United States.

Dr. Annalisa Malara, who diagnosed Italy's first domestic case on Feb. 20 that confirmed Europe's outbreak was underway, was on hand at her hospital in Codogno to encourage all Italians to get the shot.

"Today we close the circle a bit that was opened on Feb. 20," she said.

AP journalists from around Europe contributed to this report.

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

Activist, champion: Naomi Osaka is AP Female Athlete of Year

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP Tennis Writer

With tennis, like so much of the world, shut down because of the coronavirus pandemic, Naomi Osaka found herself with time to read and think.

And while she won the U.S. Open for her third Grand Slam title, she also stood out for speaking out about racial injustice and police brutality.

As noteworthy in 2020 for her activism away from the tennis court as her success on it, Osaka was selected by The Associated Press as the Female Athlete of the Year in results revealed Sunday after a vote by AP member sports editors and AP beat writers.

"It was difficult to be isolated from my family for large parts of the year, but that's nothing compared to others. It was sad to watch and read the news of people suffering from COVID-19, and the economic and social effect on so many — losing jobs, mental health. It was such a tough year for so many people," Osaka wrote in an email interview. "And then watching the police injustices like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Jacob Blake (to name just a few) in the summer broke my heart. I am proud of my U.S. Open victory, but more so that I got people talking about the real issues."

Osaka collected 18 of 35 first-place votes and a total of 71 points.

WNBA Finals MVP Breanna Stewart was next with nine first-place votes and 60 points, followed by Sarah Fuller, the Vanderbilt soccer player who kicked for the school's football team, with one first-place vote and 24 points.

LeBron James was announced Saturday as the AP Male Athlete of the Year.

Billie Jean King, a 12-time Grand Slam singles title winner and a pioneering advocate for decades, praised Osaka for positioning "herself as a leader not only in women's tennis but in all of sports and a force for change in our society."

"She successfully completed the difficult task of taking excellence in sports performance and using that

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platform to succeed outside of sports on a much bigger stage," King told the AP. "She ignited a conversation on social justice, the results of which were bigger than tennis, larger than sports, and in doing so raised the bar for all those who want to leverage the gifts and talents we have to make a difference in our world."

Osaka went 16-3 during the coronavirus-truncated tennis calendar — the professional tours took about a five-month hiatus; Wimbledon was canceled for the first time since 1945 — and ended the year ranked No. 3.

The defining stretch of Osaka's season came in August and September, when she compiled an 11-match winning streak that included the U.S. Open.

It was during a tuneup tournament in New York that Osaka — whose father is Haitian and mother is Japanese — declared she would not play her semifinal, joining athletes from the NBA and elsewhere in protesting the police shooting of Blake.

"There are clearly so many worthy issues. This one especially resonated with me because of my own personal up-bringing; and also while the tennis tour was paused, I was able to watch and read news at length for the first time in my life. This summer in the U.S., tensions were high and reached boiling point," Osaka said. "It was the right time for me to speak up."

Taking her lead, that tournament shut down completely for a day.

"Her activism has shone a light on how we as individuals and sports leagues can collectively make an impact," WTA Chairman and CEO Steve Simon said. "Not only is she a phenomenal tennis player, but she also demonstrates how athletes have an opportunity to use their platform for something bigger than the game or themselves. Her actions are nothing short of inspiring and she is so very deserving of this recognition."

During the U.S. Open, Osaka brought attention to Black victims of violence by arriving for matches wearing face masks bearing the names of Floyd, Taylor, Tamir Rice, Elijah McClain, Trayvon Martin, Ahmaud Arbery and Philando Castile.

"To be honest, I really didn't stop to think about what others would think of my actions. Other people's opinions weren't going to stop me from doing what I know in my heart was the right thing to do," Osaka said. "The strong voices of Colin (Kaepernick) and LeBron were certainly positive influences for me and gave me strength in my own convictions."

Turning to 2021, the 23-year-old Osaka listed these goals: "work hard, do better, speak up, be kind."

Japan, where she was born, is slated to host the postponed Olympics next year.

"I am looking forward most to being with the athletes that had waited and trained for over 10 years, for celebrating a very hard year (2020), and having that happen in Japan makes it that much more special," Osaka said. "It's a special and beautiful country filled with culture, history and beauty. I cannot be more excited."

Follow Howard Fendrich on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/HowardFendrich>

More AP tennis: <https://apnews.com/apf-Tennis> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Tribes try to shield elders and their knowledge from virus

By CHRISTINE FERNANDO Associated Press

As Monica Harvey watched, crowds flocked to a Sam's Club in northern Arizona where she works, picking shelves clean of toilet paper and canned goods. Native American seniors couldn't move fast enough, and Harvey saw their faces fall when they reached empty shelves.

The Navajo woman wanted to help tribal elders get household staples without leaving their homes and risking exposure to COVID-19, so she started Defend Our Community, a group that delivers supplies.

Tribes across the nation are working to protect elder members who serve as honored links to customs passed from one generation to the next. The efforts to deliver protective gear, meals and vaccines are about more than saving lives. Tribal elders often possess unique knowledge of language and history that is all the more valuable because tribes commonly pass down their traditions orally. That means losing

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elders to the virus could wipe out irreplaceable pieces of culture.

"When you lose an elder, you lose a part of yourself," said Harvey, who lives in Leupp, Arizona, east of Flagstaff. "You lose a connection to history, our stories, our culture, our traditions."

Harvey remembers her own grandfather explaining the stories behind Navajo songs and teaching her Navajo words from the songs. She often listened to her grandparents speaking Navajo while she practiced the words under her breath.

In Oklahoma, the Cherokee Nation has increased food distributions to elders and offered financial aid to those who were struggling to pay rent or utilities. Concern for elders is also apparent in the tribe's COVID-19 vaccine-distribution plans. Participants and workers in the tribe's elder program are first in line for the shots, along with hospital workers and first responders. Next are those whose first language is Cherokee and others considered "tribal treasures," an honor given to members who keep Cherokee art, language and other culture alive through their work.

An effort among the Blackfeet in Montana is helping the tribe's 600-plus members connect with elders who need support. Connecticut's Mashantucket Pequot Nation is providing its citizens with masks and telemedicine, delivering meals to their doors and organizing home visits to give flu vaccines.

"Elders are like libraries. Losing one is like a library burning down," said Loren Racine, creator of a Facebook page offering help in the Blackfeet community.

Roy Boney Jr., who manages a Cherokee language program, said the vast majority of Cherokee speakers are elders. They make up a small pool of people the program relies on to teach the language he calls the "beating heart" of Cherokee identity.

"For decades our language has been taken from us through forced assimilation," Boney said. "Elders hold our history and culture but also our language. ... Our elders are precious."

Almost half of the Cherokee who received care from the tribe's health services but died from the coronavirus were fluent Cherokee speakers. Losing even a handful of speakers can be devastating for language preservation and other cultural practices, Boney said.

"With them goes so much information in terms of language knowledge, dialect, specialized knowledge of medicine and traditional practices," he said. "All these things we're trying to revitalize and save, they're the heart of all of it."

Mashantucket Pequot elders shifted to a virtual format for the intergenerational gatherings where they tell traditional stories. An elders council also helps to organize Pequot language bingo nights and Schemitzun, the annual Festival of the Green Corn.

"When we heard how COVID-19 was spreading, we were immediately concerned for our elders and how losing them would affect the tribe, so we immediately started working to protect them," said the tribe's chief medical officer, Setu Vora.

The tribe has no known COVID-19 deaths.

Pequot elders play an important role in the effort to revive the tribe's language, which is no longer widely spoken. Elders still remember relatives who spoke the language and can verify the definitions and context of certain words. A handful of the tribe's 2,000 members are becoming somewhat proficient in Pequot as they research and reclaim new words, Vora said.

Karen Ketcher was among 28 Cherokee Nation elders who have died from the coronavirus. She was weeks shy of her 71st birthday and had decades of experience working for the tribe and the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs. Her knowledge was unmatched and invaluable, said her granddaughter, Taryn King.

"There's so much at stake when this virus hits our communities," said King, 31, of Stilwell, Oklahoma. She described elders as "the glue that holds our communities together."

At work, Ketcher was affectionately called "Granny." She was the go-to person for questions about Cherokee policies, tribal governance and how to apply for grants. She also was the first stop for snacks, help mending holes in sweaters or questions about community relations.

One co-worker, Kamisha Hair, went into Ketcher's office shortly before the tribe temporarily closed it in March because of the pandemic. She assured Ketcher things would be OK and implored her to pray.

The two hugged and said they loved each other. Ketcher died in April.

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Relatives held a small outdoor service for her. When they returned to town, other Cherokees had lined the streets to pay their respects.

"Losing an elder like Granny is like losing a piece of your identity," Hair said. "It dies with them, and you can never get it back."

Associated Press writer Felicia Fonseca in Flagstaff, Arizona, contributed. Fernando and Fonseca are members of AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow Fernando on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/christinetfern>. Follow Fonseca at <https://twitter.com/FonsecaAP>

Asia Today: Japan halts all foreign arrivals over UK variant

TOKYO (AP) — Japan is barring entry of all nonresident foreign nationals as a precaution against a new and potentially more contagious coronavirus variant that has spread across Britain.

The Foreign Ministry says the entry ban will start Monday and last through Jan. 31.

Last week, Japan banned nonresident foreigners coming from Britain and South Africa after confirming the new variant in seven people over the last two days — five from Britain who tested positive at airports and two others in Tokyo.

Japan is also suspending the exemption of a 14-day quarantine for Japanese nationals and resident foreigners in a short-track program that began in November. The entrants now must carry proof of a negative test 72 hours prior to departure for Japan and self-isolate for two weeks after arrival.

U.S. military personnel stationed in Japan — who under the Status of Forces Agreement are exempt from Japanese passport control and visa requirements — would be permitted to enter the country for duty or other reasons, although they would have to follow quarantine rules.

Japan, which has been struggling with surging cases since November, has confirmed a total of 217,312 cases, including 3,213 deaths.

Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region:

— South Korea has decided not to immediately enforce its toughest distancing rules in the greater Seoul area despite a surge in coronavirus cases there. The area is currently under the second-highest distancing rules. There have been calls for raising the restrictions to the highest level, but the government is reluctant to do so because of worries about the economy. Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol said Sunday the government will maintain the current restrictions in the Seoul area until Jan. 3. He said the third-highest level of distancing rules imposed in other regions will also remain in place until Jan 3. Kwon said South Korea logged an average of 999 new cases per day last week, with 690 of them in the Seoul area. Under the current rules, nightclubs, karaoke rooms, fitness centers, gyms and cram schools in the Seoul area have suspended operations. As additional steps, authorities last week banned social gatherings of more than five people and ordered the shutdowns of ski resorts and other tourists spots. The toughest restrictions would shut down hundreds of thousands of more businesses and order companies to have all nonessential employees work from home. South Korea has reported 56,872 cases overall, including 808 deaths.

— Beijing officials reported five new locally transmitted coronavirus cases as authorities rushed to mass-test residents. The five cases, linked to earlier infections, lived in the city's Shunyi district, which has since activated an emergency response plan including mass testing, source tracing and disinfection. As of Saturday noon, over 120,000 had been tested for the coronavirus. Authorities plan to test 800,000 people in the district. Separately, officials reported four locally transmitted cases in the northeastern port city of Dalia, where over 4.75 million people were tested following more than 20 confirmed cases this month. China reported 22 new cases in the last 24 hours, including 10 imported and 12 domestic. China has so far reported a total of 86,955 cases, with 4,634 deaths.

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

Wars, instability pose vaccine challenges in poor nations

By KATHY GANNON, ANDREW MELDRUM and LEE KEATH Associated Press

DAR MANGI, Pakistan (AP) — Arifullah Khan had just administered another polio vaccine when the gunfire blasted from the nearby hills.

"It happened so suddenly. There was so much gunfire it felt like an explosion," he said, recalling details of the attack five years ago in Pakistan's Bajaur tribal region near the Afghan border.

A bullet shattered his thigh and he fell to the ground. His childhood friend and partner in the vaccination campaign, Ruhollah, lay bleeding on the ground in front of him.

"I couldn't move," Khan said. "I watched him lying right in front of me as he took his last breath."

In Pakistan, delivering vaccines can be deadly. Militants and radical religious groups spread claims that the polio vaccine is a Western ploy to sterilize Muslim children or turn them away from religion. More than 100 health workers, vaccinators and security officials involved in polio vaccination have been killed since 2012.

The violence is an extreme example of the difficulties many poor and developing countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East and Latin America face as they tackle the monumental task of vaccinating their populations against COVID-19.

It's not just the problem of affording vaccines or being at the back of the line behind wealthy countries in receiving them.

Poor infrastructure often means roads are treacherous and electricity is sporadic for the refrigerators vital to preserving vaccines. Wars and insurgencies endanger vaccinators. Corruption can siphon away funds, and vaccination campaign planners must sometimes navigate through multiple armed factions.

"The most challenging areas ... are conflict settings, where outbreaks of violence hinder vaccinations, and areas where misinformation is circulating, which discourages community participation," said UNICEF's deputy chief of global immunization, Benjamin Schreiber.

Many nations are relying on COVAX, an international system aimed at ensuring equitable access to vaccines, though it is already short on funding.

UNICEF, which runs immunization programs worldwide, is gearing up to help procure and administer COVID-19 vaccines, Schreiber told The Associated Press. It has stockpiled half a billion syringes and aims to provide 70,000 refrigerators, mostly solar powered, he said.

The agency aims to transport 850 tons of COVID-19 vaccines a month next year, double its usual annual monthly rate for other vaccines, UNICEF's executive director Henrietta Fore said in a statement.

The situation can vary widely from country to country.

Mexico is expected to start immunizations soon. The military will handle distribution, and the government has promised free vaccines for Mexico's nearly 130 million inhabitants by the end of 2021.

Meanwhile, Haiti, the Western Hemisphere's poorest country, has yet to announce any vaccination plans. Health experts worry that widespread rumors could set back vaccinations — including claims that hospitals will give fatal injections to inflate COVID-19 death figures and receive more foreign aid.

The African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is leading a continent-wide effort to vaccinate Africa's 1.3 billion people in 54 countries. The agency is coordinating efforts to obtain doses and seeking World Bank help in funding — estimating it will take \$10 billion to acquire, distribute and administer the vaccines.

The aim is to vaccinate 60% of Africa's population within two years — some 700 million people — more than the continent has done in the past, said John Nkengasong, director of the African CDC.

"The time for action is now," said Nkengasong. "The West cannot defeat COVID-19 alone. It must be defeated by all over the world, and that includes Africa."

Congo underscores the obstacles the campaign faces.

The country has overcome Ebola outbreaks with vaccination campaigns. But it struggled in eastern Congo, where Allied Democratic Forces rebels stage frequent attacks and other armed groups vie for control of mineral riches.

Rough terrain and insecurity meant vaccinators had trouble getting to all areas. Some came under attack.

Rumors flew about the Ebola vaccines, including the idea they were meant to kill people, said Dr. Maurice

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Kakule, an Ebola survivor who worked in vaccination campaigns. Education programs overcame much of the resistance, but similar suspicions are spreading about the COVID-19 vaccine, he said.

In Beni, the area's main city, Danny Momoti, a trader, said he would take the vaccine because of his work. "I need this COVID-19 vaccination card to be accepted in Dubai and elsewhere where I go to buy the goods for Beni," he said.

Civil wars present perhaps the greatest obstacles.

In Yemen, the health system has collapsed under six years of war between Houthi rebels who control the north and government-allied factions in the south.

Yemen saw its first outbreak of polio in 15 years this summer, centered in the northern province of Saada. Vaccinators haven't been able to work there the past two years, in part because of security fears, UNICEF said. Agencies rushed to give new inoculations in parts of the north and south in November and December.

Cholera and diphtheria have been rampant, and once again, Yemen faces a new surge in hunger. U.N. officials have warned of potential famine in 2021.

No plans for COVID-19 vaccinations have been announced yet, whether by the Houthis, southern authorities or WHO and UNICEF.

Only half of Yemen's health facilities remain functional. Roads, power networks and other infrastructure have been devastated. The Houthis have hampered some programs, trying to wrest concessions from U.N. agencies, including blocking a shipment of cholera vaccines amid a 2017 outbreak.

"Even the mildest and normally preventable diseases can prove fatal due to a lack of health care access in a conflict setting," said Wasim Bahja, the Yemen country director for International Medical Corps.

In Pakistan, public distrust was fueled when the CIA in 2011 used a scam vaccination program to identify the hideout of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, leading to the special forces raid that killed him.

Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria are the only countries in the world where polio is still endemic. There have been 82 new polio cases this year alone, largely because vaccinations were suspended due to the pandemic, said Dr. Rana Safdar, who coordinates the polio vaccination campaigns.

The Bajaur region, where Khan was shot, remains one of the more dangerous areas, Safdar said.

Khan tried to explain the deep mistrust in his region. Deeply conservative tribal elders "believe the vaccine is the reason the young people who were given it as children are disrespectful and show little concern for Islamic traditions and values."

"Everyone is scared" of COVID-19, he said. "But they are suspicious of Western things."

Khan said he signed up to administer polio vaccines because he was paid the equivalent of \$56 for just a few days' work. "I needed to feed my family."

He will likely sign up to deliver COVID-19 vaccines as well.

"But first I would check if there is any danger there," he said.

Meldrum reported from Johannesburg, Keath from Cairo. Associated Press writers Samy Magdy in Cairo, Maria Verza in Mexico City, Sonia Pérez D. in Guatemala City, Evens Sanon in Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Al-Hadji Kudra Maliro in Beni, Congo contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Monday, Dec. 28, the 363rd day of 2020. There are three days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 28, 1612, Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei observed the planet Neptune, but mistook it for a star. (Neptune wasn't officially discovered until 1846 by Johann Gottfried Galle.)

On this date:

In 1832, John C. Calhoun became the first vice president of the United States to resign, stepping down because of differences with President Andrew Jackson.

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In 1908, a major earthquake followed by a tsunami devastated the Italian city of Messina, killing at least 70,000 people.

In 1912, San Francisco's Municipal Railway began operations with Mayor James Rolph Jr. at the controls of Streetcar No. 1 as 50,000 spectators looked on.

In 1945, Congress officially recognized the Pledge of Allegiance.

In 1972, Kim Il Sung, the premier of North Korea, was named the country's president under a new constitution.

In 1973, the Endangered Species Act was signed into law by President Richard Nixon.

In 1981, Elizabeth Jordan Carr, the first American "test-tube" baby, was born in Norfolk, Virginia.

In 1987, the bodies of 14 relatives of Ronald Gene Simmons were found at his home near Dover, Arkansas, after Simmons shot and killed two other people in Russellville. (Simmons, who never explained his motives, was executed in 1990.)

In 2001, the National Guard was called out to help Buffalo, New York, dig out from a paralyzing, 5-day storm that had unloaded nearly 7 feet of snow.

In 2007, Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto was laid to rest as the country's army tried to quell a frenzy of rioting in the wake of her assassination.

In 2014, the war in Afghanistan, fought for 13 bloody years and still raging, came to a formal end with a quiet flag-lowering ceremony in Kabul that marked the transition of the fighting from U.S.-led combat troops to the country's own security forces.

In 2016, Actor Debbie Reynolds, who lit up the screen in "Singin' in the Rain" and other Hollywood classics, died at age 84 a day after losing her daughter, Carrie Fisher, who was 60.

Ten years ago: Eight young people were killed in a fire that swept through an abandoned New Orleans warehouse (some of the victims were squatters who had been living inside the building). Agathe von Trapp, the real-life inspiration for eldest daughter Liesl in the musical "The Sound of Music," died in Towson, Maryland, at age 97.

Five years ago: A grand jury in Cleveland declined to indict a white rookie police officer in the killing of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, a Black youngster who was shot while playing with what turned out to be a pellet gun. Iraqi forces backed by U.S.-led airstrikes drove Islamic State militants out of the center of Ramadi and seized the main government complex there. Ian "Lemmy" Kilmister, 70, the singer and bassist who founded Motorhead in 1975, died in Los Angeles.

One year ago: A man armed with a machete stabbed five people at a Hanukkah celebration in a rabbi's home in suburban New York; the most critically injured victim, 72-year-old Josef Neumann, died three months after the attack. (Grafton Thomas has pleaded not guilty; the charges include federal hate crimes.) A truck bomb attack at a busy checkpoint in the Somali capital of Mogadishu left 79 people dead; Somalia's al-Shabab Islamic extremist rebels claimed responsibility. Five people were killed in the crash of a small plane in Lafayette, Louisiana, as they headed to the Peach Bowl in Atlanta to see LSU play Oklahoma; the victims included local TV reporter Carley McCord, the daughter-in-law of LSU's offensive coordinator. Tennis star Serena Williams was voted the AP's Female Athlete of the Decade. U.S. astronaut Christina Koch set a record for the longest single spaceflight by a woman, breaking the old mark of 288 days.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Nichelle Nichols is 88. Actor Dame Maggie Smith is 86. Former Sen. Johnny Isakson, R-Ga., is 76. Former Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., is 74. Rock singer-musician Edgar Winter is 74. Actor Denzel Washington is 66. TV personality Gayle King is 66. Actor Chad McQueen is 60. Country singer-musician Marty Roe (Diamond Rio) is 60. Actor Malcolm Gets is 57. Actor Mauricio Mendoza is 51. Actor Elaine Hendrix is 50. Political commentator Ana Navarro is 49. Talk show host Seth Meyers is 47. Actor Brendan Hines is 44. Actor Joe Manganiello is 44. Actor Vanessa Ferlito is 43. Rhythm-and-blues singer John Legend is 42. Rapper-musician-producer Terrace Martin is 42. Actor Andre Holland is 41. Actor Sienna Miller is 39. Actor Beau Garrett (TV: "The Good Doctor") is 38. Pop singer Kasey Sheridan (Dream) is 34. Actor Thomas Dekker is 33. Actor Mackenzie Rosman is 31. Pop singer David Archuleta is 30. Actor Mary-Charles Jones (TV: "Kevin Can Wait") is 19. Actor Miles Brown is 16.