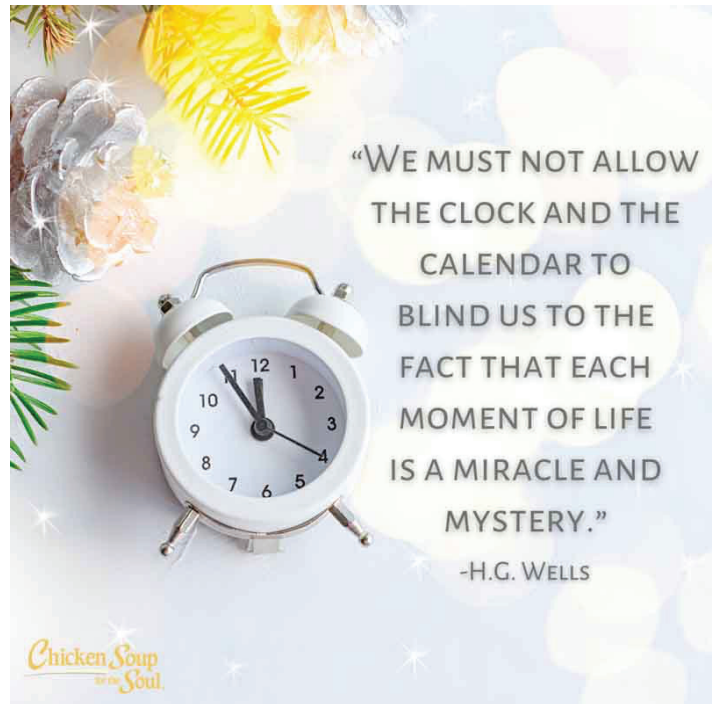


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Upcoming Schedule

- Saturday, Jan. 2: Webster Invitational Wrestling Tournament, 9 a.m.
- Tuesday, Jan. 5: Basketball doubleheader with Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:30 p.m., Boys Varsity at 8 p.m.
- Thursday, Jan. 7: Wrestling triangular in Groton starting at 6 p.m. with Redfield and Webster.
- Friday, Jan. 8: Girls Basketball at Sisseton with JV starting at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game.
- Saturday, Jan. 9: Quad Wrestling at Wolsey-Wessington High School starting at 10 a.m.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



Pandemic deaths place logistical and emotional burdens on S.D. funeral directors

By: Megan Raposa

Funeral director Mitch Steinhoff's alarm goes off at 4 a.m. most days so he can get in a few hours of work before the phones start ringing at 8.

One call can change the whole day in the funeral business, and for Steinhoff, owner of Eidsness Funeral Home in Brookings, the phone rings more often in recent months as more South Dakotans die amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"We ended up serving 25 families in some capacity in November," he said. "Typically, we would serve seven or eight."

Many funeral home directors across the state say they have seen double or triple the usual number of deaths in the past few months as the COVID-19 pandemic has dragged on. Materials such as personal protective equipment, caskets, body bags and gloves are in short supply, and wait times are increasing for cremation services.



Mitch Steinhoff

Some funeral directors are working 12 to 16 hours a day to keep up with demand for their services. As of Dec. 30, 2020, about 1,450 people had died due to COVID-19 in the state.

Meanwhile, they're working with families who aren't able to grieve as they normally would before the pandemic. Families may not have had a chance to visit loved ones before they died, may have been exposed to the coronavirus themselves or may have to wait until the virus is under control before holding a more traditional funeral service or remembrance ceremony.

The roughly 340 licensed funeral directors and embalmers in South Dakota are playing a small but essential role in the response to the pandemic and like many others, they have faced a new normal that has been challenging and at times, heartbreaking and lonely.

In Redfield, for example, the local nursing home and its residents were hit hard by COVID-19, resulting in several elderly deaths.

"It's been just horrendous," said Kelly Hyke, owner of Hyke Funeral Home in Redfield. "I think we are the forgotten people of covid."

In South Dakota, nursing homes and long-term care facilities have been hit particularly hard by the pandemic, and a majority of the 1,450 deaths reported have been people over the age of 80, according to data from the state health department.

Funeral directors have been taking additional precautions in transporting and embalming bodies since the start of the pandemic, regardless of the cause of death.



Funeral directors across South Dakota are taking additional preventative measures to stay safe from the COVID-19 virus, including using protective equipment such as masks, gloves, footies and plastic sheeting while handling bodies.

Photo: Megan Raposa, South Dakota News Watch

"I treat every body now like it may be infected," said Wade Wilson, a funeral director at Behrens-Wilson Funeral Home in Rapid City.

The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the following personal protective equipment for funeral directors during embalming: N95 masks, disposable gown, face shield and two pairs of gloves.

In the past, human remains may sometimes be moved by someone wearing only protective gloves, but with the airborne transmission of COVID-19, the times when the body is moved are most dangerous. When a body is moved, there is a chance that air is expelled through the mouth or nose, according to Jack Mitchell, spokesman and board member for the National Funeral Directors Association.

Overall, however, the risk of contracting COVID-19 post-mortem is very low, Mitchell said.

The risk to funeral directors is higher, though, when the deceased person must be removed from a nursing home where an outbreak has taken place, and the protocol now is to wear a gown and other personal protective equipment before going inside.

For some funeral home workers, the extra precautions and protective equipment have forced a renewed commitment to safety and hygiene.

"If I'm taking anything good out of it, it's helped us refresh on things we've maybe gotten complacent with over the years," said Justin Nelson, funeral director at Mason Funeral Home in Winner.

Some homes hit harder than others

The impact of the pandemic on funeral homes has varied depending on a few factors, including the size of the funeral home. Larger funeral homes are more capable of handling an increase in cases, both because they have more storage for remains and because they have more staff to help.

In Sioux Falls, George Boom Funeral Home has been busier than usual but not overwhelmed, said manager Phil Schmitz.

The funeral home opened a new facility in east-central Sioux Falls in 2017, and with that came about three times more space than its previous location. The business is also looking to add a second crematory in the coming months to keep up with current and projected future demand.

In Brookings, Steinhoff took a proactive approach as soon as he saw what the coronavirus was doing to overwhelm funeral facilities in New York earlier in the year.

He added a storage and cooling facility that can hold six to 10 bodies, which is several times more storage than most small- to mid-sized funeral homes. The storage space has been full since October.

In smaller areas, a spike in deaths is felt more intensely. Hyke is the only funeral director in Spink County, so when a local nursing home saw an outbreak in cases and deaths, he was the only one available to handle the cases. As is the nature of small towns, those calls rarely came from strangers.

"We see these people every single day in the grocery store, at



Kelly Hyke

"We see these people every single day in the grocery store, at the post office, here at the funeral home, so it makes it tough because you have that connection ... but it's also a good thing because, I think, knowing the families, we give them excellent service." -- Kelly Hyke, funeral director in Redfield



Phil Schmitz of George Boom Funeral Home in Sioux Falls prepares protective equipment used in handling the bodies of people who die during the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: Megan Raposa, South Dakota News Watch



Funeral homes across South Dakota, including the Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel in Groton, have been busier than usual during the coronavirus pandemic and adapting to new ways that loved-ones are trying to grieve and do so safely.

Photo: Courtesy photo

time to stock up on personal protective equipment, embalming chemicals, caskets, cremation materials and other needed supplies. But when it comes to reordering, directors need to order early and often.

"Our regular suppliers, their cupboards were bare pretty quickly when the pandemic hit," said Mitchell, the national trade group official.

That means orders are taking longer to arrive. It also means fewer options are available, so directors have to take what they can get.

"There's a certain body bag that I like," said Wilson of Rapid City. "There's a certain glove that I like, but I don't have that luxury to get what I like anymore." Funeral homes have also absorbed many of the increased costs related to their work during the pandemic, the high costs of PPE supplies among them.

Those are small complaints, Wilson admits, but the limited choices also affect grieving families. They may have a certain casket they like, but it may be on backorder. Funeral homes have been sharing and exchanging these types of supplies as needed, especially in rural parts of the state, but occasionally a director has to go back to a family with bad news.

In Sioux Falls, George Boom funeral assistant Bob Logan, who handles merchandising, said he usually orders cremation supplies once every three months. He's now ordering about every six weeks to keep up with the additional demand and to ensure they always have materials on hand.

Concern for families, concern for health

Even though Winner didn't see a bunch of deaths all at once like some areas, the way some COVID-19 deaths are happening in isolation is emotionally trying for loved ones trying to grieve.

Nelson recalled a family he worked with early on in the pandemic who couldn't see their ailing father in person before he died. "It just makes a bad situation even worse," he said.

At a time when some families are unable to be physically close to each other when a relative dies, funeral directors also have to navigate new normals in interactions with those who are grieving.

"You don't have the closeness with the families," Hyke said. "We used to go in and give them hugs and shake their hands, and now it's getting drilled into us: 'No personal contact; keep six feet away.'"

Hyke, like others across the state, is concerned for the families, but he's also working to take care of his own health. He doesn't know if someone he plans to meet may have been exposed to the coronavirus. His small part-time staff hasn't been working in the office since February. All of them are either over 70 or in the high-risk category, and they cannot risk infection at work. Hyke, himself, worries what would happen if he got sick.

the post office, here at the funeral home, so it makes it tough because you have that connection," Hyke said. "But it's also a good thing because, I think, knowing the families, we give them excellent service."

Nelson said that in Winner, this year has been the busiest he has seen in his 11 years as funeral director. But he said things don't feel all that different day-to-day, with the exception of hosting fewer mourners than usual.

Because the surge in deaths hit South Dakota several months into the pandemic, funeral homes had

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"I'm the only funeral director in the whole county," he said. "If I would come down with covid, it would shut my business down."

He's also one of the directors putting in long days. At the worst of it, he saw five deaths in a 24-hour period in November. Typically that's how many deaths he'd see in an entire month.

Even in the best of times, funeral directors can be susceptible to "compassion fatigue," or getting emotionally run down after seeing grief day after day, Mitchell said, and one of his big concerns amid the pandemic is the mental health of funeral directors, especially those in covid hot spots.

Still, there is optimism on the horizon as the rate of new cases slows statewide. Vaccines are also already being distributed to medical workers and those in nursing homes.

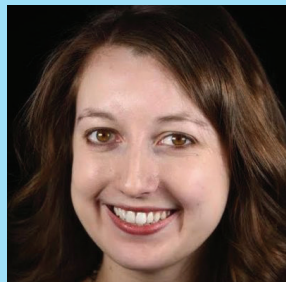
But when it comes to grieving, some fear it may take years before the full impact of the pandemic is known. Even in a state like South Dakota where most places have no restrictions on gatherings, attendance at funerals has been consistently low.

Some families got creative and help drive-up visitations, where mourners could greet family members one at a time from their vehicles at a safe distance. Others held luncheon services outside when it was warm enough to do so. A few chose to hold only an intimate graveside service with plans to do a larger celebration down the line.

Statewide, there's consensus that live-streaming funeral services online is a trend that will stick around long after the pandemic ends.

The pandemic has led to an increased awareness of the essential service funeral directors provide and the importance of funerals in the grieving process, Mitchell said. Pre-pandemic, he saw an increasing number of people treating funerals and visitations almost as an inconvenience.

"Everybody's become so busy," he said. "We're kind of hoping that people who do value a more traditional type of service who have been denied that because of the pandemic, that they're going to share the message that those gatherings are important."



ABOUT

MEGAN RAPOSA

Megan Raposa is a freelance journalist and entrepreneur in Sioux Falls, S.D. She previously worked as an editor for the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

Andrea Eisenbeisz of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel in Groton is one of many funeral chapels seeing an increase in the need of their services. The COVID-19 pandemic has made some modifications in services. One of them is the use



of Livestreaming services. People sometimes feel uneasy scrolling through Facebook and then all of a sudden they come across a funeral service. Eisenbeisz uses the services of GDILIVE.COM that offers an independent site for Livestreaming. In addition, the camera operator does more scanning around the room than what a stationary camera would do. "I like that service and it's something I don't have to add to my work load," she said. "The people like the clear quality and sound that GDILIVE.COM offers."

South Dakota has no mandatory face covering order and Paetznick-Garness allows families to decide on face covering options and social distancing. "What I am seeing are smaller services geared to immediate family members," Eisenbeisz said. "I'm also seeing less of a need for food at these more personal services."

And what happens after COVID-19? Eisenbeisz said, "It's hard to say what the new normal is going to be. We could see the continuation of the smaller, more personal services that are live-streamed and no meals after COVID-19. "

- Paul Kosel

#311 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Big numbers today. There were 215,000 new cases reported. That brings us to 19,776,800, 1.1% more than yesterday's total and within reach of 20 million tomorrow, Friday for sure. It's been more than eight weeks since our new-case number was below 100,000.

Hospitalizations were at a record level again today at 124,693. California continues to suffer: Los Angeles County has hospitalizations 10 times the number they had two months ago; around one-fifth of those are in ICU beds. These are records, just as the US as a whole also reports record numbers of hospitalized patients. The County has reported nearly three-quarters of a million cases. Texas also reports a record number of hospitalizations.

We have now lost 342,202 Americans to this virus, 1.0% more than yesterday's number. There were 3291 deaths reported today. It's been a month since this daily number was below 1000.

We do have some preliminary data on this new B.1.1.7 variant of the coronavirus, the one that apparently originated in either South Africa or the UK, but has been showing up here and there across the world, including in Colorado and, most recently, in San Diego. It seems likely this variant is more easily transmissible and unlikely the mutations seen in this variant will interfere with vaccine efficacy. These new data seem to confirm that hunch about vaccine efficacy, according to Dr. Paul Offit, Maurice R. Hilleman Professor of Vaccinology, professor of pediatrics at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania, and director of the Vaccine Education Center at The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, who told ABC News that the early tests show antibodies from vaccinated persons are performing very well against the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It appears we have one less thing to worry about.

This next requires we lay down a basic understanding of our gold-standard diagnostic test, the RT-PCR, so we're going to do some sciencey stuff first. It helps to understand the PCR method isn't something new we invented just for Covid-19; the procedure has been around for a while. It can be used in situations where you have only a minute quantity of DNA and you need more—maybe to process some sorts of crime scene evidence or to examine a rare piece of DNA. The method is handy because it increases, or amplifies, the amount of DNA you have to study.

The science is a little fancier than we're going to describe here, but it relies on the fact that DNA molecules are structured as pairs of strands that are complementary, or chemical mirror images: The precise structure of one strand determines the precise structure of the other one in the pair; only complementary strands line up and form the double-strand of a DNA molecule. The way cells reproduce DNA for new cells is to basically "unzip" these two strands from one another and then use each original strand as a template on which a new opposite strand is assembled. Because of the complementarity of the strands, the new DNA is going to be a faithful copy of the original with each new molecule half original and half newly-assembled DNA.

The PCR test essentially mimics this natural cell process in the lab, providing the enzymes needed to make the unzipping and assembly happen and also the building blocks, called nucleotides, for making new DNA, as well as providing conditions carefully arranged to nudge the process along. This process of amplification doubles the quantity of DNA as you started with. We also slip in a special nucleotide that we've labeled with a fluorescent dye; it's called a probe, and it will fluoresce when it's incorporated into the new DNA molecule we're building. We need the probes because these molecules are incredibly small, far too small to see. That means we can't examine them, and so we need a way to figure out whether our new DNA molecule was actually built. Probes that fluoresce only once they're part of a DNA molecule are the solution to this problem; they enable fluorescence detectors to tell us when we have successfully produced the DNA. Typically, several rounds, or cycles, of amplification occur, doubling the quantity of DNA each time, before you have enough DNA to reach what's called the cycle threshold—the point where the DNA is detectable. Long biological molecules like DNA are called polymers, and their construction is supervised by enzymes called polymerases. This explains why this method is called a polymerase chain reaction (PCR).

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The problem with using PCR to detect SARS-CoV-2 is that this is an RNA virus; it doesn't have any DNA. RNA is a single-stranded molecule and PCR only works on double-stranded molecules, which means we can't use the PCR method to amplify RNA, at least not without some more fancy stuff first. I guess nothing's simple these days.

It happens that, inside cells, the way RNA is made is by using DNA as a template for the assembly of the RNA. This is similar to DNA production except it uses RNA nucleotides instead of DNA ones and it needs a different enzyme, one that will deal with the slightly different gluing-together process for making RNA. This RNA-production process in the cell is called transcription, and these specialized enzymes are called transcriptases. (If you've detected a naming pattern here whereby enzymes seem to get names ending in -ase, then you're paying attention. Congratulations.)

Now what would be handy about now would be if we could figure out a way to run this transcription process backward so we could use RNA as the template for making DNA because then we could use that viral-RNA-patterned DNA in the PCR test to detect the viral RNA, sort of by proxy. Alas, transcriptase is strictly a one-direction enzyme, so it's no help. But it turns out some RNA viruses (not this one, but a group called retroviruses, retro- for going backwards) have already solved that problem, having evolved a means for infecting cells which relies on getting the host cell to make a bunch of DNA to viral specifications. They have enzymes just for this purpose called reverse transcriptases, and knowing about those enabled us to steal the technology from the viruses and make our own reverse transcriptases for our own use in the lab—for example, to help us invent diagnostic tests for pesky viruses.

So here, in a nutshell, is what happens when your swab specimen is collected and shipped off to the lab. First, any viral RNA present in the specimen is extracted from the swab. Then reverse transcriptase (the RT of the RT-PCR) is used to build a double-stranded DNA molecule which is complementary, that is, a faithful copy, to the viral RNA. And then we employ the PCR process, fluorescent probes and all, to amplify the DNA until it is detectable. It's kind of mind-blowing that scientists figured out how to do this and then do it over and over, all while working with a substance that is invisible to them.

Now if you think about it, that cycle threshold (number of cycles needed to get a detectable quantity of DNA) is going to be higher when there was less RNA to start with and lower when there is a lot of RNA in the swab, so theoretically, the cycle threshold value could enable us to quantify the viral load in the original specimen. Turns out we might just be interested in having that information. Here's why:

There is plenty of evidence presented in several papers that one factor which can predict how sick you may become with Covid-19 is your viral load, that is, how much of the virus is in your body. This isn't earth-shattering news; it is just how things work with a number of viruses. Since we've figured this out, it has become apparent it would be useful to have some sort of quantitative report of the relative amount of virus that is in a patient's specimen; we could then plan our approach to patients based on their viral loads. Dr. Daniel Griffin, infectious disease physician at Columbia University in New York, told the New York Times that we could then "stratify risk," sorting patients into groups: those who just need a daily oxygen check versus those who need closer monitoring.

It has not been routine for labs to report out cycle threshold values for PCR tests, despite growing pressure from physicians to do so. The FDA is now telling labs they can report an estimate of viral load along with positive results for the diagnostic test. While labs were never prohibited from doing so, this FDA statement can be seen as encouragement to report those values. Many infectious disease specialists are hailing this as a big step in the right direction, one that will inform clinical practice. I should note there are also scientists sounding a note of caution; the caution surrounds the fact that different PCR methodologies may not return analogous results and so some sort of standardization may be needed so results are properly interpreted, as well as validation of the tests when used for quantification. I'm guessing in coming weeks those things are going to happen, which will give us the opportunity to see whether and how this additional information might enable us to focus care where it is most needed. This certainly has great potential.

We've all read news stories about folks with Covid-19 getting on a plane and experiencing a medical crisis

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in flight. A few such have died before the plane could land. Now most of us have focused our attention on the fact that a sick person was on a plane, exposing fellow passengers and airline employees. That's certainly reasonable, especially when you consider that all domestic airlines require passengers to fill out a questionnaire about whether they are experiencing any symptoms which may mean they are infected with the coronavirus. The purpose for these questionnaires is, of course, to keep them off flights where they might expose others. It probably shouldn't surprise us that some folks are lying about their symptoms so they can get on the plane.

Apparently, the honor system doesn't work so well when people don't care much about exposing others to risks. Maybe it will work better if word gets out lying on the questionnaire about your symptoms is also dangerous to you. In fact, flying is high risk even for infected people without symptoms because of the low air pressure in the cabin of a plane at altitude. While the cabins are pressurized to make it possible to breathe at all, cabin pressure is typically 25 percent less than air pressure on the ground; and low air pressure reduces the concentration of available oxygen in the air. That reduced oxygen supply decreases blood oxygen level. Now that lower oxygen isn't an issue if you're healthy, but it can provoke a crisis in someone with a lung or a heart problem, either a chronic condition or an acute one like a viral infection. Many people with severe heart and lung disease use supplemental oxygen while in flight, even when they don't need it on the ground. People with Covid-19 apparently haven't gotten that memo; of course, since they're not supposed to be in the air anyhow, I suppose no one's thought to mention to them the dangers of air travel. Maybe we need to fix that: Flying with Covid-19 can be hazardous not only to the people around you, but to you too.

A guy named Jim Zockoll grew up in North Braddock, Pennsylvania. He went off to the Air Force after high school and became a flight engineer for Pan Am Airlines back in the '50s when commercial air travel was a new thing. Uncertain about the longevity of this new-fangled airline business, Zockoll ran a drain cleaning service on the side which, by happenstance, he learned was a needed service in England. In the early '60s, he moved to London to establish his business there and became very successful; but he never forgot North Braddock. So when the pandemic struck and he learned many people in the US were food insecure as a result, he decided to give the old home town a little boost.

He and his brother Fred made arrangements with a local grocery store to provide every single resident of North Braddock with a grocery gift card for Christmas. All of them. They sent these in memory of their mother who spent her life in that town, noting her name and former address in the message that went out with the gift cards.

A guy who had something to spare decided to share it with people who didn't. That's quite lovely. Each of us has something to spare. It might not be money, but it might be time or help or kindness. We can create a lot of lovely if we set our minds to it.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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December 30 COVID-19 UPDATE

Groton Daily Independent from State Health Lab Reports

South Dakota: Community Spread for week of Dec. 28:

Moderate: Brule, Clark, Corson, Jackson and Lyman downgraded from Substantial to Moderate.

Minimal: Buffalo, Jerauld, Mellette, Sanborn and Ziebach downgraded from Moderate to Minimal; Jones upgraded from None to Minimal.

Positive: +562 (98,659 total) Positivity Rate: 12.9%

Total Tests: 4341 (755,685 total)

Hospitalized: +34 (5639 total). 293 currently hospitalized (-10)

Avera St. Luke's: 9 (0) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 3 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (+1) COVID-19 ventilators.

Sanford Aberdeen: 4 (+1) COVID-19 Occupied beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ICU Beds, 1 (0) COVID-19 ventilators.

Deaths: +18 (1464 total)

Females: 7, Males: 11

Age Groups: 60s=4, 70s=7, 80+=7

Counties: Brule-1, Deuel-1, Grant-5, Hamlin-2, Lincoln-2, Minnehaha-3, Oglala Lakota-1, Pennington-1, Yankton-1, Ziebach-1.

Recovered: +553 (91,527 total)

Active Cases: -9 (5729)

Percent Recovered: 92.8%

Beadle (34) +14 positive, +2 recovered (76 active cases)

Brookings (29) +30 positive, +13 recovered (203 active cases)

Brown (57): +25 positive, +23 recovered (238 active cases)

Clark (2): +1 positive, +2 recovered (17 active cases)

Clay (11): +10 positive, +3 recovered (86 active cases)

Codington (68): +7 positive, +29 recovered (226 active cases)

Davison (52): +6 positive, +11 recovered (97 active cases)

Day (20): +1 positive, +3 recovered (34 active cases)

Edmunds (4): +6 positive, +1 recovered (56 active cases)

Faulk (11): +0 positive, +3 recovered (7 active cases)

Grant (33): +4 positive, +4 recovered (28 active cases)

Hanson (3): +1 positive, +0 recovered (17 active cases)

Hughes (25): +23 positive, +12 recovered (119 active cases)

Lawrence (28): +9 positive, +9 recovered (114 active cases)

Lincoln (65): +48 positive, +38 recovered (439

active cases)

Marshall (4): +0 positive, +0 recovered (22 active cases)

McCook (21): +10 positive, +5 recovered (40 active cases)

McPherson (1): +2 positive, +0 recovery (9 active case)

Minnehaha (262): +122 positive, +128 recovered (1416 active cases)

Pennington (129): +88 positive, +80 recovered (768 active cases)

Potter (2): +0 positive, +1 recovered (10 active cases)

Roberts (31): +11 positive, +3 recovered (99 active cases)

Spink (24): -1 positive, +7 recovered (35 active cases)

Walworth (14): +1 positive, +5 recovered (34 active cases)

NORTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Daily Report, Dec. 30:

- 4.6% rolling 14-day positivity
- 375 new positives
- 7,919 susceptible test encounters
- 96 currently hospitalized (-19)
- 1,821 active cases (+120)
- 1,282 total deaths (+6)

PLEASE NOTE: Due to the increase in antigen screening across North Dakota and the increase in negative result reporting, beginning today, the total tests and percent positivity will include both antigen and PCR results.

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| County | Positive Cases | Recovered Cases | Negative Persons | Deceased Among Cases | Community Spread | % RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly) |
|-------------|----------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|--|
| Aurora | 412 | 383 | 773 | 8 | Substantial | 25.00% |
| Beadle | 2502 | 2393 | 5177 | 34 | Substantial | 7.95% |
| Bennett | 354 | 341 | 1083 | 8 | Moderate | 3.45% |
| Bon Homme | 1477 | 1415 | 1873 | 23 | Substantial | 25.40% |
| Brookings | 2956 | 2724 | 9995 | 29 | Substantial | 6.39% |
| Brown | 4399 | 4104 | 11049 | 57 | Substantial | 20.86% |
| Brule | 627 | 607 | 1689 | 7 | Moderate | 6.25% |
| Buffalo | 410 | 395 | 852 | 10 | Minimal | 14.29% |
| Butte | 877 | 816 | 2826 | 18 | Substantial | 15.38% |
| Campbell | 115 | 106 | 206 | 4 | Minimal | 0.00% |
| Charles Mix | 1109 | 1035 | 3536 | 11 | Substantial | 14.55% |
| Clark | 312 | 293 | 855 | 2 | Moderate | 6.38% |
| Clay | 1623 | 1526 | 4507 | 11 | Substantial | 11.88% |
| Codington | 3421 | 3127 | 8404 | 68 | Substantial | 15.29% |
| Corson | 448 | 423 | 888 | 10 | Moderate | 13.04% |
| Custer | 672 | 638 | 2389 | 9 | Substantial | 18.60% |
| Davison | 2707 | 2558 | 5701 | 52 | Substantial | 14.34% |
| Day | 529 | 475 | 1540 | 20 | Substantial | 23.44% |
| Deuel | 411 | 377 | 989 | 7 | Substantial | 12.50% |
| Dewey | 1262 | 1160 | 3488 | 12 | Substantial | 34.09% |
| Douglas | 381 | 348 | 825 | 7 | Substantial | 32.00% |
| Edmunds | 362 | 302 | 883 | 4 | Substantial | 20.45% |
| Fall River | 451 | 416 | 2278 | 12 | Substantial | 17.65% |
| Faulk | 313 | 295 | 597 | 11 | Moderate | 0.00% |
| Grant | 821 | 760 | 1928 | 33 | Substantial | 4.11% |
| Gregory | 482 | 443 | 1084 | 26 | Substantial | 9.09% |
| Haakon | 233 | 198 | 465 | 7 | Substantial | 29.17% |
| Hamlin | 603 | 534 | 1506 | 34 | Substantial | 15.49% |
| Hand | 312 | 298 | 699 | 2 | Moderate | 0.00% |
| Hanson | 311 | 291 | 602 | 3 | Moderate | 17.39% |
| Harding | 89 | 85 | 153 | 1 | Minimal | 14.29% |
| Hughes | 2009 | 1865 | 5601 | 25 | Substantial | 3.05% |
| Hutchinson | 697 | 642 | 2037 | 16 | Substantial | 17.54% |

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| | | | | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------------|--------|
| Hyde | 132 | 129 | 368 | 1 | Minimal | 0.00% |
| Jackson | 262 | 240 | 852 | 8 | Moderate | 18.18% |
| Jerauld | 259 | 234 | 496 | 15 | Minimal | 0.00% |
| Jones | 67 | 63 | 183 | 0 | Minimal | 14.29% |
| Kingsbury | 537 | 486 | 1419 | 13 | Substantial | 31.25% |
| Lake | 1015 | 948 | 2761 | 16 | Substantial | 19.28% |
| Lawrence | 2541 | 2399 | 7531 | 28 | Substantial | 20.68% |
| Lincoln | 6758 | 6254 | 17358 | 65 | Substantial | 15.60% |
| Lyman | 517 | 491 | 1706 | 9 | Moderate | 6.45% |
| Marshall | 260 | 234 | 996 | 4 | Substantial | 20.59% |
| McCook | 683 | 622 | 1401 | 21 | Substantial | 22.03% |
| McPherson | 180 | 169 | 504 | 1 | Moderate | 2.86% |
| Meade | 2222 | 2078 | 6658 | 24 | Substantial | 15.24% |
| Mellette | 216 | 209 | 656 | 2 | Minimal | 0.00% |
| Miner | 225 | 201 | 500 | 6 | Moderate | 31.25% |
| Minnehaha | 24896 | 23218 | 67614 | 262 | Substantial | 12.16% |
| Moody | 531 | 487 | 1583 | 14 | Substantial | 15.15% |
| Oglala Lakota | 1924 | 1771 | 6172 | 35 | Substantial | 17.71% |
| Pennington | 11117 | 10220 | 33592 | 129 | Substantial | 21.66% |
| Perkins | 284 | 239 | 666 | 11 | Substantial | 32.43% |
| Potter | 300 | 288 | 713 | 2 | Moderate | 9.30% |
| Roberts | 977 | 847 | 3735 | 31 | Substantial | 24.54% |
| Sanborn | 304 | 295 | 612 | 3 | Minimal | 5.88% |
| Spink | 698 | 639 | 1859 | 24 | Substantial | 5.52% |
| Stanley | 270 | 251 | 774 | 2 | Substantial | 0.00% |
| Sully | 111 | 99 | 250 | 3 | Minimal | 28.57% |
| Todd | 1151 | 1091 | 3791 | 19 | Substantial | 20.90% |
| Tripp | 624 | 592 | 1318 | 11 | Substantial | 16.67% |
| Turner | 964 | 866 | 2375 | 47 | Substantial | 14.93% |
| Union | 1593 | 1443 | 5376 | 30 | Substantial | 17.10% |
| Walworth | 614 | 566 | 1615 | 14 | Substantial | 16.67% |
| Yankton | 2510 | 2232 | 8240 | 25 | Substantial | 24.28% |
| Ziebach | 291 | 253 | 692 | 8 | Moderate | 9.09% |
| Unassigned | 0 | 0 | 1895 | 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 | 3681 | 0 |
| 10-19 years | 10865 | 0 |
| 20-29 years | 18000 | 4 |
| 30-39 years | 16351 | 12 |
| 40-49 years | 14151 | 24 |
| 50-59 years | 14005 | 74 |
| 60-69 years | 11216 | 186 |
| 70-79 years | 5909 | 316 |
| 80+ years | 4542 | 848 |

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

| Sex | # of Cases | # of Deaths Among Cases |
|--------|------------|-------------------------|
| Female | 51582 | 706 |
| Male | 47138 | 758 |

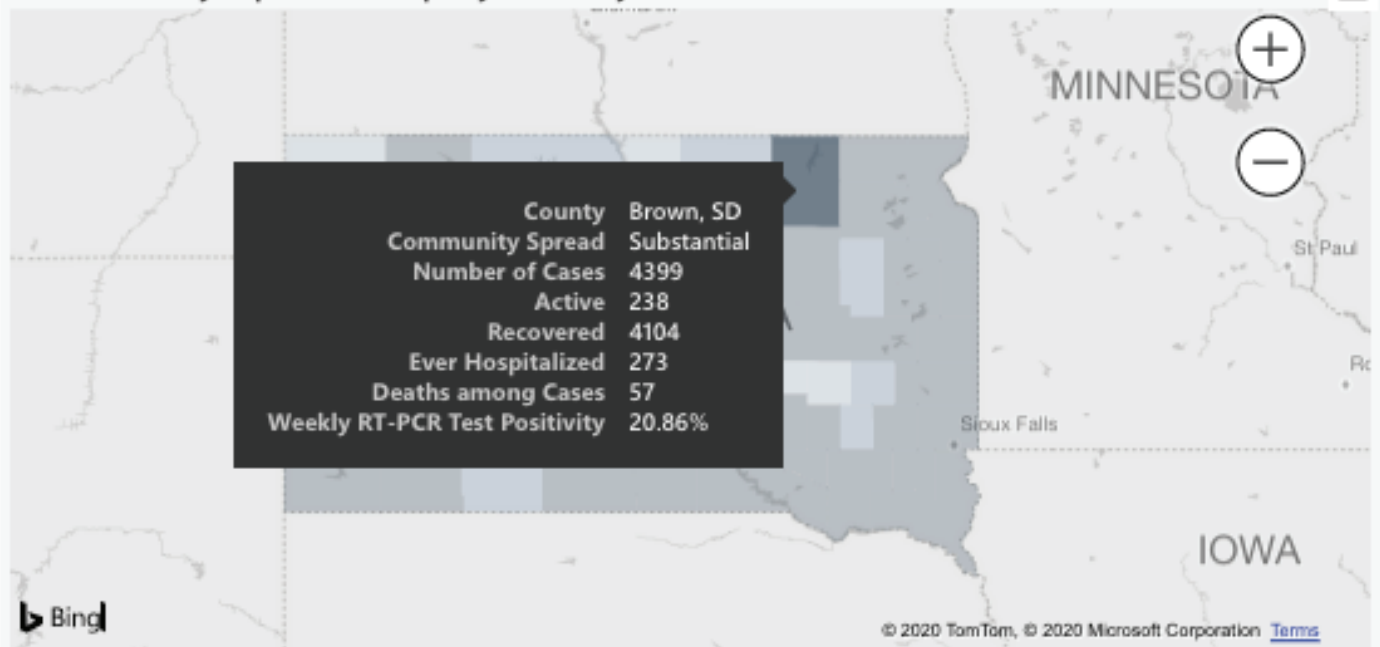
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



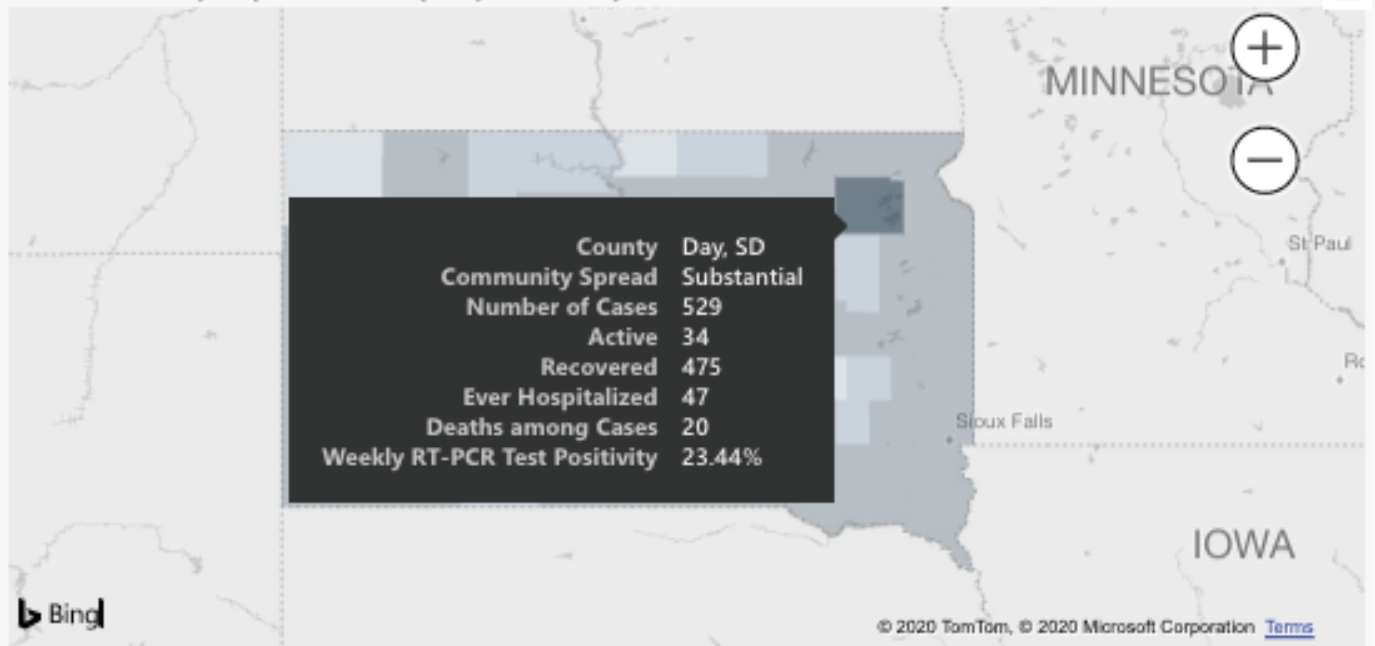
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



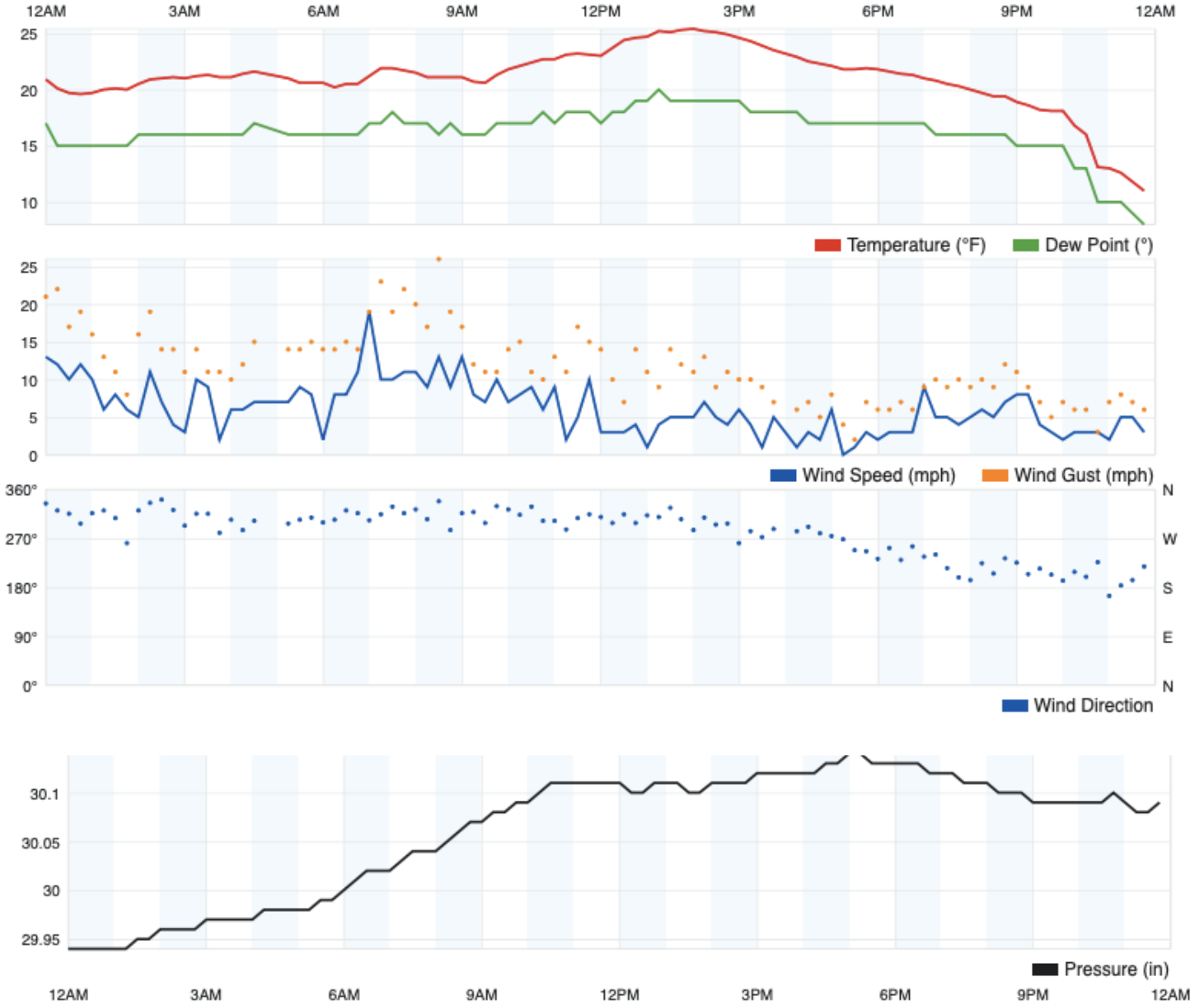
Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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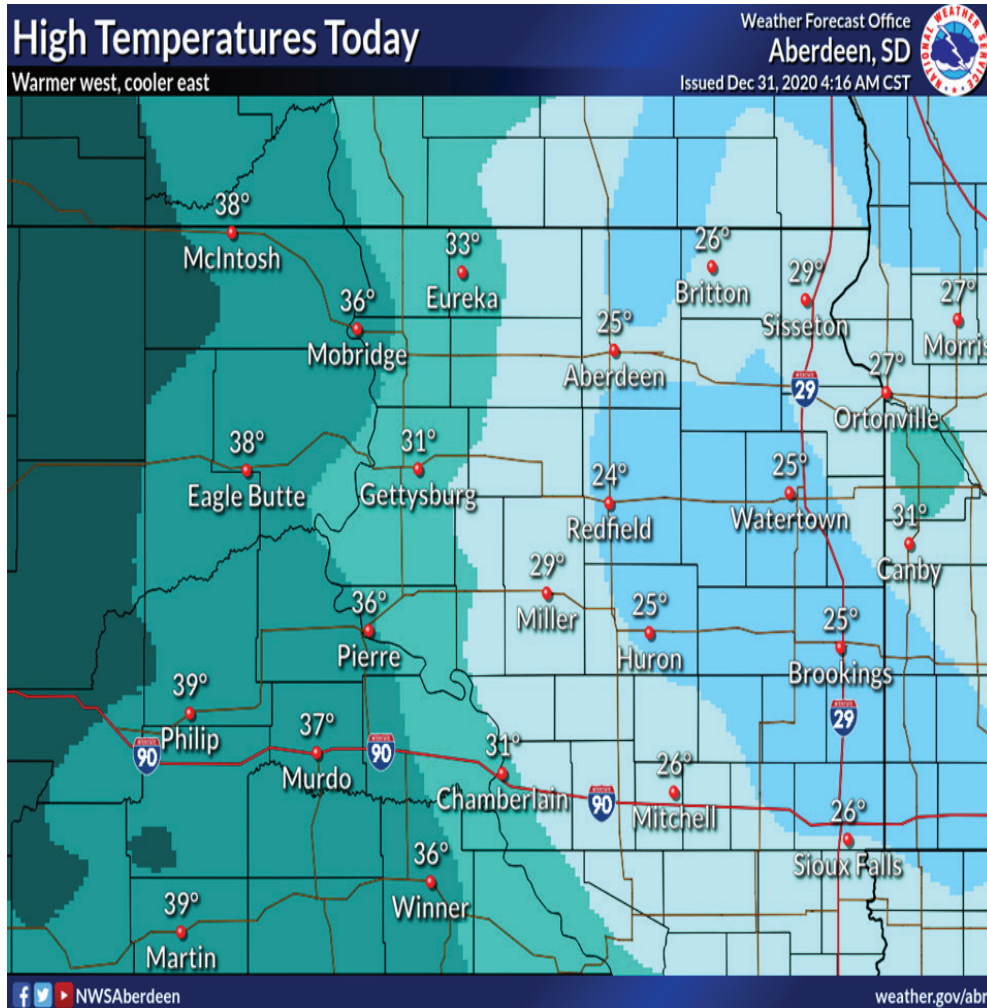
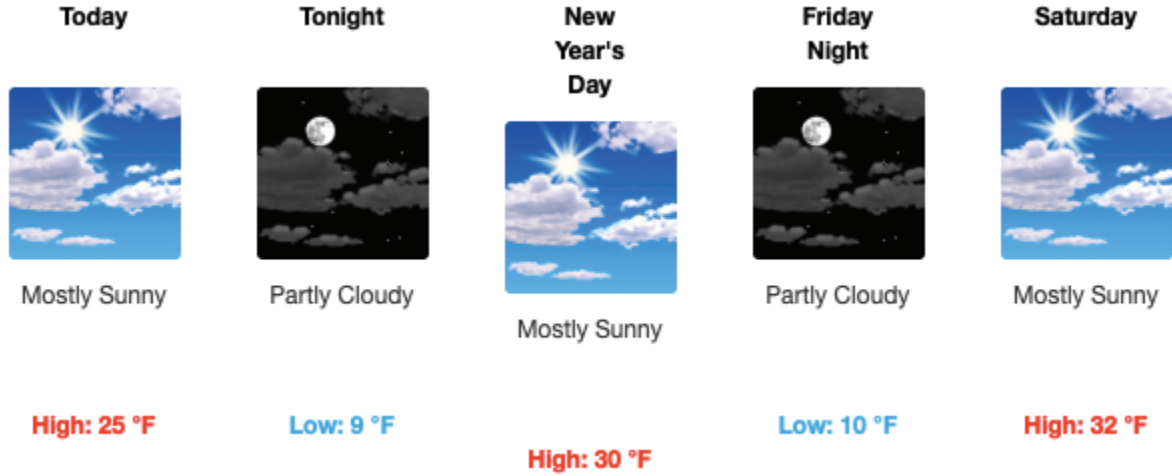
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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High temperatures today will range from the mid-20s east, where a thicker snowpack resides, to the upper 30s west. Temperatures will gradually warm through Sunday where highs are forecast to be in the low 30s east to the mid-40s west. Conditions are expected to be dry at least through the weekend and into early next week.

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Today in Weather History

2010: An area of low pressure moved across the Northern Plains on New Year's Eve bringing widespread heavy snowfall along with blizzard conditions. Bitter cold northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph combined with additional snowfall of 6 to 10 inches brought reduced visibility to near zero across much of the region. This storm was the second blizzard in two days across the area. The blizzard conditions continued into early New Year's Day. Both Interstates 29 and 90 were closed from the 31st until Sunday, January 2nd. There were several stranded motorists along Highway 83 with five people being rescued. The total snowfall amounts from the two storms ranged from 6 to 15 inches across the region.

The two-day snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Eagle Butte; 7 inches at Doland; 8 inches at Mobridge and Gann Valley; 9 inches at Castlewood; 10 inches at Murdo, Clark, Ipswich, Kennebec, and Watertown and 11 inches at Clear Lake and Bryant. Locations with a foot or more of snow included 12 inches at Aberdeen, Gettysburg, Highmore, Milbank, Mission Ridge, and Bowdle; 13 inches at Eureka, Pierre, Onida, and Blunt; 14 inches at Mellette, Sisseton, Victor, and Roscoe with 15 inches at Britton, Webster, and Redfield. The snowfall began between 6 am and noon CST on the 31st and ended between 4 am and 11 am CST on January 1st.

1876: A heavy snowstorm hit southern Arkansas, with amounts well over 20 inches in places. 28 inches was reported near Warren, and 24–28 inches was reported at Arkansas City.

1882: Downtown San Francisco saw 3.5 inches of snow.

1890: According to the National Meteorological Library and Archive from the United Kingdom, during December 1890, Westminster, England saw zero hours of sunshine.

1933: During the last week of December, a series of winter storms pounded the mountainside with 12 inches of rain near Los Angeles. More rain occurred on New Year's Eve, including 4.86 inches in downtown Los Angeles. The 4.86 inches is currently the fourth most rainfall to occur in one day in downtown Los Angeles since 1877. Around midnight, hillsides in at least three mountain locations collapsed sending millions of tons of mud and debris into the Crescenta Valley neighborhoods below. Crescenta Valley is a few miles north of Los Angeles. This mudslide destroyed more than 400 homes. Following the disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the County of Los Angeles built a flood control system of catch basins, and concrete storm drains, designed to prevent a repeat of the 1934 disaster.

1967: The kickoff temperature for the NFL Championship Game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers was -13°F with a wind chill of -36°F. This game is known as the "Ice Bowl."

2000: The "Snow Bowl" was played between Mississippi St and Texas A&M at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, Louisiana. Snow began about a half hour before kickoff and didn't stop until well after the bowl game.

1917 - The temperature at Lewisburg, WV, plunged to 37 degrees below zero to set a state record. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1929 - Greenland Ranch, in Death Valley, California, went the entire year without measurable precipitation. (The Weather Channel)

1933 - A 24 hour rainfall of 7.36 inches set the stage for the worst flood in Los Angeles history. Flooding claimed 44 lives. (David Ludlum)

1941 - Snow which began on New Year's Eve became a major blizzard on New Year's Day, burying Des Moines, IA, under 19.8 inches of snow in 24 hours, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1947 - A late afternoon tornado touched down 10 miles north of Shreveport LA, and dissipated south of El Dorado AR. The tornado, as much as 400 yards in width, killed 18 persons. It damaged or destroyed two thirds of the structures at Cotton Valley LA. (The Weather Channel)

1962 - Perhaps the worst blizzard in the history of the state of Maine finally came to an end. The storm produced 40 inches in 24 hours at Orono, and a total of 46 inches at Ripogonus Dam. Gale force winds produced snow drifts twenty feet high around Bangor. A disastrous icestorm was over Georgia and South Carolina. It ravaged the two states for days causing more than seven million dollars damage. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

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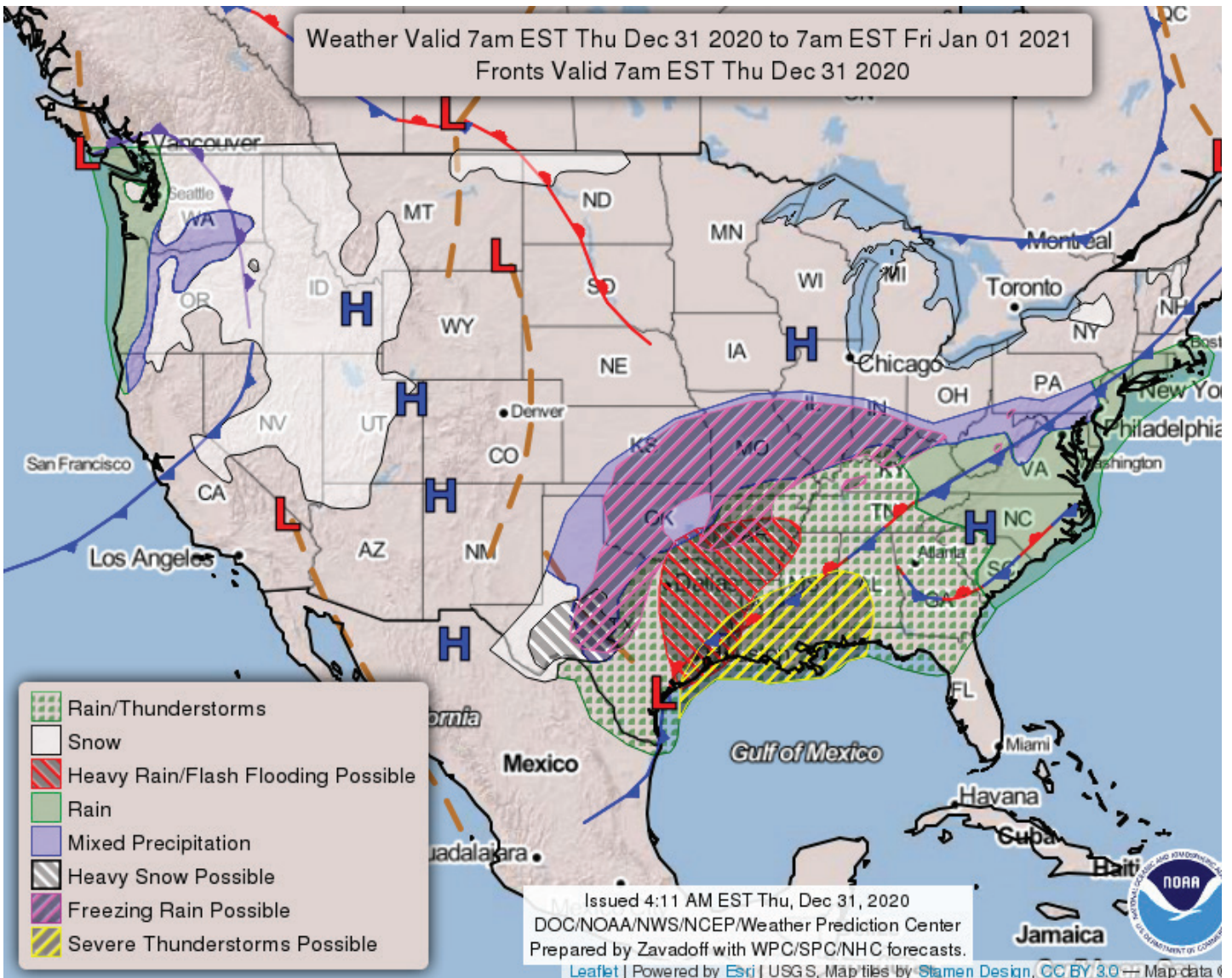
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 25.4 °F
Low Temp: 11.0 °F
Wind: 19 mph
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 47° in 1912, 1999
Record Low: -39 in 1967
Average High: 22°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.50
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 21.70
Precip Year to Date: 16.52
Sunset Tonight: 5:01 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:14 a.m.



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LOOKING FOR GOD IN 2021

" You chart the path ahead of me and tell me when to stop and rest.

"Every moment you know where I am." Psalm 139:3

"The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you." Psalm 32:8

"Because of Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for He chose us from the beginning and all things happen just as He decided years ago." Ephesians 1:11

"The Lord will work out His plans for my life – for Your faithful love, O Lord, endures forever. Don't abandon me, for You made me!" Psalm 138:8

"Seek His will in all you do and He will direct your paths." Proverbs 3:6

Prayer: Grant us wisdom, give us faith, increase our trust, and watch over us each day, Father, as we seek Your plan for our lives. May we follow You always. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scriptures For Today: - Psalm 139:3; Psalm 32:8; Ephesians 1:11; Psalm 138:8; Proverbs 3:6

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

01-02-15-16-35

(one, two, fifteen, sixteen, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$56,000

Lotto America

18-25-26-30-49, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 2

(eighteen, twenty-five, twenty-six, thirty, forty-nine; Star Ball: eight; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$2.3 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$401 million

Powerball

03-43-45-61-65, Powerball: 14, Power Play: 2

(three, forty-three, forty-five, sixty-one, sixty-five; Powerball: fourteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$363 million

Wednesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Harding County 58, Edgemont 51

Langford 67, Dupree 36

Lyman 59, Timber Lake 43

Potter County 59, Jones County 40

Tiospa Zina Tribal 75, Tri-State, N.D. 48

Big Bo Classic=

Wolsey-Wessington 37, Ipswich 36

Chadron Holiday Tournament=

Championship=

Chadron, Neb. 68, Custer 51

Corn Palace Classic=

Aberdeen Christian 63, Hanson 53

Bridgewater-Emery 69, Gregory 58

Howard 77, White River 75

Vermillion 64, Viborg-Hurley 45

Huron Holiday Classic=

Clark/Willow Lake 56, Wessington Springs 37

Faulkton 62, Ethan 48

Lower Brule 71, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 25

McIntosh 52, James Valley Christian 43

Redfield 44, Gayville-Volin 10

Sioux Falls - Pentagon Tournament=

Mitchell 62, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 46

Yankton 77, Campbell County, Wyo. 64

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

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Dupree 49, Langford 43
Harding County 55, Edgemont 49
Jones County 66, Potter County 45
Tri-State, N.D. 61, Tiospa Zina Tribal 41
Big Bo Classic=
Ipswich 55, Wolsey-Wessington 45
Chadron Holiday Tournament=
Consolation=
Custer 46, Hemingford, Neb. 41
Sanford Pentagon Classic=
Dakota Valley 67, Chamberlain 47
Hamlin 67, Tea Area 55
Hill City 61, Dell Rapids 37
Vermillion 60, Sioux Valley 25
Viborg-Hurley 45, Deubrook 40
Sioux Falls -Pentagon Tournament=
Harrisburg 67, Campbell County, Wyo. 39
Thunder Basin, Wyo. 49, Mitchell 48

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

Heavy snow expected in Texas; storm could spawn tornadoes

By KEN MILLER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A winter storm moving across southwestern Texas on Wednesday could dump more than a foot (0.30 meters) of snow before moving eastward and possibly spawning tornadoes in parts of Texas, Louisiana and Mississippi on New Year's Eve, according to weather forecasters.

Jeremy Grams, a forecaster with the National Weather Services' Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Oklahoma, said 12 to 18 inches (0.30 meters to 0.46 meters) of snow was possible west of the Pecos River in southwest Texas, with another 3 to 5 inches (0.13 meters) predicted for western Oklahoma by Thursday.

Tornadoes are possible as the cold air moving eastward with the storm collides with moisture and warmer temperatures from the Gulf of Mexico, Grams said.

"On the warm side of the system we have the chance for tornadoes from southeast Texas across most of Louisiana and at least into southern Mississippi," Grams said.

Grams said a wintry mix of precipitation and a threat of tornadoes is uncommon — but not unheard of — this time of year.

The storm produced what Grams said was a likely a brief tornado in Corsicana, Texas, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) south of Dallas shortly before noon Wednesday.

More than a dozen mobile homes were damaged in Corsicana, Navarro County officials said in a social media statement, but no injuries were reported. Two other homes were damaged by fallen trees.

The Navarro County Office of Emergency Management did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Grams said any tornadoes would likely be classified as EF2, with wind speeds of 111-135 mph (179-217 kph), or below, compared to violent tornadoes which he said are those rated EF4 and above with wind speeds of 166 mph (267 kph) and higher.

In Oklahoma, the state Department of Transportation reported wet and slushy roads on Interstate 40 in the central part of the state on Wednesday, and extending along I-44 to Tulsa. The state said salt and sand was being applied to make roadways less slick.

The city of Odessa, Texas, in the Permian Basic oil patch opened a winter weather shelter that would be available through Friday. Federal guidelines for social distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19 will be

enforced at the shelter, the city said.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Tuesday placed several state agencies on standby ahead of the storm. Meanwhile, another storm system dropped heavy snow across the Upper Midwest and led to winter storm warnings for parts of Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, South Dakota, Wisconsin and Illinois.

—
Miller reported from Oklahoma City.

Business owners frustrated at pace of coronavirus grants

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — As an initial deadline passed Wednesday for South Dakota's \$450 million grant program to help small businesses upended by the pandemic, fewer than 20% of nearly 6,000 applicants have seen any money.

The deadline has been extended by the federal government, but some business owners expressed frustration at what they described as snags in the application process and a monthslong wait for the grants.

The grant program is a cornerstone of Republican Gov. Kristi Noem's plan to spend \$1.25 billion in federal coronavirus money, sending nearly a third to small businesses, startups and nonprofits that can show they have been hurt financially by the pandemic. But from bed and breakfasts in Sioux Falls to rodeo operators in Pierre, business owners have been left waiting for word on relief as they try to adapt to the economic uncertainty and shape plans for next year.

"It's so sad. I mean, I'm drowning," said Michael Haskett, who owns a Sioux Falls cafe.

He's among the few whose applications have been processed. He received just over \$10,000 last week and was waiting to hear on his application for a second round of grants the governor opened on Dec. 11. But Haskett has not heard of anyone else in the Sioux Falls restaurant business who has received funds.

"Restaurants in the best of times, we make razor-thin margins," he said. "Right now, we're losing. We're losing hard."

Haskett began his application once the first round of grants opened in October. At that time, a surge of coronavirus infections was gaining force in South Dakota. The \$450 million program, which the Legislature endorsed, promised to give a boost to small businesses that could show a downturn from last year. The state's economy had weathered the pandemic relatively well compared with other states — something Noem has emphasized to defend her decision to forgo business closures or restrictions on bars and restaurants.

Business owners like Haskett said they have still seen big reductions in business, especially when cases surged in November. More recently, the average number of daily cases dropped by 43% over the last two weeks, according to Johns Hopkins researchers. Health officials reported a small uptick Wednesday, reporting 562 new positive cases and 18 deaths from COVID-19.

"I don't like getting a handout, but I also don't want people getting sick," Haskett said, describing how he had cut hours and seating capacity at his cafe.

The state's Bureau of Finance and Management, to implement the program, signed a \$6 million contract with Guidehouse Inc., a Virginia-based technology consultant.

Sen. Reynold Nesiba, a Democrat from Sioux Falls, said he was "deeply disappointed and frustrated" with the company after hearing about the delays and technical snags.

Guidehouse did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the program.

The Bureau of Finance and Management has reported that just 16%, or 951 out of 5,912, small businesses, startups and nonprofits that applied have received a total of about \$86 million. The state initially faced a deadline Wednesday set by Congress to allocate all the funds, but that was extended through next year when President Donald Trump signed a pandemic relief package bill on Sunday.

"I think there were a lot of nuances that were hard to anticipate when they were putting the program together in October," said Nathan Sanderson, the director of the South Dakota Retailers Association.

He said the delays were caused by holdups like explaining ownership changes or gathering the right paperwork.

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Liza Clark, commissioner of the Bureau of Finance and Management, told lawmakers in November that many businesses had not answered emails requesting to fix errors in their applications and worried that emails could have been lost in their spam folders.

But Brie Korkow, who operates a rodeo business near Pierre, said she diligently checked her email and began calling the program's helpline every few days for updates. She had to make a few corrections to her application that she felt should have been easy to catch by a better-designed process.

Other business owners, such as Karen Johnson who operates a bed and breakfast in Sioux Falls, said they were asked to correct errors that they had not made.

Korkow was grateful for the prospect of help and said she was "proud" of how South Dakota had approached the pandemic. But she felt frustrated trying to plan for the uncertain economic prospects of next year, while still trying to repay government loans she received in the spring.

"You don't want to have to get so desperate that you're going to have to go sell some good bucking horses or good bucking bulls to make ends meet," she said.

Rep. Chris Karr, a Sioux Falls Republican, said Guidehouse has increased its staff on the project. He said using a contractor was the best way to implement a large program in a matter of months.

Still, he said that as a business owner himself, he understood the frustration.

"Every dollar counts and every day counts," he said.

Fire that began in dog house totals rural South Dakota home

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — Authorities say a house fire believed to have started when a dog house heater failed during a snowstorm was thought to be under control Monday night, only to flare up early Tuesday and destroy a rural South Dakota home.

The Yankton Fire Department said the electrical fire that began in the dog house about 7 p.m. Monday engulfed a shed, spread to the side of the house and settled into the attic. The fire also burned through a propane line attached to a 125-gallon tank.

Firefighters were at the home for 2 1/2 hours Monday night and thought they had put out the blaze, which displaced four people and the dog, Deputy Chief and Fire Marshall Larry Nickles told the Yankton Press & Dakotan.

When Nickles left the scene, two rooms had sustained water damage and light smoke damage was reported elsewhere, but the house was in good enough condition that heat was still on, he said. Firefighters cut holes in the house's metal roof, but may not have located all of the burning material, leading to Tuesday's rekindling, the deputy chief said.

The house had only an insulated truss space between the cathedral ceilings and the roof, which Nickles said was a factor in the flare-up. Firefighters were called back to the scene around 5:15 a.m. Tuesday when flames were shooting from the roof. By that time, the storm had made the roof too slick to walk on.

"Our guesstimate now is that the house was totaled," Nickles said. "The dog's not happy he lost his house, but there were no injuries."

Man sentenced to time served for theft from tribal college

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A Pine Ridge man has been sentenced to time served and ordered to pay restitution after pleading guilty to stealing from the Oglala Lakota College.

The Rapid City Journal reports 33-year-old John Jay Hussman III was sentenced earlier this fall at the federal court in Rapid City after pleading guilty to embezzling from a Native American tribal organization.

It's unclear how many days in jail Hussman served for a crime punishable by up to five years in prison.

As part of his plea deal, prosecutors dropped a charge of larceny for allegedly stealing more than \$3,000 from a Pizza Hut in 2017.

Hussman got a \$2,004 check from the college written to Oglala Sioux Tribe Financial Services in December 2018.

Authorities say he endorsed the check in his own name and deposited it in his personal checking account.

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Authorities say he paid the money back to the college before sentencing but was ordered to pay \$3,086 in restitution to Pizza Hut even though he wasn't convicted of stealing from them.

This story has been corrected to change "sentence" to "sentenced" in headline

Man sentenced to 10 years in prison for child sex abuse

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — An Elkton man has been sentenced to 10 years in prison for sexual contact with a child.

The Argus Leader reports Jose Alfredo Salinas-Gamez, 40, pleaded no contest in September to sexual contact with a child under the age of 16.

According to court documents, Gamez engaged in sexual contact with a 12-year-old victim between July 2011 to July 2012. Gamez will get credit for the 309 days already served from the time of his sentencing on Dec. 22, according to court documents.

Along with the 10-year sentence in a state penitentiary, Gamez will pay court fines of \$500 and \$1,800 for a psychosexual assessment and must comply with all sex offender requirements.

2020 finally ending, but New Year's revelries muted by virus

By ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — This New Year's Eve is being celebrated like no other, with pandemic restrictions limiting crowds and many people bidding farewell to a year they'd prefer to forget.

Australia will be among the first nations to ring in 2021 because of its proximity to the International Date Line. It is a grim end to the year for New South Wales and Victoria, the country's two most populous states, which are battling to curb new COVID-19 outbreaks.

In past years 1 million people crowded Sydney's harbor to watch fireworks that center on the Sydney Harbor Bridge, but most will be watching on television as authorities urge residents to stay home.

Locations on the harbor are fenced off, popular parks closed and famous night spots eerily deserted. A 9 p.m. fireworks display was scrapped but there will be a seven-minute pyrotechnics show at midnight.

People are only allowed in downtown Sydney if they have a restaurant reservation or are one of five guests of an inner-city resident. People won't be allowed in the city center without a permit.

Some harborside restaurants were charging up to 1,690 Australian dollars (\$1,294) for a seat, Sydney's The Daily Telegraph newspaper reported Wednesday.

Sydney is Australia's most populous city and has had its most active local transmission of the coronavirus in recent weeks.

Melbourne, Australia's second most populous city, has canceled its fireworks this year. "For the first time in many, many years we made the big decision, difficult decision to cancel the fireworks," Mayor Sally Capp said.

"We did that because we know that it attracts up to 450,000 people into the city for one moment at midnight to enjoy a spectacular display and music. We are not doing that this year."

In notable contrast, the west coast city of Perth — which has not had community spread of the virus since April -- was gearing up to celebrate the new year almost normally with large crowds expected to watch two fireworks spectacles.

New Zealand, which is two hours ahead of Sydney, and several of its South Pacific island neighbors have no COVID-19 cases, and New Year celebrations there are the same as ever.

In Chinese societies, the Lunar New Year celebration that falls in February in 2021 generally takes precedence over the solar New Year, on Jan. 1. While celebrations of the Western holiday have been growing more common in recent decades, this year will be more muted.

Beijing is holding a countdown ceremony with just a few invited guests, while other planned events have been canceled. And nighttime temperatures plunging to -15 Celsius (-5 Fahrenheit) will likely discourage

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people from spending the night out with friends.

Taiwan is hosting its usual New Year's celebration, a fireworks display by its capital city's iconic tower, Taipei 101, as well as a flag-raising ceremony in front of the Presidential Office Building on New Year's morning. The flag raising will be limited to government officials and invited guests after a traveler who recently arrived in Taiwan was found to be infected with the new variant of the coronavirus.

The island has been a success story in the pandemic, registering only seven deaths and 700 confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Hong Kong, with its British colonial history and large expatriate population, has usually seen raucous celebrations along the waterfront and in bar districts. For the second year running, however, New Year's Eve fireworks have been canceled, this time over coronavirus rather than public security concerns.

Hong Kong social distancing regulations restrict gatherings to only two people. Restaurants have to close by 6 p.m. Live performances and dancing are not allowed. But crowds still throng shopping centers.

Much of Japan was welcoming 2021 quietly at home, alarmed after Tokyo reported a record number of daily coronavirus cases at about 1,300. It was the first time that daily cases in the capital have topped 1,000.

Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike asked people to skip countdown ceremonies and expressed concern about crowds of shoppers.

"The coronavirus knows no yearend or New Year's holidays," she told reporters.

Many people skipped what's customarily a chance to return to ancestral homes for the holidays, hoping to lessen health risks for extended families.

Rural restaurants saw business drop, while home deliveries of traditional New Year's "good luck" food called "osechi" boomed.

Emperor Naruhito is delivering a video message for the new year, instead of waving from a balcony with the imperial family as cheering crowds throng outside the palace.

Train services that usually carry people on shrine visits overnight, as well as some countdown ceremonies, were canceled.

Meiji Shrine in downtown Tokyo, which normally attracts millions of people during New Year holidays and is usually open all night on New Year's Eve, closed at 4 p.m. this year.

In South Korea, Seoul's city government canceled its annual New Year's Eve bell-ringing ceremony in the Jongno neighborhood for the first time since the event was first held in 1953, months after the end of the Korean War.

The ceremony, in which citizens ring a large bell in a traditional pavilion when the clock strikes midnight, normally draws an estimated 100,000 people and is broadcast live.

Authorities in eastern coastal areas closed beaches and other spots where hundreds of thousands of people typically gather on New Year's Day to watch the sunrise. The southeastern city of Pohang instead planned to broadcast live the sunrise at several beaches on its YouTube channel.

South Korea's central government banned private social gatherings of more than five people and shut down ski resorts and major tourist spots nationwide from Christmas Eve until Jan. 3 to help bring a recent viral resurgence under control.

Millions of Indians planned to usher in the new year with subdued celebrations at home because of night curfews, a ban on beach parties and restrictions on movement in major cities and towns after the new, more contagious variant of the coronavirus reached the country.

In New Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai, hotels and bars were ordered to shut at 11 p.m. The three cities have been the worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

Drones were keeping watch on people's movements in Mumbai, India's financial and entertainment capital. Large gatherings were banned, but there were no restrictions on visiting friends, relatives and public places in groups of not more than four people, police said. Face masks and social distancing were mandatory, they said.

Many revelers flocked to Goa, a former Portuguese colony and popular backpacking destination with numerous beach resorts. Authorities decided against imposing a curfew with coronavirus infections largely controlled there.

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In Sri Lanka, public gatherings have been banned due to a resurgence of COVID-19, and health and law enforcement authorities urged people to limit celebrations to close family members. Health officials have warned of legal action against hotels and restaurants that hold parties.

Officials have also closed schools and restricted public transport in response to the renewed outbreak.

China OKs 1st homegrown vaccine as COVID surges globally

By HUIZHONG WU and KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — China has approved its first homegrown COVID-19 vaccine for general use, health regulators said Thursday, marking the addition of another vaccine in the global fight against a virus that is surging back in many places as winter sets in.

The two-dose vaccine from state-owned Sinopharm is the first approved for general use in China. The go-ahead comes shortly after the country launched a program to vaccinate 50 million people before the Lunar New Year holiday in February. It also comes one day after British regulators authorized AstraZeneca's inexpensive and easy-to-handle vaccine.

The back-to-back approvals could bring poorer countries, many of which have been unable to secure the Pfizer and Moderna doses being snapped up by rich countries, one step closer to getting vaccines sooner. Pakistan's science minister said Thursday that his government will buy 1.2 million doses of a Sinopharm vaccine, two days after its death toll topped 10,000.

Technically, China granted conditional approval for the vaccine, which means that research is still ongoing, and the company will be required to submit follow-up data as well as reports of any adverse effects after the vaccine is sold on the market, Chen Shifei, the deputy commissioner of the National Medical Products Administration, told a news conference.

The vaccine was developed by the Beijing Institute of Biological Products, a subsidiary of state-owned conglomerate Sinopharm. The company announced Wednesday that preliminary data from last-stage trials had shown it to be 79.3% effective.

It is an inactivated vaccine, which means the virus was grown in a lab and then killed. The germ is then injected into the body to generate an immune response.

Final proof of its effectiveness will depend on publication of more data. Experts have said important data was missing from Wednesday's announcement, such as the size of the control group, how many people were vaccinated and at what point the 79.3% efficacy rate was reached after injection.

Sinopharm is one of at least five Chinese developers that are in a global race to create vaccines for the disease that has killed more than 1.8 million people.

In addition to the emergency vaccinations already underway, China plans to start vaccinating high-risk population, such as seniors as well as people with existing chronic illnesses. Officials did not say what percentage of the population they will vaccinate in China.

"This is different in every country but the general thinking is that it has to reach 60% to protect the entire population," said Zeng Yixin, vice minister of the National Health Commission.

Under emergency use, 4.5 million doses have already been given, including 3 million in the past two weeks, Zeng said.

Practically, the conditional approval means that the drug or product in question may be restricted for certain age groups, according to Tao Lina, a former Shanghai Center for Disease Control immunologist.

Officials declined to name a particular price and gave conflicting statements about it. "It will certainly be in the limit of what people can afford," said Zheng Zhongwei, another National Health Commission official.

A minute later, Zeng, the NHC official, stepped in to say that the vaccines "will definitely be free for the public."

The vaccine is already under mass production, though officials did not answer questions about current production capacity.

China's vaccine, like Russia's Sputnik shot, could be easier for countries around the world to handle than the Pfizer or Moderna shots, which have stricter cold chain requirements. Sinopharm's vaccine is able to

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be stored at 2 to 8 degrees Celsius (36 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit), or a normal refrigeration temperature.

Belarus and Argentina both launched mass vaccinations Wednesday using Russia's vaccine. Sinopharm's vaccine has already been approved in the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, and is slated for use next in Morocco.

Other countries have also been buying doses of another Chinese vaccine candidate, made by Sinovac Biotech. Turkey received the shipments this week of 3 million doses. Indonesia and Brazil have all purchased Sinovac's vaccines.

China is eager to distribute its vaccines globally, driven by a desire to repair the damage to its image by the pandemic that started a year ago in the central city of Wuhan.

President Xi Jinping has vowed to donate the vaccine as a public good to the world and China has joined COVAX, a global plan for equal distribution and access.

"We eagerly await Chinese vaccines to be included in COVAX's vaccine bank soon and get WHO prequalification soon as well," said Shen Bo, a Foreign Ministry official.

The vaccine standards were developed in "close cooperation" with the WHO, officials said.

Meeting the WHO qualification could go some way toward assuring the rest of the world about the quality and efficacy of Chinese vaccines, which already face a reputation problem back home. It would also open the path for Chinese vaccines to be distributed in COVAX and potentially in countries that don't have their own regulatory agencies.

"This is very exciting that there is another vaccine and one that can be distributed in locations that don't have the cold chain," said Ashley St. John, an immunologist at the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore. "But at the same time we have to temper the excitement. We have to understand the long term efficacy, effect on transmission and effect on severe disease."

Wu reported from Taipei, Taiwan.

The name of China's drug regulator has been corrected to the National Medical Products Administration, not the Medical Production Administration.

Brexit's choice for EU, UK: firm friends or nearby rivals

By RAF CASERT and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The New Year could finally bring a fresh start and a commitment to let bygones be bygones for Britain and the European Union.

But don't bet on it.

The U.K. has chosen to leave the EU, setting a course away from the continental mainland. But the two sides' histories have been too intertwined for 1,000 years for the split to be simple.

Eleven months after Britain's formal departure from the EU, Brexit becomes a fact of daily life on Friday, once a transition period ends and the U.K. fully leaves the world's most powerful trading bloc.

But customs controls, red tape and the residue of bile caused by years of acrimonious divorce talks may provide the sting — not the thrill — of the new. And despite the 4½-year extraction process, loose ends will surface for months, even years, to come.

"For one reason or another, the U.K. is likely to be in non-stop negotiations with the EU for decade after decade," said Charles Grant of the Center for European Reform think-tank.

Brexit marks the end of an awkward relationship. Britain joined the then-European Economic Community in 1973, but never fully embraced the bloc's project of ever-closer integration. The EU was born out of the ashes of World War II and its delusional, destructive nationalism.

As a nation victorious in two world wars and with lingering memories of its imperial past, Britain viewed the pan-European project much differently than, for example, Germany.

Still, actually leaving the bloc was long a fringe idea before it gradually gained strength within Britain's Conservative Party. In a 2016 referendum, voters — striking a blow against the status quo — opted by a

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narrow 52% to 48% to leave.

That political shock is still reverberating. It took 3½ years for the split to happen last Jan. 31 and another 11 months of fractious wrangling to agree on a trade deal.

Sealed on Christmas Eve, it satisfies major demands on both sides. It protects the EU market by making tariff-free trade conditional on Britain continuing to meet high social, workplace and environmental standards. It allows Britain to claim it regained "sovereignty" because it is no longer part of EU structures like the European Court of Justice.

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson called it "a new starting point for our relationship between sovereign equals."

The EU begs to differ. It considers itself the superior partner, a bloc of 450 million consumers, carried by economic juggernauts like Germany and France, while Britain is a nation of 67 million. It believes the brunt of Brexit's pain will be borne by the U.K.

"We are one of the giants," said European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. "From a position of strength you can achieve a lot."

For British Brexiteers, the blow from erecting new trade barriers is compensated by visions of regained freedom and — a crucial word — "sovereignty."

So far, Johnson has given only glimpses of what he plans to do with that sovereignty: forge trade deals around the world, be more competitive through "smarter and better regulation," expand the high-tech sector.

From a member of the EU, Britain will become its economic rival.

The EU is wary of Britain's potential to seek an edge by slashing standards and becoming a low-tax "Singapore on Thames" on its doorstep. That's why the Brexit deal contains "level playing field" restrictions on how far the U.K. can diverge without punishment.

Britain may soon bristle against those restraints. Further tensions, spats and negotiations loom in the future. And the agreement is to be reviewed every five years, reviving a debate that many had hoped would fade.

"If you thought this was going to be a one-hit wonder ... then you will be disappointed," said Catherine Barnard, professor of EU law at Cambridge University.

Trust is already in short supply, and recent events gave a taste of what can happen.

Much U.K.-EU goods trade goes across the English Channel, and when France decided to stop all crossings on Dec. 20 in response to a fast-spreading new COVID-19 variant identified in England, it created traffic chaos that took days to unsnarl, even after Paris lifted the blockade.

Britain's tabloid press perceived French ill-intent, accusing Paris of trying to force Britain into a Brexit trade deal. French President Emmanuel Macron became "Monsieur Roadblock" giving Britain, in keeping with the Christmas theme, a "kick in the baubles."

France denied the border closure was related to Brexit. But Macron's office issued a statement this week saying that "France will be very vigilant from Day 1" in case Britain "disregards its commitments" under the agreement.

While Johnson sets Britain out on a solo course, most EU leaders see cooperation as ever more vital, especially with a pandemic ravaging the world and the United States and China ready to squeeze European nations out of the diplomatic game.

"We should cut through the soundbites and ask ourselves what sovereignty actually means," said von der Leyen. "It is about pooling our strength and speaking together in a world full of great powers. And in a time of crisis, it is about pulling each other up instead of trying to get back to your feet alone."

Brexit has already destabilized the U.K. itself. It has boosted support for independence in Scotland, which voted strongly to remain in the EU in 2016. Northern Ireland, which shares a border with EU member Ireland, remains economically closer to the bloc than the rest of the U.K. under the departure terms, a status that could push it away from Britain.

EU chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier, a European Unionist and Frenchman to the core, sees tough

times ahead for Britain.

Barnier said that "when you see today's world, a dangerous, unstable and unjust world, I definitely think that it is better to be together, with our neighbors in a union, a single market, than everyone being in their own corner, with their own interests."

Lawless reported from London.

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

Increased testing needed as Africa sees rise in virus cases

By CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal (AP) — As a result of holiday gatherings, African officials warn of a resurgence of COVID-19 on the continent and urge increased testing to combat it.

The level of testing across the continent is considerably less than what health experts say is needed to effectively control the spread of the disease.

Africa makes up about 3.3% of the global total of confirmed virus cases, but this is believed to be just a fraction of the actual cases on the continent of 1.3 billion people.

When the pandemic began only two of Africa's 54 countries had laboratories to test for the disease. Now virtually every one of the continent's countries can carry out the tests. Together Africa's countries have conducted at least 25 million COVID-19 tests, with a recent increase of 3%, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Compared to the small amount of testing at the beginning of the pandemic, Africa CDC Director John Nkengasong has said the increased testing is "good progress and we continue to be hopeful of this."

The distribution of the tests, however, is very uneven. Just 10 countries — South Africa, Morocco, Ethiopia, Egypt, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Uganda, Rwanda and Cameroon — are carrying out more than 70% of the continent's testing. To make the testing more widespread, 2.7 million additional tests have been procured by member states, the Africa CDC said some weeks ago.

Increased testing is needed to help Africa locate where cases are rising and where additional medical responses are needed. And, when they become available to Africa, where vaccines should go.

Africa's rural areas have even less testing than its cities, where most hospitals and clinics are located. More testing is needed in rural areas, said Nkengasong, especially as urban Africans travel to remote areas to unite with their families as the New Year approaches.

Rapid antigen tests would dramatically boost the ability to test in Africa's remote, rural areas, according to the Africa CDC and WHO.

The rapid tests look for antigens, or proteins found on the surface of the virus. They are generally considered less accurate — though much faster — than PCR tests, which are higher-grade genetic tests. PCR tests require processing with specialty lab equipment and chemicals and it can take several days before patients get the results.

In contrast, the rapid antigen tests can provide results at the testing site in less than 30 minutes.

The World Health Organization and its partners announced in September that 120 million of the rapid tests would be made available to help Africa's poor and middle-income countries test at levels closer to those of richer countries, which are deemed necessary to effectively fight the spread of COVID-19.

"Once we begin to use the antigen test more broadly, it will become a game-changer aspect of the way we do testing for the across the continent, especially in the remote areas and especially during this holiday period," said Nkengasong.

Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's regional director for Africa, has said that many cases remain unrecorded in Africa, because of the lack of testing, which has focused on travelers, patients and direct contacts. Few African countries have been able to do adequate community testing to find where the disease is concentrated and at what level.

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Laboratory capacity for testing in African nations is lower than in most countries, according to WHO, calling testing volumes sub-optimal due to limited supplies of PCR test kits, which can be expensive.

"The global demand has put a strain on the supplies, with delays and some of the countries have inadequate infrastructure for setting up labs with molecular testing capacity for PCR diagnosis of COVID-19," according to the WHO.

Prof. Pontiano Kaleebu, who heads an agency in charge of testing for the coronavirus in Uganda, said in many African countries people cannot afford the tests.

Testing fees in Uganda range from \$65 to \$100, and the service is not available in many remote areas.

"Sometimes people keep saying, 'Where do I go? What do I do?'" he said, referring to patients who need to take a COVID-19 test but lack the money or don't know of a nearby testing facility.

According to Ugandan government guidelines, hospitals are ordered to isolate patients who show COVID-19 symptoms on admission, but others on routine visits to health facilities aren't necessarily tested and must pay out of pocket if they wish to be tested.

Officials standing guard at hospital entrances conduct temperature checks and desultorily take notes, but some visitors can pass through undetected when the guards are tired or have gone for a lunch break.

Uganda, which has tested over 736,000 samples for COVID-19, has reported nearly 34,000 cases and 248 deaths as of Dec. 30.

"If we had all the resources, we would test more," Kaleebu said.

The World Health Organization recommends that countries should not be finding more than about 5% of all cases they test to be positive, suggesting that above that threshold they aren't testing widely enough.

In Africa, the positivity ranges from 2.3% to more than 40%, according to Our World in Data, which compiles data from Johns Hopkins University. In Europe, however, the range is similar, from 5% to more than 30% in some countries.

However, when looking at the tests carried out per 1,000 people, African countries are on the low end ranging from 0 to the highest in Morocco at 119 tests per 1,000 people, according to the data.

In efforts to track the level of infections in communities, countries such as South Africa and Ghana are testing for the prevalence of COVID-19 in sewage water.

In South Africa, which has conducted more than 5.6 million tests, the Water Research Commission at wastewater treatment plants found COVID-19 fragments in sewage, mainly human feces, which corresponded with official numbers on the prevalence of the virus, especially in hotspot areas.

Water samples are drawn from water treatment facilities serving residential and commercial areas, but the research has been widened to include non-sewered areas in South Africa's poor and overcrowded informal settlements.

"In South Africa, the number of COVID-19 patients are most likely underestimated, mainly due to the limitations regarding testing and also due to the likely large number of asymptomatic individuals," said Jay Bhagwan, executive manager for water use and waste management of the Water Research Commission.

"If we can rapidly expand the wastewater surveillance program in South Africa, the sector will have a tool that provides valuable additional information about the spread of the virus as a complement to health surveillance."

AP writers Rodney Muhumuza in Kampala, Uganda; Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg; and Francis Kokutse in Accra, Ghana contributed.

In new playground Dubai, Israelis find parties, Jewish rites

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — It was a scene that just a few months ago would have been unthinkable. As Emiratis in flowing white robes and headdresses looked on, the Israeli bride and groom were hoisted on the shoulders of skullcap-wearing groomsmen and carried toward the dance floor, where dozens joined the throng swaying and singing in Hebrew.

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Noemie Azerad and Simon David Benhamou didn't just throw a somewhat normal wedding bash in the middle of a pandemic that has shut down their country and ravaged the world. They were reveling in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates, which—like most of the Arab world—had been off-limits to Israeli passport holders for decades.

The pair was among tens of thousands of Israelis who had flocked to the UAE in December after the two countries normalized ties in a breakthrough U.S.-brokered deal.

Israel's latest virus-induced lockdown, which began earlier this week, temporarily cooled the travel fever. But Israelis with dashed vacation plans, now stuck at home, hope that vaccination campaigns will help contain the outbreak and make Dubai trips possible again soon.

The lure of Dubai, the UAE's skyscraper-studded commercial hub with sandy beaches and marbled malls, has already proven powerful. Scores of Israeli tourists, seeking revelry and relief from monthslong virus restrictions and undeterred by their government's warnings about possible Iranian attacks in the region, have celebrated weddings, bar mitzvahs and the eight-day Jewish festival of Hanukkah with large gatherings banned back home.

"I expected to feel really uncomfortable here," said 25-year-old Azerad, the Israeli bride, from the hotel ballroom, bathed in the glow of Dubai's glittering skyline. But all of her preferred wedding destinations announced tough restrictions on gatherings to check the spread of the virus. Dubai caps parties at 200.

Unwilling to delay the wedding, the choice was obvious.

"I feel like it's Tel Aviv," Azerad said of Dubai. "I hear Hebrew everywhere."

Her French father, Igal Azerad, said he always hides his skullcap in his pocket for fear of assault on the streets of Paris. But in Dubai the sight of his kippah prompts "Emiratists to come up and tell me 'Shalom,'" he said.

The dizzying pace of normalization has stunned even the skeptics. Despite the countries' long-secret ties, the UAE had considered Israel a political pariah over the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The modest expat Jewish community in the federation of seven sheikhdoms kept a low profile and prayed in an unmarked villa.

But the arrival of 70,000 Israeli tourists, according to travel agents' estimates, on 15 nonstop daily flights in December changed everything. A 12-foot (3.5-meter) Hanukkah candelabra appeared under the Burj Khalifa, the world's tallest tower, where Jews gathered to light the candles and take selfies as festive Hebrew songs blared across the massive fountain downtown.

The Jewish community's furtive Friday night Shabbat meal has transformed into celebrations at two cavernous banquet halls with spillover seating for Israeli visitors. "Made in Israel" signs have popped up in Dubai's chain grocery and liquor stores, which now sell wine from the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights. Wine, honey and tahini from Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank will hit the shelves in the coming weeks and be labeled products of Israel, according to a Dubai-based commodities company.

On social media, a trip to the UAE has become a status symbol for Israelis who display photos of themselves in Dubai. A dozen hotels across the city say they've booked thousands of Israeli travelers and hosted a range of Israeli business conferences, holiday parties and days-long weddings. Israeli singers have planned concerts for spring. Kosher catering companies from the United Kingdom and elsewhere have set up shop in the UAE. Plans are underway to break ground on the country's first Jewish cemetery and ritual bath known as a mikvah, according to Rabbi Mendel Duchman, who helps run the country's Jewish Community Center.

"It was unbelievable, it was a tsunami," said Mark Feldman, head of Jerusalem-based Ziontours, noting the contrast to Israel's "cold peace" with Egypt and Jordan. "Dubai became an oasis for Israelis in the middle of the pandemic."

For weeks in December, the only other countries where Israelis could land without a 14-day home quarantine upon return were Rwanda and the Seychelles. Dubai has remained open for business and tourism, with few restrictions beyond social-distancing indoors and masks outside. Guests at weddings and other gatherings often do not wear masks.

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Even as Israelis gush about the warm embrace of their hosts, very little has been heard about the UAE's 180-degree shift from its 1 million citizens, who are granted free housing, education and health care and tend to seclude themselves from their country's vast expatriate population. The sheikhdom's hereditary rulers suppress dissent. Even dramatic political decisions are met with acquiescence.

Ahmed al-Mansoori, an Emirati museum director who has welcomed dozens of Israeli visitors to his collection of ancient maps and manuscripts, including a fourth-century Torah scroll, acknowledged "some cultural misunderstandings among populations that haven't really dealt with each other before."

"Each Emirati has their own psychology about this," he said when asked about the policy reversal that Palestinians view as a betrayal of their quest for a state on lands occupied by Israel.

But he noted that Dubai, a city powered by millions of workers from Africa, Asia and the Middle East, easily absorbs waves of expats, including from countries locked in bitter struggles with each other.

Despite initial worries about Iranian threats and diplomatic fallout from misbehaving tourists, travel agents say there have been only minor hiccups. A few Israeli tourists got stuck in sand dunes while racing on quad bikes, prompting an elaborate rescue mission by a government helicopter, said Yaniv Stainberg, owner of Privilege Tourism. Some were arrested for snapping photos at a mosque, he added. Others were scolded for kissing in public, an offense punishable under the UAE's Islamic legal system with prison time.

But as the virus surged in Israel and photos of raucous unmasked parties in Dubai splashed across social media, Israel's health and foreign ministries were reportedly sparring over whether to classify the UAE as a high-infection zone, which would require quarantine upon arrival in Israel and perhaps mar the countries' new courtship.

Within days, the point was moot. Israel entered its third lockdown on Sunday. By then, the newlyweds, Azerad and Benhamou, had returned home.

"COVID has really hindered us, it's unfortunate for all the new friends in the region who we want to meet," said Eliav Benjamin, an Israeli Foreign Ministry official, referring to Israel's other recent normalization agreements with Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco. "Vaccines, however, will be a game-changer."

Trump push on \$2K checks flops as GOP-led Senate won't vote

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell all but shut the door on President Donald Trump's push for \$2,000 COVID-19 relief checks, declaring Congress has provided enough pandemic aid as he blocked another attempt by Democrats to force a vote.

The GOP leader made clear Wednesday he is unwilling to budge, despite political pressure from Trump and even some fellow Republican senators demanding action. Trump wants the recent \$600 in aid increased threefold. But McConnell dismissed the idea of bigger "survival checks" approved by the House, saying the money would go to plenty of American households that just don't need it.

McConnell's refusal to act means the additional relief Trump wanted is all but dead.

"We just approved almost a trillion dollars in aid a few days ago," McConnell said, referring to the year-end package Trump signed into law.

McConnell added, "if specific, struggling households still need more help," the Senate will consider "smart targeted aid. Not another firehose of borrowed money."

The showdown between the outgoing president and his own Republican Party over the \$2,000 checks has thrown Congress into a chaotic year-end session just days before new lawmakers are set to be sworn into office.

It's one last standoff, together with the override of Trump's veto of a sweeping defense bill, that will punctuate the president's final days and deepen the GOP's divide between its new wing of Trump-styled populists and what had been mainstay conservative views against government spending.

Trump has been berating the GOP leaders, and tweeted, "\$2000 ASAP!"

President-elect Joe Biden also supports the payments and wants to build on what he calls a "downpayment" on relief.

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"In this moment of historic crisis and untold economic pain for countless American families, the President-elect supports \$2,000 direct payments as passed by the House," said Biden transition spokesman Andrew Bates.

The roadblock set by Senate Republicans appears insurmountable. Most GOP senators seemed to accept the inaction even as a growing number of Republicans, including two senators in runoff elections on Jan. 5 in Georgia, agree with Trump's demand, some wary of bucking him.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the \$600 checks would begin to go out Wednesday. Congress had settled on smaller payments in a compromise over the big, year-end COVID-19 relief and government funding bill that Trump reluctantly signed into law. Before signing, though, Trump demanded more.

For a second day in a row, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer tried to force a vote on the bill approved by the House meeting Trump's demand for the \$2,000 checks.

"What we're seeing right now is Leader McConnell trying to kill the checks — the \$2,000 checks desperately needed by so many American families," Schumer said.

With the Georgia Senate runoff elections days away, leading Republicans warned that the GOP's refusal to provide more aid as the virus worsens could jeopardize the outcome of those races.

Georgia's GOP Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler are trying to fend off Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in runoff elections that will determine which party has the Senate majority. The two Republicans announced support for Trump's call for more generous checks.

"The Senate Republicans risk throwing away two seats and control of the Senate," Newt Gingrich, the former congressional leader, said on Fox News.

McConnell has tried to shield his divided Republicans from a difficult vote. On Wednesday he suggested he had kept his word to start a "process" to address Trump's demands, even if it means no votes will actually be taken.

"It's no secret Republicans have a diversity of views," he said.

Earlier, McConnell had unveiled a new bill loaded up with Trump's other priorities as a possible off-ramp for the stalemate. It included the \$2,000 checks more narrowly targeted to lower-income households as well as a complicated repeal of protections for tech companies like Facebook or Twitter under Section 230 of a communications law that the president complained is unfair to conservatives. It also tacked on the establishment of a bipartisan commission to review the 2020 presidential election Trump lost to President-elect Joe Biden.

If McConnell sets a vote on his bill, it could revive Trump's priorities. But because the approach contains the additional tech and elections provisions, Democrats and some Republicans will likely balk and it's unlikely to have enough support in Congress to pass.

No additional votes on COVID-19 aid have been scheduled at this point. For McConnell, the procedural moves allowed him to check the box over the commitments he made when Trump was defiantly refusing to sign off on the big year-end package last weekend. "That was a commitment, and that's what happened," he said.

Liberal senators, led by Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who support the relief boost are blocking action on a defense bill until a vote can be taken on Trump's demand for \$2,000 for most Americans.

Sanders thundered on the floor that McConnell should call his own constituents in the GOP leader's home state of Kentucky "and find out how they feel about the need for immediate help in terms of a \$2,000 check."

Republican Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri and Marco Rubio of Florida, among the party's potential 2024 presidential hopefuls, also pushed in the president's direction. Hawley is also leading Trump's challenge Jan. 6 to the Electoral College result tally in Congress.

Other Republicans panned the bigger checks, arguing during a lively Senate debate that the nearly \$400 billion price tag was too high, the relief is not targeted to those in need and Washington has already dispatched ample sums on COVID-19 aid.

Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., tweeted that "blindly borrowing" billions "so we can send \$2,000 checks to millions of people who haven't lost any income is terrible policy."

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Considered a longshot, Trump's demand gained momentum at the start of the week when dozens of House Republicans calculated it was better to link with most Democrats than defy the outgoing president. They helped pass a bill raising the payments with a robust two-thirds vote of approval.

As Trump's push fizzles out, his attempt to amend the year-end package — \$900 billion in COVID-19 aid and \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September — will linger as potentially one last confrontation before the new Congress is sworn in Sunday.

The COVID-19 portion of the bill revives a weekly pandemic jobless benefit boost — this time \$300, through March 14 — as well as the popular Paycheck Protection Program of grants to businesses to keep workers on payrolls. It extends eviction protections, adding a new rental assistance fund.

Americans earning up to \$75,000 will qualify for the direct \$600 payments, which are phased out at higher income levels, and there's an additional \$600 payment per dependent child.

Associated Press writer Ashraf Khalil in Washington contributed to this report.

Missouri senator to contest Biden's Electoral College win

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said he will raise objections next week when Congress meets to affirm President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the election, forcing House and Senate votes that are likely to delay — but in no way alter — the final certification of Biden's win.

President Donald Trump has, without evidence, claimed there was widespread fraud in the election. He has pushed Republican senators to pursue his unfounded charges even though the Electoral College this month cemented Biden's 306-232 victory and multiple legal efforts to challenge the results have failed.

A group of Republicans in the Democratic-majority House have already said they will object on Trump's behalf during the Jan. 6 count of electoral votes, and they had needed just a single senator to go along with them to force votes in both chambers.

Without giving specifics or evidence, Hawley said Wednesday he would object because "some states, including notably Pennsylvania," did not follow their own election laws. Lawsuits challenging Biden's victory in Pennsylvania have been unsuccessful.

"At the very least, Congress should investigate allegations of voter fraud and adopt measures to secure the integrity of our elections," Hawley said in a statement. He also criticized the way Facebook and Twitter handled content related to the election, characterizing it as an effort to help Biden.

Biden transition spokeswoman Jen Psaki dismissed Hawley's move as "antics" that will have no bearing on Biden being sworn in on Jan. 20.

"The American people spoke resoundingly in this election and 81 million people have voted for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris," Psaki said in a call with reporters. She added: "Congress will certify the results of the election as they do every four years."

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows praised Hawley on Twitter for "unapologetically standing up for election integrity."

Trump was cutting short his Florida holiday vacation and returning to Washington on Thursday, one day earlier than expected, for reasons the White House didn't explain.

When Congress convenes to certify the Electoral College results, any lawmaker can object to a state's votes on any grounds. But the objection is not taken up unless it is in writing and signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

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

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

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time such a vote had occurred.

As president of the Senate, Vice President Mike Pence will preside over the Jan. 6 session and declare the winner.

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In addition to having to go on the record with a vote, Republicans are worried about negative effects on the two Senate runoff elections in Georgia on Tuesday. GOP Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler face Democratic challengers Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in a state that flipped in November for Biden.

Associated Press writer Aamer Madhani in Chicago contributed to this report.

Hammon first woman to coach NBA team; Lakers beat Spurs

RAUL DOMINGUEZ Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Becky Hammon would have preferred a victory over history after becoming the first woman to coach an NBA team.

The assistant coach took over the San Antonio Spurs in the second quarter after coach Gregg Popovich was ejected in a 121-107 loss to LeBron James and the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday night.

"I try not to think of the huge picture and huge aspect of it because it can be overwhelming," Hammon said. "I really have had no time to reflect. I have not had time to look at my phone. So, I don't know what's going on outside the AT&T Center."

Hammon and the Spurs already had a lot to contend with against the defending league champion Lakers.

James celebrated his 36th birthday with 26 points, eight assists and five rebounds in the Lakers' third double-digit victory. The teams will complete the two-game set Friday night.

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"(I was) trying to get the guys in the right spots," Hammon said. "Trying to get them motivated. Obviously, it's a learning situation for all of us, but I would have loved to have walked out there with a win with the guys."

Popovich was ejected by official Tony Brown with 3:56 remaining in the second quarter. Popovich screamed at Brown and entered the court following a non-call on DeMar DeRozan's attempted layup and a subsequent attempted rebound by Drew Eubanks.

As he exited the court to applause from several of the team's family members in attendance, Popovich pointed a finger at Hammon and had a succinct message.

"You got 'em," Hammon said. "See? He doesn't treat us any differently than he does you guys."

Said LeBron James: "Obviously she's been paying her dues over the last few years and Coach Pop has given her the opportunity. ... It's a beautiful thing just to hear her barking out calls, barking out sets. She's very passionate about the game. Congrats to her and congrats for our league."

Hammon took over the team's huddles during timeouts and walked the sideline following Popovich's ejection. Hammon was the first full-time female assistant coach in league history.

"Well deserved," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "I've talked to her before and she really knows her stuff and obviously she's here for a reason. She's equipped, intelligent (and the) guys have great respect for her. She's going to be a great coach one day."

A three-time All-American at Colorado State, Hammon played for the New York Liberty and San Antonio Stars in the WNBA as well as overseas before retiring to join Popovich's staff in 2014.

"Even in timeouts with Pop as head coach, she is quick on her feet," DeRozan said. "She tells us about defensive assignments, offensive sets we should run. Seeing her in the forefront, it would have definitely been cool to have won for her."

The Lakers contributed to Popovich's frustration and the Spurs' fortunes didn't get much better after the veteran coach exited.

Dennis Schroder had 21 points, Anthony Davis had 20 points and eight rebounds for the Lakers. Wesley Matthews was 6 for 6 on 3-pointers in scoring 18 points off the bench.

The Spurs opened with a 9-2 run, including an uncontested drive through the lane by Keldon Johnson for a two-handed slam. The Lakers responded with an 11-0 run that promoted a timeout by Popovich.

The Lakers took their first double-digit lead at 35-25 on Kyle Kuzma's 3-pointer with 1:14 remaining in the first quarter.

Dejounte Murray had a career-high 29 points, seven assists and seven rebounds.

"At the end of the day, it don't mean nothing, we lost," Murray said.

DeRozan added 23 for the Spurs, who lost their second straight after opening the season with two consecutive wins.

TIP-INS

Lakers: PG Alex Caruso missed the game for "health and safety protocols" as mandated by the league. Lakers coach Frank Vogel did not elaborate on Caruso's status. ... James was listed as questionable after spraining his left ankle sprain in the Lakers' 115-107 loss to Portland on Monday. James played 35 minutes against the Spurs after scoring 29 points in 36 minutes against the Trail Blazers.

Spurs: Popovich said the Spurs will monitor Aldridge's knee soreness on a day-to-day basis. ... Tim Duncan took over last season when Popovich was ejected against Portland on Nov. 16, 2019. The Hall of Famer opted not to return as assistant this season.

Missouri senator to contest Biden's Electoral College win

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., said Wednesday he will raise objections next week when Congress meets to affirm President-elect Joe Biden's victory in the election, forcing House and Senate votes that are likely to delay — but in no way alter — the final certification of Biden's win.

President Donald Trump has, without evidence, claimed there was widespread fraud in the election. He

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has pushed Republican senators to pursue his unfounded charges even though the Electoral College this month cemented Biden's 306-232 victory and multiple legal efforts to challenge the results have failed.

A group of Republicans in the Democratic-majority House have already said they will object on Trump's behalf during the Jan. 6 count of electoral votes, and they had needed just a single senator to go along with them to force votes in both chambers.

Without giving specifics or evidence, Hawley said he would object because "some states, including notably Pennsylvania" did not follow their own election laws. Lawsuits challenging Biden's victory in Pennsylvania have been unsuccessful.

"At the very least, Congress should investigate allegations of voter fraud and adopt measures to secure the integrity of our elections," Hawley said in a statement. He also criticized the way Facebook and Twitter handled content related to the election, characterizing it as an effort to help Biden.

Biden transition spokeswoman Jen Psaki dismissed Hawley's move as "antics" that will have no bearing on Biden being sworn in on Jan. 20.

"The American people spoke resoundingly in this election and 81 million people have voted for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris," Psaki said in a call with reporters. She added: "Congress will certify the results of the election as they do every four years."

White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows praised Hawley on Twitter for "unapologetically standing up for election integrity."

Trump is cutting short his Florida holiday vacation and returning to Washington on Thursday, one day earlier than expected, for reasons the White House didn't explain.

When Congress convenes to certify the Electoral College results, any lawmaker can object to a state's votes on any grounds. But the objection is not taken up unless it is in writing and signed by both a member of the House and a member of the Senate.

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

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

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Associated Press writer Amer Madhani in Chicago contributed to this report.

Spurs' Becky Hammon first woman to direct NBA team

Associated Press undefined

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — Becky Hammon became the first woman to direct a team in NBA history, taking over the San Antonio Spurs on Wednesday night against the Los Angeles Lakers following Gregg Popovich's ejection in the first half.

Popovich was ejected by official Tony Brown with 3:56 remaining in the second quarter. Popovich screamed at Brown and entered the court following a non-call on DeMar DeRozan's attempted layup and a subsequent attempted rebound by Drew Eubanks. Popovich was applauded as he exited the court by several of the team's family members that were in attendance at the AT&T Center.

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Speedy Sir: Lewis Hamilton knighted in year-end royal honors

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Lewis Hamilton is now a "Sir" as well as a seven-time Formula One champion.

Hamilton received a knighthood Wednesday as part of Queen Elizabeth II's New Year's honors list, which also recognized British performers, politicians, public servants and people outside the limelight who worked to defeat the coronavirus and its devastating impacts.

Hamilton, who secured his seventh F1 title last month to equal Michael Schumacher's record, has said his recent success was partly inspired by the Black Lives Matter movement. The 35-year-old race car driver took the knee on the grid and wore anti-racism slogans during the season.

Hamilton told the BBC last week that "it was a different drive than what I've had in me in the past, to get to the end of those races first so that I could utilize that platform" against racism.

Supporters have suggested Hamilton would have been knighted sooner if not for his tax status. Hamilton's knighthood was awarded in the "overseas" section of the honors list because he lives in low-tax Monaco.

His tax affairs made news in 2017 when the Paradise Papers leak showed he avoided paying more than \$4 million in taxes on a private jet registered in the Isle of Man, a tax haven.

Motorsport U.K. Chairman David Richards said Hamilton's tax status had been "totally misunderstood"

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and that the racing champion was among the 5,000 highest taxpayers in the U.K.

In other honors, veteran comic actress Sheila Hancock was made a dame, the female equivalent of a knight, in recognition of her six-decade career. Acclaimed makeup artist Pat McGrath, dubbed the "most influential makeup artist in the world" by Vogue, also received a damehood.

There was a knighthood for cinematographer Roger Deakins, a 15-time Academy Award nominee who has won Oscars for "Blade Runner 2049" and "1917."

Actress Lesley Manville, an Oscar nominee for "Phantom Thread," was named a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, or CBE. Actor Toby Jones, whose credits include voicing the character of Dobby in two "Harry Potter" movies, was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire or OBE, as was writer Jed Mercurio, creator of the TV detective series "Line of Duty."

Veteran footballers Jimmy Greaves and Ron Flowers were made Members of the Order of the British Empire, or MBEs, after a long-running campaign to ensure every surviving member of the team that won England the 1966 World Cup receives an honor.

The queen's honors are awarded twice a year, in late December and in June, when the monarch's birthday is observed. The awards acknowledge hundreds of people for services to community or British national life. Recipients are selected by committees of civil servants from nominations made by the government and the public.

Greta Westwood, chief executive of nursing charity the Florence Nightingale Foundation, received a CBE for her work highlighting the mental-health toll of the pandemic on front-line workers. Others honored for their work during the pandemic include research scientists, statistical modelers, engineers and onesie manufacturer Katherine Dawson, who received an OBE for making scrubs for medics when supplies were short.

In descending order, the main honors are knighthoods, CBE, OBE and Member of the Order of the British Empire, or MBE. Knights are addressed as "sir" or "dame," followed by their name. Recipients of the other honors have no title, but they can put the letters after their names.

There is growing criticism of the honors' evocation of the British Empire, the legacy of which has been debated anew amid campaigns against racism and colonialism around the world.

The education spokeswoman for the opposition Labour Party, Kate Green, who has an OBE, recently called the titles of the honors "offensive and divisive."

The British government said there are no plans to change the titles.

Man called most prolific serial killer in US history dies

By JOHN ROGERS Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The man authorities say was the most prolific serial killer in U.S. history, with nearly 60 confirmed victims, died Wednesday in California. He was 80.

Samuel Little, who had diabetes, heart trouble and other ailments, died at a California hospital, according to the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. He was serving a life sentence for multiple counts of murder.

California corrections department spokeswoman Vicky Waters said there was no sign of foul play, and his cause of death will be determined by a coroner.

A career criminal who had been in and out jail for decades, Little denied for years he'd ever killed anyone.

Then, in 2018, he opened up to Texas Ranger James Holland, who had been asked to question him about a killing it turned out Little didn't commit. During approximately 700 hours of interviews, however, Little provided details of scores of slayings only the killer would know.

A skilled artist, he even provided Holland with dozens of paintings and drawings of his victims, sometimes scribbling their names when he could remember them, as well as details such as the year and location of the murder and where he'd dumped the body.

By the time of his death, Little had confessed to killing 93 people between 1970 and 2005. Most of the slayings took place in Florida and Southern California.

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Authorities, who continue to investigate his claims, said they have confirmed nearly 60 killings and have no reason to doubt the others.

"Nothing he's ever said has been proven to be wrong or false," Holland told the CBS news magazine "60 Minutes" in 2019.

The numbers dwarf those of Green River killer Gary Ridgeway (49), John Gacy (33) and Ted Bundy (36). Almost all of Little's victims were women, many of them prostitutes, drug addicts or poor people living on the edges of society. They were individuals, he said he believed, who would leave few people behind to look for them and not much evidence for police to follow.

Indeed, local authorities in states across the country initially classified many of the deaths as accidents, drug overdoses or the result of unknown causes.

Little strangled most of his victims, usually soon after meeting them during chance encounters. He drowned one, a woman he met at a nightclub in 1982.

He was nearly 80, in failing health and serving a life sentence in a California prison when he began confiding to Holland in May 2018, after years of refusing to talk to other authorities. Once a strong, strapping boxer who used his powerful hands to strangle his victims, he was now using a wheelchair to get around.

Holland has described Little as both a genius and a sociopath, adding the killer could never adequately explain to him why he did what he did. Although known as an expert interrogator, Holland himself said he could only guess at why Little opened up to him.

The ranger did work tirelessly to create and maintain a bond with the killer during their hundreds of hours of interviews, bringing him favorite snacks such as pizza, Dr. Pepper and grits and discussing their mutual interest in sports. He also gave Little assurances that he wouldn't be executed.

Holland would address Little by his childhood nickname, Sammy, while Little called Holland Jimmy and once told the Los Angeles Times he'd "found a friend in a Texas ranger."

He told "60 Minutes" he hoped his confessions might exonerate anyone wrongly convicted of his crimes. "I say if I can help get somebody out of jail, you know, then God might smile a little bit more on me," he said.

A transient who traveled the country when he wasn't in jail for larceny, assault, drugs or other crimes, Little said he started killing in Miami on New Year's Eve 1970.

"It was like drugs," he told Holland. "I came to like it."

His last killing was in 2005, he said, in Tupelo, Mississippi. He also killed people in Tennessee, Texas, Ohio, Kentucky, Nevada, Arkansas and other states.

Kentucky authorities finally caught up with him in 2012 after he was arrested on drug charges and his DNA linked him to three California killings.

When he began recounting the other slayings, authorities were astounded at how much he remembered. His paintings, they said, indicated he had a photographic memory.

One killing was solved after Little recalled the victim wore dentures. Another after he told Holland he'd killed the victim near a set of unusual looking arches in Florida. A victim he met outside a Miami strip club in 1984 was remembered as being 25 years old with short blond hair, blue eyes and a "hippie look."

As he continued to talk, authorities across the country rushed to investigate old cases, track down relatives and bring closure to families.

Little revealed few details about his own life other than that he was raised in Lorain, Ohio, by his grandmother. Authorities said he often went by the name Samuel McDowell.

He was married once, Little said, and involved in two long-term relationships.

He claimed he developed a fetish for women's necks after becoming sexually aroused when he saw his kindergarten teacher touch her neck. He was always careful, he added, to avoid looking at the necks of his wife or girlfriends and never hurt anyone he loved.

"I don't think there was another person who did what I liked to do," he told "60 Minutes." "I think I'm the only one in the world. And that's not an honor, that is a curse."

Associated Press writer Don Thompson contributed from Sacramento.

Trump push on \$2K checks flops as GOP-led Senate won't vote

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell all but shut the door Wednesday on President Donald Trump's push for \$2,000 COVID-19 relief checks, declaring Congress has provided enough pandemic aid as he blocked another attempt by Democrats to force a vote.

The GOP leader made clear he is unwilling to budge, despite political pressure from Trump and even some fellow Republican senators demanding action. Trump wants the recent \$600 in aid increased threefold. But McConnell dismissed the idea of bigger "survival checks" approved by the House, saying the money would go to plenty of American households that just don't need it.

McConnell's refusal to act means the additional relief Trump wanted is all but dead.

"We just approved almost a trillion dollars in aid a few days ago," McConnell said, referring to the year-end package Trump signed into law.

McConnell added, "if specific, struggling households still need more help," the Senate will consider "smart targeted aid. Not another firehose of borrowed money."

The showdown between the outgoing president and his own Republican Party over the \$2,000 checks has thrown Congress into a chaotic year-end session just days before new lawmakers are set to be sworn into office.

It's one last standoff, together with the override of Trump's veto of a sweeping defense bill, that will punctuate the president's final days and deepen the GOP's divide between its new wing of Trump-styled populists and what had been mainstay conservative views against government spending.

Trump has been berating the GOP leaders, and tweeted, "\$2000 ASAP!"

President-elect Joe Biden also supports the payments and wants to build on what he calls a "downpayment" on relief.

"In this moment of historic crisis and untold economic pain for countless American families, the President-elect supports \$2,000 direct payments as passed by the House," said Biden transition spokesman Andrew Bates.

The roadblock set by Senate Republicans appears insurmountable. Most GOP senators seemed to accept the inaction even as a growing number of Republicans, including two senators in runoff elections on Jan. 5 in Georgia, agree with Trump's demand, some wary of bucking him.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said the \$600 checks would begin to go out Wednesday. Congress had settled on smaller payments in a compromise over the big, year-end COVID relief and government funding bill that Trump reluctantly signed into law. Before signing, though, Trump demanded more.

For a second day in a row, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer tried to force a vote on the bill approved by the House meeting Trump's demand for the \$2,000 checks.

"What we're seeing right now is Leader McConnell trying to kill the checks — the \$2,000 checks desperately needed by so many American families," Schumer said.

With the Georgia Senate runoff elections days away, leading Republicans warned that the GOP's refusal to provide more aid as the virus worsens could jeopardize the outcome of those races.

Georgia's GOP Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler are trying to fend off Democrats Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock in runoff elections that will determine which party has the Senate majority. The two Republicans announced support for Trump's call for more generous checks.

"The Senate Republicans risk throwing away two seats and control of the Senate," Newt Gingrich, the former congressional leader, said on Fox News.

McConnell has tried to shield his divided Republicans from a difficult vote. On Wednesday he suggested he had kept his word to start a "process" to address Trump's demands, even if it means no votes will actually be taken.

"It's no secret Republicans have a diversity of views," he said.

Earlier, McConnell had unveiled a new bill loaded up with Trump's other priorities as a possible off-ramp

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for the stalemate. It included the \$2,000 checks more narrowly targeted to lower-income households as well as a complicated repeal of protections for tech companies like Facebook or Twitter under Section 230 of a communications law that the president complained is unfair to conservatives. It also tacked on the establishment of a bipartisan commission to review the 2020 presidential election Trump lost to President-elect Joe Biden.

If McConnell sets a vote on his bill, it could revive Trump's priorities. But because the approach contains the additional tech and elections provisions, Democrats and some Republicans will likely balk and it's unlikely to have enough support in Congress to pass.

No additional votes on COVID aid have been scheduled at this point. For McConnell, the procedural moves allowed him to check the box over the commitments he made when Trump was defiantly refusing to sign off on the big year-end package last weekend. "That was a commitment, and that's what happened," he said.

Liberal senators, led by Bernie Sanders of Vermont, who support the relief boost are blocking action on a defense bill until a vote can be taken on Trump's demand for \$2,000 for most Americans.

Sanders thundered on the floor that McConnell should call his own constituents in the GOP leader's home state of Kentucky "and find out how they feel about the need for immediate help in terms of a \$2,000 check."

Republican Sens. Josh Hawley of Missouri and Marco Rubio of Florida, among the party's potential 2024 presidential hopefuls, also pushed in the president's direction. Hawley is also leading Trump's challenge Jan. 6 to the Electoral College result tally in Congress.

Other Republicans panned the bigger checks, arguing during a lively Senate debate that the nearly \$400 billion price tag was too high, the relief is not targeted to those in need and Washington has already dispatched ample sums on COVID aid.

Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., tweeted that "blindly borrowing" billions "so we can send \$2,000 checks to millions of people who haven't lost any income is terrible policy."

Considered a longshot, Trump's demand gained momentum at the start of the week when dozens of House Republicans calculated it was better to link with most Democrats than defy the outgoing president. They helped pass a bill raising the payments with a robust two-thirds vote of approval.

As Trump's push fizzles out, his attempt to amend the year-end package — \$900 billion in COVID-19 aid and \$1.4 trillion to fund government agencies through September — will linger as potentially one last confrontation before the new Congress is sworn in Sunday.

The COVID-19 portion of the bill revives a weekly pandemic jobless benefit boost — this time \$300, through March 14 — as well as the popular Paycheck Protection Program of grants to businesses to keep workers on payrolls. It extends eviction protections, adding a new rental assistance fund.

Americans earning up to \$75,000 will qualify for the direct \$600 payments, which are phased out at higher income levels, and there's an additional \$600 payment per dependent child.

Associated Press writer Ashraf Khalil in Washington contributed to this report.

Census Bureau to miss deadline, jeopardizing Trump plan

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The Census Bureau will miss a year-end deadline for handing in numbers used for divvying up congressional seats, a delay that could undermine President Donald Trump's efforts to exclude people in the country illegally from the count if the figures aren't submitted before President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

The Census Bureau plans to deliver a population count of each state in early 2021, as close to the missed deadline as possible, the statistical agency said in a statement late Wednesday.

"As issues that could affect the accuracy of the data are detected, they are corrected," the statement said. "The schedule for reporting this data is not static. Projected dates are fluid."

It will be the first time that the Dec. 31 target date is missed since the deadline was implemented more than four decades ago by Congress.

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Internal documents obtained earlier this month by the House Committee on Oversight and Reform show that Census Bureau officials don't expect the apportionment numbers to be ready until days after Biden is inaugurated on Jan. 20.

Once in office, Biden could rescind Trump's presidential memorandum directing the Census Bureau to exclude people in the country illegally from numbers used for divvying up congressional seats among the states. An influential GOP adviser had advocated excluding them from the apportionment process in order to favor Republicans and non-Hispanic whites.

"The delay suggests that the census bureau needs more time to ensure the accuracy of census numbers for all states," said Terri Ann Lowenthal, a former congressional staffer who specializes in census issues.

By law the Commerce Department must present the president by year's end with population figures from the 2020 census, data then used to determine how many seats in Congress each state gets. The president then is required to submit the numbers to Congress in early January. The Commerce Department oversees the Census Bureau, which conducts the once-a-decade head count of every U.S. resident.

However, there are no penalties for missing the deadline.

"For the Census Bureau, goals No. 1, 2 and 3 are completeness, accuracy and usefulness. They like to maintain the schedule, but that can't be a priority for them," said Kenneth Prewitt, a former Census Bureau director during President Bill Clinton's administration.

Besides deciding how many House seats each state gets, the census is used for determining how \$1.5 trillion in federal funding is distributed each year.

Trump's July order on apportionment was challenged in more than a half dozen lawsuits around the U.S., but the Supreme Court ruled earlier this month that any challenge was premature, allowing the plan to move forward. The Census Bureau hasn't publicly revealed how it plans to determine who is in the country illegally since the Supreme Court last year prohibited a citizenship question from being added to the census questionnaire.

After the pandemic caused hiring shortages and prompted the Census Bureau to suspend field operations in the spring, the statistical agency asked Congress for extensions. The requests included one that would push the deadline for handing in the apportionment numbers from the end of the year to next spring.

At the time, Trump said, "This is called an act of God. This is called a situation that has to be. They have to give it."

The request passed the Democratic-controlled House but went nowhere in the Republican-controlled Senate after Trump issued his order.

A coalition of municipalities and advocacy groups sued the Trump administration after it changed the schedule once again to shorten census field operations by a month and return to the Dec. 31 deadline for handing in the apportionment numbers. The plaintiffs argued the count was shortened by the Commerce Department so that census data-crunching happened while Trump was still in office, and they said it would cause minorities to be undercounted.

They also worried that the shortened field operations and data processing would jeopardize the count's accuracy and completeness. Bureau statisticians have been given only half the time originally planned to crunch the numbers, and Census Bureau director Steven Dillingham said last month that agency statisticians had found anomalies in the 2020 data that have popped up in past censuses.

The Census Bureau's watchdog agency on Wednesday said it was concerned about lapses in quality control checks meant to detect falsifications by census takers. The Office of Inspector General said the Census Bureau failed to complete 355,000 re-interviews of households to verify their information was accurate.

Even top Census Bureau officials internally questioned being able to meet the Dec. 31 deadline, with associate director Tim Olson telling colleagues in an email that anyone who thought the census numbers could be crunched by year's end "has either a mental deficiency or a political motivation." The email was disclosed in the litigation.

Former Census Bureau director John Thompson said the quality of the data is "the overarching issue" facing the Census Bureau.

"If these are not addressed, then it is very possible that stakeholders including the Congress may not

accept the results for various purposes including apportionment," said Thompson, who oversaw 2020 census preparation as the agency's leader during the Obama administration.

He said in an email that missing the Dec. 31 target date "means that the Census Bureau is choosing to remove known errors from the 2020 Census instead of meeting the legal deadline."

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Police on report man was making bombs: 'Hindsight is 20/20'

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, HALELUYA HADERO and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — More than a year before Anthony Warner detonated a Christmas Day bomb in downtown Nashville, officers visited his home after his girlfriend told police he was building bombs in a recreational vehicle at his residence, according to documents. But they did not make contact with him, or see inside his RV.

Those revelations, contained in a newly disclosed 2019 incident report, put Nashville's police chief on the defensive Wednesday as he said his officers did nothing wrong and that they had handled the situation properly. He added that other than a 1970s marijuana-related arrest, Warner was "squeaky clean."

"I believe the officers did everything they could legally. Maybe they could have followed up more, hindsight is 20/20," Metro Nashville Police Chief John Drake said at a news conference.

Officers were called to Pamela Perry's Nashville home on Aug. 21, 2019, following a report from her attorney that she was making suicidal threats while sitting on her front porch with firearms, the police department said in a statement.

According to the incident report, when officers arrived, police said she had two unloaded pistols beside her on the porch. She told them the guns belonged to "Tony Warner" and she did not want them in the house any longer. Perry, then 62, was taken for a psychological evaluation after speaking to mental health professionals.

"During that visit, before leaving for the evaluation, Perry told police that her boyfriend was making bombs in an RV," the report stated.

The report says police went to Warner's home, about 1 and 1/2 miles (2.4 kilometers) away, but he didn't answer the door when they knocked repeatedly. They saw the RV but it was in a fenced-off backyard and officers couldn't see inside the vehicle. They also spotted several security cameras and wires attached to an alarm sign on a front door.

"They saw no evidence of a crime and had no authority to enter his home or fenced property," the police statement said, adding supervisors and detectives were then notified.

"If we could have had more to go off of, it would have been good," Drake said.

Law enforcement officials did not publicly release the report, which was obtained only after news outlets submitted public records requests. Later, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation announced that Warner's only arrest was for a 1978 marijuana-related charge.

David Rausch, the TBI's director, had told reporters earlier this week that Warner was not on their radar. Rausch was flanked by federal and state officials — including Drake — who did not object or amend the statement.

Drake later told reporters Wednesday he didn't learn of the report until late Sunday evening, but said he believed his officers that they could not smell any explosives and that there was no probable cause for a search warrant. He also added he didn't know why Rausch said Warner wasn't on anyone's radar.

Wednesday's developments came as federal agents were continuing to examine Warner's digital footprint and writings, a law enforcement official said.

Investigators are scrutinizing whether Warner believed in multiple conspiracy theories after being told by some of the people they've interviewed that Warner believed that shape-shifting reptiles take on a human form to take over society and that he discussed taking trips to hunt aliens, the official said. Investigators have also been asking witnesses whether Warner may have believed in any conspiracies about 5G technology.

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

The report also said attorney Raymond Throckmorton told officers that day that he represented Warner and told officers Warner "frequently talks about the military and bomb making," the police report said. Warner "knows what he is doing and is capable of making a bomb," Throckmorton told responding officers.

On Tuesday, Throckmorton told The Tennessean that Perry had fears about her safety and thought Warner might harm her.

After officers visited Warner's home last August, the police department's hazardous devices unit was given a copy of the police report. During the week of August 26, 2019, they contacted Throckmorton. Police said officers recalled Throckmorton saying Warner "did not care for the police," and that he wouldn't allow Warner "to permit a visual inspection of the RV."

Throckmorton disputes that he told police they couldn't search the vehicle and says that he only represented Warner in a civil case several years prior.

"Somebody, somewhere dropped the ball," he said.

Drake said he believed the officers' account.

A day after officers visited Warner's home, the police report and identifying information about Warner were sent to the FBI to check their databases and determine whether Warner had prior military connections, police said. The FBI eventually reported back that they had no such records after conducting a standard agency-to-agency record check.

No other information about Warner came to the department or the FBI's attention after August 2019, police said.

The bombing occurred Christmas morning well before downtown streets were bustling with activity. 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. Then, inexplicably, the audio switched to a recording of Petula Clark's 1964 hit "Downtown" shortly before the blast. Dozens of buildings were damaged and several people were injured.

Investigators have not uncovered a motive.

Hadero reported from Lancaster, Pennsylvania and Balsamo reported from Washington. Associated Press reporter Eric Tucker contributed to this report also from Washington.

California has nation's 2nd confirmed case of virus variant

By COLLEEN SLEVIN and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

California on Wednesday announced the nation's second confirmed case of the new and apparently more contagious variant of the coronavirus, offering a strong indication that the infection is spreading more widely in the United States.

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced the infection found in Southern California during an online conversation with Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases.

"I don't think Californians should think that this is odd. It's to be expected," Fauci said.

Newsom did not provide any details about the person who was infected.

The announcement came 24 hours after word of the first reported U.S. variant infection, which emerged in Colorado. That person was identified Wednesday as a Colorado National Guardsman who had been sent to help out at a nursing home struggling with an outbreak. Health officials said a second Guard member may have it too.

The cases triggered a host of questions about how the version circulating in England arrived in the U.S. and whether it is too late to stop it now, with top experts saying it is probably already spreading elsewhere in the United States.

"The virus is becoming more fit, and we're like a deer in the headlights," warned Dr. Eric Topol, head of Scripps Research Translational Institute. He noted that the U.S. does far less genetic sequencing of

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virus samples to discover variants than other developed nations, and thus was probably slow to detect this new mutation.

The two Guard members had been dispatched Dec. 23 to work at the Good Samaritan Society nursing home in the small town of Simla, in a mostly rural area about 90 miles outside Denver, said Dr. Rachel Herlihy, state epidemiologist. They were among six Guard members sent to the home.

Nasal swab samples taken from the two as part of the Guard's routine coronavirus testing were sent to the state laboratory, which began looking for the variant after its spread was announced in Britain earlier this month, Herlihy said. Samples from staff and residents at the nursing home are also being screened for the variant at the lab, but so far no evidence of it has been found, she said.

The Colorado case announced Tuesday involves a man in his 20s who had not traveled recently, officials said. He has mild symptoms and is isolating at his home near Denver, while the person with the suspected case is isolating at a Colorado hotel while further genetic analysis is done on his sample, officials said.

The nursing home said it is working closely with the state and is also looking forward to beginning vaccinations next week.

Several states, including California, Massachusetts and Delaware, are also analyzing suspicious virus samples for the variant, said Dr. Greg Armstrong, who directs genetic sequencing at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. He said the CDC is working with a national lab that gets samples from around the country to broaden that search, with results expected within days.

The discovery in Colorado has added urgency to the nation's vaccination drive against COVID-19, which has killed more than 340,000 people in the U.S.

Britain is seeing infections soar and hospitalizations climb to their highest levels on record. The variant has also been found in several other countries.

Scientists have found no evidence that it is more lethal or causes more severe illness, and they believe the vaccines now being dispensed will be effective against it. But a faster-spreading virus could swamp hospitals with seriously ill patients.

The discovery overseas led the CDC to issue rules on Christmas Day requiring travelers arriving from Britain to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test. But U.S. health officials said the Colorado patient's lack of travel history suggests the new variant is already spreading in this country.

Topol said it is too late for travel bans.

"We're behind in finding it. Colorado is likely one of many places it's landed here," he said. "It's all over the place. How can you ban travel from everywhere?"

Colorado public health officials are conducting contact tracing to determine its spread.

Researchers estimate the variant is 50% to 70% more contagious, said Dr. Eric France, Colorado's chief medical officer.

"Instead of only making two or three other people sick, you might actually spread it to four or five people," France said. "That means we'll have more cases in our communities. Those number of cases will rise quickly and, of course, with more cases come more hospitalizations."

London and southeast England were placed under strict lockdown measures earlier this month because of the variant, and dozens of countries banned flights from Britain. France also briefly barred trucks from Britain before allowing them back in, provided the drivers got tested for the virus.

New versions of the virus have been seen almost since it was first detected in China a year ago. It is common for viruses to undergo minor changes as they reproduce and move through a population. The fear is that mutations at some point will become significant enough to defeat the vaccines.

South Africa has also discovered a highly contagious COVID-19 variant that is driving the country's latest spike of cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

Johnson reported from Washington state.

Yemeni officials: Blast at Aden airport kills 25, wounds 110

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By AHMED AL-HAJ and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

SANAA, Yemen (AP) — A large explosion struck the airport in the southern Yemeni city of Aden on Wednesday, shortly after a plane carrying the newly formed Cabinet landed there, security officials said. At least 25 people were killed and 110 wounded in the blast.

Yemen's internationally recognized government said Iran-backed Houthi rebels fired four ballistic missiles at the airport. Rebel officials did not answer phone calls from The Associated Press seeking comment. No one on the government plane was hurt.

Officials later reported another explosion close to a palace in the city where the Cabinet members were transferred following the airport attack. The Saudi-led coalition later shot down a bomb-laden drone that attempted to target the palace, according to Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV channel.

The Cabinet reshuffle was seen as a major step toward closing a dangerous rift between the government of embattled Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates. Hadi's government and the separatists are nominal allies in Yemen's years-long civil war that pits the Saudi-led, U.S.-backed military coalition against the Houthis, who control most of northern Yemen as well as the country's capital, Sanaa.

AP footage from the scene at the airport showed members of the government delegation disembarking as the blast shook the grounds. Many ministers rushed back inside the plane or ran down the stairs, seeking shelter.

Thick smoke rose into the air from near the terminal building. Officials at the scene said they saw bodies lying on the tarmac and elsewhere at the airport.

Yemeni Communication Minister Naguib al-Awg, who was on the plane, told the AP that he heard two explosions, suggesting they were drone attacks. Prime Minister Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed and the others were quickly whisked from the airport to the Mashiq Palace.

Military and security forces sealed off the area around the the palace.

"It would have been a disaster if the plane was bombed," al-Awg said, insisting the plane was the target of the attack as it was supposed to land earlier.

Prime Minister Saeed tweeted that he and his Cabinet were safe and unhurt. He called the explosions a "cowardly terrorist act" that was part of the war on "the Yemeni state and our great people."

Foreign Minister Ahmed Awad Bin Mubarak blamed the Houthis for the attacks. His ministry said in a statement later that the rebels fired four ballistic missiles at the airport, and launched drone attacks at the palace, the Cabinet's headquarters. They did not provide evidence.

Health Minister Qasem Buhaibuh said in a tweet the attacks at the airport killed least 25 people and wounded 110 others, suggesting the death toll could increase further because some of the wounds were serious.

Images shared on social media from the scene showed rubble and broken glass strewn about near the airport building and at least two lifeless bodies, one of them charred, lying on the ground. In another image, a man tries to help another man whose clothes were torn to get up from the ground.

The International Committee of the Red Cross said three of its workers were killed in the airport blast: two Yemeni nationals and a Rwandan. Three other workers were wounded. ICRC workers were at the airport transiting with other civilians when the blast took place, it said.

"This is a tragic day for the ICRC and for the people of Yemen," said Dominik Stillhart, ICRC's director of operations.

Yemeni Belqees television said its reporter Adeb al-Ganabi was also killed in the airport blast. Information Minister Moammer al-Iryani said at least 10 other journalists were wounded.

A statement from Farhan Haq, Deputy Spokesperson for U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, said the "Secretary-General condemns the deplorable attack on Aden airport shortly after the arrival of the newly formed Yemeni cabinet, which killed and wounded dozens of people."

Anwar Gargash, the United Arab Emirates' minister of state for foreign affairs, said the attack on Aden's airport was meant to destroy the power-sharing deal between Yemen's internationally recognized govern-

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ment and the southern separatists.

U.S. Ambassador in Yemen Christopher Henzel said the U.S. condemned the attacks in Aden. "We stand with the Yemeni people as they strive for peace, and we support the new Yemeni Government as it works towards a better future for all Yemenis," he said.

Egypt, Jordan and other Arab and Western nations also condemned the airport attack.

The Yemeni ministers were returning to Aden from the Saudi capital, Riyadh, after being sworn in last week as part of a reshuffle following a deal with the separatists. Yemen's internationally recognized government has worked mostly from self-imposed exile in Riyadh during the country's years-long civil war.

The Saudi ambassador to Yemen, Mohammed al-Jaber, described the attack as a "cowardly terrorist act targeting the Yemeni people, their security and stability."

Despite "the disappointment and confusion caused by those who create death and destruction," the peace agreement between the government and southern separatists "will go forward," he said.

Hadi, in exile in Saudi Arabia, announced the Cabinet reshuffle earlier this month.

Naming a new government was part of a power-sharing deal between the Saudi-backed Hadi and the Emirati-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council, an umbrella group of militias seeking to restore an independent southern Yemen, which existed from 1967 until unification in 1990.

The blast underscores the dangers facing Hadi's government in the port city, the scene of bloody fighting between forces of the internationally recognized government and the UAE-backed separatists.

In a video message posted on his Twitter account later, Saeed, the Yemeni prime minister, said his government was in Aden "to stay." The city has been the seat of Hadi's government since Houthi rebels overran the capital Sanaa in 2014.

Last year, the Houthis fired a missile at a military parade of newly graduated fighters of a militia loyal to the UAE at a military base in Aden, killing dozens.

In 2015, then-Yemeni Prime Minister Khaled Bahah and members of his government survived a missile attack, blamed on the Houthis, on an Aden hotel used by the government.

Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country, has been engulfed in civil war since 2014, when the Houthis overran the north and Sanaa. The following year, a Saudi-led military coalition intervened to wage war on the Houthis and to restore Hadi's government to power.

The war has killed more than 112,000 people and brought about the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Magdy reported from Cairo. Associated Press writer Maggie Michael in Cairo contributed to this report.

'Gilligan's Island' star Dawn Wells dies, COVID-19 cited

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Dawn Wells, who played the wholesome Mary Ann among a misfit band of shipwrecked castaways on the 1960s sitcom "Gilligan's Island," died Wednesday of causes related to COVID-19, her publicist said. She was 82.

Wells died peacefully at a residential facility in Los Angeles, publicist Harlan Boll said. "There is so much more to Dawn Wells" than the "Gilligan's Island" character that brought her fame, Boll said in a statement.

Besides TV, film and stage acting credits, her other real-life roles included teacher, motivational speaker and conservationist, Boll said.

Tina Louise, 86, who played Ginger the movie star, is the last surviving member of a cast that included Bob Denver as the title character; Alan Hale Jr. as the Skipper; Jim Backus and Natalie Schafer as wealthy passengers Thurston and Lovey Howell, and Russell Johnson, known as the Professor.

"I will always remember her kindness to me," Louise said in a statement. "We shared in creating a cultural landmark that has continued to bring comfort and smiles to people during this difficult time. I hope that people will remember her the way that I do — always with a smile on her face."

"Oh, this so sad. Bon voyage, Mary Ann," Jane Lynch posted on Twitter.

"Two and a Half Men" star Jon Cryer tweeted that it was a "thrill" to meet Wells when she visited the

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show, adding, "She could not have been more lovely and gracious."

Wells, a native of Reno, Nevada, represented her state in the 1959 Miss America pageant and quickly pivoted to an acting career. Her early TV roles were on shows including "77 Sunset Strip," "Maverick" and "Bonanza."

Then came "Gilligan's Island," a goofy, good-natured comedy that aired from 1964-67 that became an unlikely but indelible part of popular culture. Wells' comely but innocent Mary Ann complemented Louise's worldly Ginger, and both became innocuous '60s TV versions of sex symbols.

Wells' wardrobe included a gingham dress and shorts that modestly covered her belly button, with both costumes on display in Los Angeles at The Hollywood Museum.

TV movies spinoffs from the series followed, including 1978's "Rescue from Gilligan's Island," but Wells also moved on to other TV guest roles and films including the 2002 vacuum cleaner salesman comedy "Super Sucker" with Jeff Daniels. She starred on stage in dozens of plays, including "Chapter Two" and "The Odd Couple."

In 2013, she was honored by for her work with a Tennessee-based refuge, The Elephant Sanctuary.

To mark the 50th anniversary of "Gilligan's Island." Dawn wrote "A Guide To Life: What Would Mary Ann Do?" with observations about her character and the cultural changes that took place while she was stranded.

Two years ago, a friend launched a GoFundMe drive to help cover medical and other costs for Wells, although she protested she didn't need the assistance. She did end up acknowledging her need and accepted more than \$180,000 in donations.

"Wow! I am amazed at the kindness and affection I have received" in response to the fundraising drive, Wells said in a social media post at the time. She said a "dear friend" undertook it after a frank conversation.

She recounted musing to him, "Where did the time go? I don't know how this happened. I thought I was taking all the proper steps to ensure my golden years. Now, here I am, no family, no husband, no kids and no money."

Wells added in the post that she was grateful to her supportive fans and that her outlook remained positive.

Dawn is survived by her stepsister, Weslee Wells, Boll said.

Georgia governor pushes back on Trump's call for resignation

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp on Wednesday called a tweet by President Donald Trump demanding his resignation a "distraction" and said he was focused on the state's response to the coronavirus pandemic and upcoming runoff elections for two U.S. Senate seats.

Trump said earlier in the day that Kemp, a fellow Republican, was an "obstructionist who refuses to admit that we won Georgia, BIG!" Trump lost the state to Democrat Joe Biden but has repeatedly made baseless accusations that illegal votes cost him the state's electoral votes. He has also previously criticized Kemp, who has rejected his demands to undermine the results. In Wednesday's tweet, he said Kemp "should resign from office."

"All of these things are a distraction," Kemp said at a news conference at the state Capitol. "I mean, I've supported the president. I've said that many times. I worked as hard as anybody in the state on his reelection up through Nov. 3."

Kemp said the focus should be on the state's Jan. 5 elections. Democrats need to win both seats to take control of the U.S. Senate.

"All these other things, there is a constitutional and legal process that is playing out, and I'm very comfortable letting that process play out," he said.

The spat flared as Georgia officials continued to defend the election results.

Investigators who audited the signatures on more than 15,000 absentee ballot envelopes in one Georgia county found "no fraudulent absentee ballots," according to the audit report.

Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger announced earlier this month that his office would work with

the Georgia Bureau of Investigation to do the signature audit in suburban Atlanta's Cobb County. Deputy Secretary of State Jordan Fuchs said at the time that Trump's campaign had alleged that Cobb County didn't properly conduct the signature match for the June primary.

"This audit disproves the only credible allegations the Trump campaign had against the strength of Georgia's signature match processes," Raffensperger, also a Republican, said in a news release Monday. Biden narrowly won Georgia by about 12,000 votes out of 5 million cast.

The investigators reviewed 15,118 absentee ballot envelopes from randomly selected boxes, about 10% of the total received in Cobb County for the November general election, according to the audit report. That sample size was chosen to "reach a 99% confidence level in the results."

The Cobb County elections department had "a 99.99% accuracy rate in performing correct signature verification procedures," the audit report says.

In two cases, the audit team determined that a voter should have been contacted to fix a problem. In both those cases, investigators interviewed the voters and determined they were the ones who cast the ballots, the report says.

Georgians can request absentee ballots either through an online portal that Raffensperger established in September or by submitting an application. For online requests, they provide their driver's license number and date of birth to verify their identity. If they use an application, they must sign it for verification.

When an application is received, county election workers compare the signature on the application to the voter's signature on file, and if it is consistent, a ballot is mailed, Raffensperger has said.

Before submitting an absentee ballot, a voter must sign an oath on an outer envelope. When county election officials receive an absentee ballot, they must compare the signature to the absentee ballot application if one exists and to the signature on file. The signatures must be consistent but don't have to match exactly, Raffensperger has said.

If the signature doesn't match, the voter is notified and can take other steps to verify identity. If the signature does match, the ballot is separated from the envelope to protect the right to ballot secrecy guaranteed by Georgia law.

Associated Press writer Sudhin Thanawala contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: Scientists trying to understand new virus variant

By The Associated Press undefined

Does it spread more easily? Make people sicker? Mean that treatments and vaccines won't work? Questions are multiplying as fast as new variants of the coronavirus, especially the one moving through England and now popping up in the U.S. and other countries.

Scientists say there is reason for concern and more to learn but that the new variants should not cause alarm.

Worry has been growing since before Christmas, when Britain's prime minister said the coronavirus variant seemed to spread more easily than earlier ones and was moving rapidly through England. On Tuesday, Colorado health officials said they had found it there.

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

Q: WHERE DID THIS NEW VARIANT COME FROM?

A: New variants have been seen almost since the virus was first detected in China nearly a year ago. Viruses often mutate, or develop small changes, as they reproduce and move through a population.

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

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

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Q: HOW DOES ONE VARIANT BECOME DOMINANT?

A: That can happen if one variant takes hold and starts spreading in an area, or because “super spreader” events helped it become established.

It also can happen if a mutation gives a new variant an advantage, such as helping it spread more easily than other ones that are circulating.

Scientists are still working to confirm whether the variant in England spreads more easily, but they are finding some evidence that it does. The variant “out-competes the other strains and moves faster and infects more people, so it wins the race,” Landrigan said.

The British variant was first detected in September, WHO officials said. A new South African variant also has emerged.

Q: WHAT'S WORRISOME ABOUT THE BRITISH VARIANT?

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

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

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

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

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

Q: WHAT DO THE MUTATIONS MEAN FOR TREATMENTS?

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

Studies on antibody response are under way, Van Kerkhove said.

One drugmaker, Eli Lilly, said that tests in its lab suggest that its drug remains fully active.

Q: WHAT ABOUT VACCINES?

A: Scientists believe current vaccines will still be effective against the variant, but they are working to confirm that. On Wednesday, British officials reiterated that there is no data suggesting the new variant hurts the effectiveness of the available vaccines.

Vaccines induce broad immune system responses besides just prompting the immune system to make antibodies to the virus, so they are expected to still work, several scientists said.

Q: WHAT CAN I DO TO REDUCE MY RISK?

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

“The bottom line is we need to suppress transmission” of the coronavirus, said the WHO's director-general, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

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

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

China clamps down in hidden hunt for coronavirus origins

By DAKE KANG, MARIA CHENG and SAM MCNEIL Associated Press

MOJIANG, China (AP) — Deep in the lush mountain valleys of southern China lies the entrance to a mine shaft that once harbored bats with the closest known relative of the COVID-19 virus.

The area is of intense scientific interest because it may hold clues to the origins of the coronavirus that

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has killed more than 1.7 million people worldwide. Yet for scientists and journalists, it has become a black hole of no information because of political sensitivity and secrecy.

A bat research team visiting recently managed to take samples but had them confiscated, two people familiar with the matter said. Specialists in coronaviruses have been ordered not to speak to the press. And a team of Associated Press journalists was tailed by plainclothes police in multiple cars who blocked access to roads and sites in late November.

More than a year since the first known person was infected with the coronavirus, an AP investigation shows the Chinese government is strictly controlling all research into its origins, clamping down on some while actively promoting fringe theories that it could have come from outside China.

The government is handing out hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to scientists researching the virus' origins in southern China and affiliated with the military, the AP has found. But it is monitoring their findings and mandating that the publication of any data or research must be approved by a new task force managed by China's cabinet, under direct orders from President Xi Jinping, according to internal documents obtained by the AP. A rare leak from within the government, the dozens of pages of unpublished documents confirm what many have long suspected: The clampdown comes from the top.

As a result, very little has been made public. Authorities are severely limiting information and impeding cooperation with international scientists.

"What did they find?" asked Gregory Gray, a Duke University epidemiologist who oversees a lab in China studying the transmission of infectious diseases from animals to people. "Maybe their data were not conclusive, or maybe they suppressed the data for some political reason. I don't know ... I wish I did."

The AP investigation was based on dozens of interviews with Chinese and foreign scientists and officials, along with public notices, leaked emails, internal data and the documents from China's cabinet and the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. It reveals a pattern of government secrecy and top-down control that has been evident throughout the pandemic.

As the AP previously documented, this culture has delayed warnings about the pandemic, blocked the sharing of information with the World Health Organization and hampered early testing. Scientists familiar with China's public health system say the same practices apply to sensitive research.

"They only select people they can trust, those that they can control," said a public health expert who works regularly with the China CDC, declining to be identified out of fear of retribution. "Military teams and others are working hard on this, but whether it gets published all depends on the outcome."

The pandemic has crippled Beijing's reputation on the global stage, and China's leaders are wary of any findings that could suggest they were negligent in its spread. The Chinese Ministry of Science and Technology and the National Health Commission, which are managing research into the coronavirus' origins, did not respond to requests for comment.

"The novel coronavirus has been discovered in many parts of the world," China's foreign ministry said in a fax. "Scientists should carry out international scientific research and cooperation on a global scale."

Some Chinese scientists say little has been shared simply because nothing of significance has been discovered.

"We've been looking, but we haven't found it," said Zhang Yongzhen, a renowned Chinese virologist.

China's leaders are far from alone in politicizing research into the origins of the virus. In April, President Donald Trump shelved a U.S.-funded project to identify dangerous animal diseases in China and Southeast Asia, effectively severing ties between Chinese and American scientists and complicating the search for virus origins. Trump also has accused China of setting off the pandemic through an accident at a Wuhan lab — a theory that some experts say cannot be ruled out but as yet has no evidence behind it.

Research into COVID-19's origins is critical to the prevention of future pandemics. Although a World Health Organization international team plans to visit China in early January to investigate what started the pandemic, its members and agenda had to be approved by China.

Some public health experts warn that China's refusal to grant further access to international scientists has jeopardized the global collaboration that pinpointed the source of the SARS outbreak nearly two decades

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ago. Jonna Mazet, a founding executive director of the UC Davis One Health Institute, said the lack of collaboration between Chinese and U.S. scientists was "a disappointment" and the inability of American scientists to work in China "devastating."

"There's so much speculation around the origins of this virus," Mazet said. "We need to step back...and let scientists get the real answer without the finger-pointing."

The hidden hunt for the origins of COVID-19 shows how the Chinese government has tried to steer the narrative.

The search started in the Huanan Seafood market in Wuhan, a sprawling, low-slung complex where many of the first human coronavirus cases were detected. Scientists initially suspected the virus came from wild animals sold in the market, such as civet cats implicated in the spread of SARS.

In mid-December last year, Huanan vendor Jiang Dafa started noticing people were falling ill. Among the first was a part-time worker in his 60s who helped clean carcasses at a stall; soon, a friend he played chess with also fell ill. A third, a seafood monger in his 40s, was infected and later died.

Patients began trickling into nearby hospitals, triggering alarms by late December that alerted the China CDC. CDC chief Gao Fu immediately sent a team to investigate.

At first, research appeared to be moving swiftly.

Overnight on Jan. 1, the market suddenly was ordered shut, barring vendors from fetching their belongings, Jiang said. China CDC researchers collected 585 environmental samples from door handles, sewage and the floor of the market, and authorities sprayed the complex down with sanitizer. Later, they would cart out everything inside and incinerate it.

Internal China CDC data obtained by the AP shows that by Jan. 10 and 11, researchers were sequencing dozens of environmental samples from Wuhan. Gary Kobinger, a Canadian microbiologist advising WHO, emailed his colleagues to share his concerns that the virus originated at the market.

"This corona(virus) is very close to SARS," he wrote on Jan. 13. "If we put aside an accident ... then I would look at the bats in these markets (sold and 'wild')."

By late January, Chinese state media announced that 33 of the environmental samples had tested positive. In a report to WHO, officials said 11 specimens were more than 99% similar to the new coronavirus. They also told the U.N. health agency that rats and mice were common in the market, and that most of the positive samples were clustered in an area where vendors traded in wildlife.

In the meantime, Jiang avoided telling people he worked at Huanan because of the stigma. He criticized the political tussle between China and the U.S.

"It's pointless to blame anyone for this disease," Jiang said.

As the virus continued spreading rapidly into February, Chinese scientists published a burst of research papers on COVID-19. Then a paper by two Chinese scientists proposed without concrete evidence that the virus could have leaked from a Wuhan laboratory near the market. It was later taken down, but it raised the need for image control.

Internal documents show that the state soon began requiring all coronavirus studies in China to be approved by high-level government officials — a policy that critics say paralyzed research efforts.

A China CDC lab notice on Feb. 24 put in new approval processes for publication under "important instructions" from Chinese President Xi Jinping. Other notices ordered CDC staff not to share any data, specimens or other information related to the coronavirus with outside institutions or individuals.

Then on March 2, Xi emphasized "coordination" on coronavirus research, state media reported.

The next day, China's cabinet, the State Council, centralized all COVID-19 publication under a special task force. The notice, obtained by the AP and marked "not to be made public," was far more sweeping in scope than the earlier CDC notices, applying to all universities, companies and medical and research institutions.

The order said communication and publication of research had to be orchestrated like "a game of chess" under instructions from Xi, and propaganda and public opinion teams were to "guide publication." It went on to warn that those who publish without permission, "causing serious adverse social impact, shall be held accountable."

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"The regulations are very strict, and they don't make any sense," said a former China CDC deputy director, who declined to be named because they were told not to speak to the media. "I think it's political, because people overseas could find things being said there that might contradict what China says, so it's all being controlled."

After the secret orders, the tide of research papers slowed to a trickle. Although China CDC researcher Liu Jun returned to the market nearly 20 times to collect some 2,000 samples over the following months, nothing was released about what they revealed.

On May 25, CDC chief Gao finally broke the silence around the market in an interview with China's Phoenix TV. He said that, unlike the environmental samples, no animal samples from the market had tested positive.

The announcement surprised scientists who didn't even know Chinese officials had taken samples from animals. It also ruled out the market as the likely source of the virus, along with further research that showed many of the first cases had no ties to it.

With the market proving a dead end, scientists turned more attention to hunting for the virus at its likely source: bats.

Nearly a thousand miles away from the wet market in Wuhan, bats inhabit the maze of underground limestone caves in Yunnan province. With its rich, loamy soil, fog banks and dense plant growth, this area in southern China bordering Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar is one of the most biologically diverse on earth.

At one Yunnan cave visited by the AP, with thick roots hanging over the entrance, bats fluttered out at dusk and flew over the roofs of a nearby small village. White droppings splattered the ground near an altar in the rear of the cave, and Buddhist prayer strings of red and yellow twine hung from the stalactites. Villagers said the cave had been used as a sacred place presided over by a Buddhist monk from Thailand.

Contact like this between bats and people praying, hunting or mining in caves alarms scientists. The coronavirus' genetic code is strikingly similar to that of bat coronaviruses, and most scientists suspect COVID-19 jumped into humans either directly from a bat or via an intermediary animal.

Since bats harboring coronaviruses are found in China and throughout Southeast Asia, the wild animal host of COVID-19 could be anywhere in the region, said Linfa Wang at Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore.

"There is a bat somewhere with a 99.9% similar virus to the coronavirus," Wang said. "Bats don't respect these borders."

COVID-19 research is proceeding in countries such as Thailand, where Dr. Supaporn Wacharapluesadee, a coronavirus expert, is leading teams of scientists deep into the countryside to collect samples from bats. During one expedition in August, Supaporn told the AP the virus could be found "anywhere" there were bats.

Chinese scientists quickly started testing potential animal hosts. Records show that Xia Xueshan, an infectious diseases expert, received a 1.4 million RMB (\$214,000) grant to screen animals in Yunnan for COVID-19. State media reported in February that his team collected hundreds of samples from bats, snakes, bamboo rats and other animals, and ran a picture of masked scientists in white lab coats huddled around a large, caged porcupine.

Then the government restrictions kicked in. Data on the samples still has not been made public, and Xia did not respond to requests for an interview. Although Xia has co-authored more than a dozen papers this year, an AP review shows, only two were on COVID-19, and neither focused on its origins.

Today, the caves that scientists once surveyed are under close watch by the authorities. Security agents tailed the AP team in three locations across Yunnan, and stopped journalists from visiting the cave where researchers in 2017 identified the species of bats responsible for SARS. At an entrance to a second location, a massive cave teeming with tourists taking selfies, authorities shut the gate on the AP.

"We just got a call from the county," said a park official, before an armed policeman showed up.

Particularly sensitive is the mine shaft where the closest relative of the COVID-19 virus — called "RaTG13" — was found.

RaTG13 was discovered after an outbreak in 2012, when six men cleaning the bat-filled shaft fell ill with

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mysterious bouts of pneumonia, killing three. The Wuhan Institute of Virology and the China CDC both studied bat coronaviruses from this shaft. And although most scientists believe the COVID-19 virus had its origins in nature, some say it or a close relative could have been transported to Wuhan and leaked by mistake.

Wuhan Institute of Virology bat expert Shi Zhengli has repeatedly denied this theory, but Chinese authorities haven't yet allowed foreign scientists in to investigate.

Some state-backed scientists say research is proceeding as usual. Famed virologist Zhang, who received a 1.5 million RMB (\$230,000) grant to search for the virus' origins, said partnering scientists are sending him samples from all over, including from bats in Guizhou in southern China and rats in Henan hundreds of miles north.

"Bats, mice, are there any new coronaviruses in them? Do they have this particular coronavirus?" Zhang said. "We've been doing this work for over a decade. It's not like we just started today."

Zhang declined to confirm or comment on reports that his lab was briefly closed after publishing the virus' genetic sequence ahead of authorities. He said he hasn't heard of any special restrictions on publishing papers, and the only review his papers go through is a routine scientific one by his institution.

But scientists without state backing complain that getting approval to sample animals in southern China is now extremely difficult, and that little is known about the findings of government-sponsored teams.

Even as they controlled research within China, Chinese authorities promoted theories that suggested the virus came from elsewhere.

The government gave Bi Yuhai, the Chinese Academy of Sciences scientist tapped to spearhead origins research, a 1.5 million RMB grant (\$230,000), records show. A paper co-authored by Bi suggested an outbreak in a Beijing market in June could have been caused by packages of contaminated frozen fish from Europe.

China's government-controlled media used the theory to suggest the original outbreak in Wuhan could have started with seafood imported from abroad — a notion international scientists reject. WHO has said it is very unlikely that people can be infected with COVID-19 via packaged food, and that it is "highly speculative" to suggest COVID-19 did not start in China. Bi did not respond to requests for an interview, and China has not provided enough virus samples for a definitive analysis.

The Chinese state press also has widely covered initial studies from Europe suggesting COVID-19 was found in wastewater samples in Italy and Spain last year. But scientists have largely dismissed these studies, and the researchers themselves acknowledged they did not find enough virus fragments to determine conclusively if it was the coronavirus.

And in the last few weeks, Chinese state media has taken out of context research from a German scientist, interpreting it to suggest that the pandemic began in Italy. The scientist, Alexander Kekule, director of the Institute for Biosecurity Research, has said repeatedly that he believes the virus first emerged in China.

Internal documents show that various government bodies also sponsored studies on the possible role of the Southeast Asian pangolin, a scaly anteater once prized in traditional Chinese medicine, as an intermediary animal host. Within the span of three days in February, Chinese scientists put out four separate papers on coronaviruses related to COVID-19 in trafficked Malayan pangolins from Southeast Asia seized by customs officials in Guangdong.

But many experts now say the theory is unlikely. Wang of the Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore said the search for the coronavirus in pangolins did not appear to be "scientifically driven." He said blood samples would be the most conclusive evidence of COVID-19's presence in the rare mammals, and so far, no incriminating matches have been found.

WHO has said more than 500 species of other animals, including cats, ferrets and hamsters, are being studied as possible intermediary hosts for COVID-19.

The Chinese government is also limiting and controlling the search for patient zero through the re-testing of old flu samples.

Chinese hospitals collect thousands of samples from patients with flu-like symptoms every week and store

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them in freezers. They could easily be tested again for COVID-19, although politics could then determine whether the results are made public, said Ray Yip, the founding director of the U.S. CDC office in China.

"They'd be crazy not to do it," Yip said. "The political leadership will wait for that information to see, does this information make China look stupid or not? ... If it makes China look stupid, they won't."

In the U.S., CDC officials long ago tested roughly 11,000 early samples collected under the flu surveillance program since Jan. 1. And in Italy, researchers recently found a boy who had fallen ill in November 2019 and later tested positive for the coronavirus.

But in China, scientists have only published retrospective testing data from two Wuhan flu surveillance hospitals — out of at least 18 in Hubei province alone and well over 500 across the country. The data includes just 520 samples out of the 330,000 collected in China last year.

These enormous gaps in the research aren't due just to a lack of testing but also to a lack of transparency. Internal data obtained by the AP shows that by Feb. 6, the Hubei CDC had tested over 100 samples in Huanggang, a city southeast of Wuhan. But the results have not been made public.

The little information that has dribbled out suggests the virus was circulating well outside Wuhan in 2019 — a finding that could raise awkward questions for Chinese officials about their early handling of the outbreak. Chinese researchers found that a child over a hundred kilometers from Wuhan had fallen ill with the virus by Jan. 2, suggesting it was spreading widely in December. But earlier samples weren't tested, according to a scientist with direct knowledge of the study.

"There was a very deliberate choice of the time period to study, because going too early could have been too sensitive," said the scientist, who declined to be named out of fear of retribution.

A WHO report written in July but published in November said Chinese authorities had identified 124 cases in December 2019, including five cases outside Wuhan. Among WHO's aims for its upcoming visit to China are reviews of hospital records before December.

Coronavirus expert Peter Daszak, a member of the WHO team, said identifying the pandemic's source should not be used to assign guilt.

"We're all part of this together," he said. "And until we realize that, we're never going to get rid of this problem."

Kang reported from Beijing and Cheng reported from London. Associated Press journalists Han Guan Ng and Emily Wang in Wuhan, China, Haven Daley in Stinson Beach, California, and Tassanee Vejpongsa in Kanchanaburi, Thailand, contributed to this report.

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Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

VIRUS TODAY: Colorado reports first US case of virus variant

By The Associated Press undefined

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

THREE THINGS TO KNOW TODAY

— A new variant of the coronavirus that may be more contagious has been found in a Colorado man who had not been traveling. That has triggered a host of questions about how the first reported U.S. case of the new version showed up in the Rocky Mountain state. The new variant was first identified in England, and infections are soaring now in Britain. The new variant has also been found in several other countries. Experts say the vaccines being given now are thought to be effective against it.

— Louisiana's newest Republican member of the U.S. House, Luke Letlow, died from complications related to COVID-19 only days before he would have been sworn into office. He was 41. Letlow was elected in a December runoff and was set to take office in January. He was admitted to a Monroe hospital after testing positive for COVID-19. He was later transferred to Ochsner-LSU Health Shreveport and placed in intensive care, where he died.

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— People who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 are finding comfort in the act of remembering, whether it's cradling an item their loved one left behind, vowing to fulfill a promise they would have blessed, or imagining them in better days. Over the last year, Associated Press journalists profiled dozens of ordinary people around the world who died from the coronavirus. As the turbulent year comes to a close, the AP revisited the families and friends of 10 of those lost to see how they are coping.

THE NUMBERS: The seven-day rolling average for daily new deaths in the U.S. decreased in the last two weeks from 2,496.9 on December 15 to 2,256.6 on December 29, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

DEATH TOLL: The number of COVID-19-related deaths in the U.S. stands at more than 338,000.

QUOTABLE: "I'm going to celebrate that I'm alive, but I'm not precisely too happy for this year," said Cesar Soltero, a 36-year-old Florida engineer who visited Times Square this week ahead of New Year's Day.

ICYMI: President-elect Joe Biden criticized the Trump administration for the pace of distributing COVID-19 vaccines, saying it is "falling far behind." Biden said "it's gonna take years, not months, to vaccinate the American people" at the current pace. He vowed to ramp up the current speed of vaccinations five to six times to 1 million shots a day, noting it could still take months to vaccinate the American people.

ON THE HORIZON: If ever a year's end seemed like cause for celebration, 2020 might be it. Yet the coronavirus scourge that dominated the year is also looming over New Year's festivities and forcing officials worldwide to tone them down. From New York's Times Square to Sydney Harbor, the pandemic is turning big public blowouts into TV-only shows and digital events.

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

Well-preserved Ice Age woolly rhino found in Siberia

MOSCOW (AP) — A well-preserved Ice Age woolly rhino with many of its internal organs still intact has been recovered from permafrost in Russia's extreme north.

Russian media reported Wednesday that the carcass was revealed by melting permafrost in Yakutia in August. Scientists are waiting for ice roads in the Arctic region to become passable to deliver it to a lab for studies next month.

It's among the best-preserved specimens of the Ice Age animal found to date. The carcass has most of its soft tissues still intact, including part of the intestines, thick hair and a lump of fat. Its horn was found next to it.

Recent years have seen major discoveries of mammoths, woolly rhinos, Ice Age foal, and cave lion cubs as the permafrost increasingly melts across vast areas of Siberia because of global warming.

Yakutia 24 TV quoted Valery Plotnikov, a paleontologist with the regional branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, as saying the woolly rhino was likely 3- or 4-years-old when it died.

Plotnikov said the young rhino likely drowned.

Scientists dated the carcass as anywhere from 20,000- to 50,000-years-old. More precise dating will be possible once it is delivered to a lab for radiocarbon studies.

The carcass was found on the bank of the Tirekhtyakh river in the Abyisk district, close to the area where another young woolly rhino was recovered in 2014. Researchers dated that specimen, which they called Sasha, at 34,000 years old.

After a year like this, expect a strange New Year's Eve

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — If ever a year's end seemed like cause for celebration, 2020 might be it.

Yet the coronavirus scourge that dominated the year is also looming over New Year's festivities and forcing officials worldwide to tone them down.

From New York's Times Square to Sydney Harbor, big public blowouts are being turned into TV-only

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shows and digital events. Fireworks displays have been canceled from the Las Vegas Strip to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris. Even private parties in some places are restricted.

The occasion stirs mixed feelings for people like Cesar Soltero, who was taking photos, and taking stock, in Times Square this week.

"I'm going to celebrate that I'm alive, but I'm not precisely too happy for this year," said Soltero, 36, an engineer visiting from Orlando, Florida, after forgoing his usual holiday trip to see family in Mexico.

Simona Faidiga and Alessandro Nunziata strolled through Times Square with their Labrador retriever puppy, Maggie, who has given Faidiga a lift after she lost her tour guide job.

The Italian couple moved to Miami for new jobs in March, just as the pandemic froze tourism. He is working as a sales representative, but she is not back at work yet. And they're not ready to declare 2021 will be better, not wanting to jinx it.

"I mean, I don't think it could be worse than 2020," said Nunziata, 27.

Days ahead of the ball drop in Times Square, it clearly wasn't New Year's as usual at the Crossroads of the World. There was room to roam on sidewalks that would normally be all but impassable.

Vendors' carts and window displays at the area's struggling gift shops flaunted few 2021-themed souvenirs as workers set up a stage for a celebration that will unfold this year without the usual throngs of cheering, kissing revelers. Police will block off the area so spectators can't get a glimpse.

"It's almost like a 'Seinfeld' episode," Police Commissioner Dermot Shea said, invoking the 1990s "show about nothing." "This is a ball drop about nothing, where you can't see, so you may as well stay home."

The event's special guests will be first responders and essential workers. But they won't be joining the mayor on stage to lead the countdown. Instead, each guest will watch from a private, well-spaced area.

The night's performances — including disco diva Gloria Gaynor's singing of the apt-for-2020 anthem "I Will Survive" — will be aimed at TV audiences.

New Year's Eve will look different around the world after a year in which the virus killed an estimated 1.8 million people, including more than 330,000 in the U.S.

Germany banned the sale of fireworks, which residents usually set off in on the streets, and a pyrotechnics show at Berlin's Brandenburg Gate is off.

So, too, are the fireworks over the River Thames in locked-down London, where New Year's Eve also marks Britain's final economic split from the European Union. However, Big Ben, which has been largely silent since 2017 while its clock tower is restored, will sound 12 bongs at midnight.

The Netherlands moved the national countdown from an Amsterdam park to a soccer stadium, where spectators won't be allowed in and pyrotechnics will be replaced with "electric fireworks."

In Rome, the fireworks are still on, but customary concerts in public plazas have been scrapped in favor of livestreamed performances and art installations. Pope Francis will skip his typical Dec. 31 visit to the Vatican's life-sized Nativity scene in St. Peter's Square and plans to deliver his New Year's Day blessing indoors, to prevent crowds from gathering.

Rio de Janeiro nixed the fireworks, open-air concerts and rooftop parties that draw crowds of white-clad revelers in the Copacabana neighborhood, where only residents will be allowed in.

New Year's Eve is one of the busiest days of the year at Paulo Roberto Senna's Copacabana beach stand, but the 57-year-old said he was OK with the shutdown: "No money can buy our health!"

Hot dog vendor Fabio Henrique saw it differently.

"They tell us to stay home, but for those who don't have money, where are we going to get the means to live?" asked Henrique, 39.

In Russia, New Year's Eve has been more widely celebrated than Christmas, which is marked on Jan. 7 by the country's Orthodox Christian majority. Public events have been banned or restricted in many regions. But the country's so-called New Year's Eve capital, the city of Kaluga, is luring tourists with a week of festivities, despite pleas from residents to cancel. Officials in Kaluga, 150 kilometers (90 miles) southwest of Moscow, said virus precautions will be taken.

Poland has told residents not to circulate between 7 p.m. on Dec. 31 until 6 a.m. on Jan. 1. Turkey de-

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clared a four-day lockdown starting on New Year's Eve, and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan warned that security forces will inspect hotels for illicit parties.

In the U.S., the Christmas morning bombing of the downtown tourist district in Nashville, Tennessee, led the city to cancel its plan to light fireworks and blow up a 2020 sign.

"To say it would have been tone deaf would be an understatement," said Bruce Spyridon, president of the Nashville Convention & Visitors Corp.

In Las Vegas, casino capacity is being limited to 25% and public gatherings are capped by the governor at 50 people. But despite the rules and the risk of COVID-19, tens of thousands of people are expected to mark the new year on the Strip or downtown. Police said their best guess is for 200,000 revelers.

South Africa President Cyril Ramaphosa suggested a new way of observing the holiday by lighting candles to honor COVID-19 victims and front-line workers and to hope for a healthy 2021.

Back in New York, yoga and stress-management instructor Allison Richard, 39, wrote up a few New Year's wishes on confetti that will be dropped at midnight in Times Square.

"Freedom," she wrote, and "contentment," "commitment," "connection," "prosperity" and "love."

Associated Press writers around the world contributed to this report.

Pelosi likely speaker again, but might require high-wire act

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There's little doubt that Nancy Pelosi will be reelected House speaker when the new Congress convenes Sunday. It could take a high-wire act for her to get there, largely thanks to the pandemic.

The only woman in history to serve as speaker, the California Democrat has a reputation as a formidable vote-counter and wily deal-cutter. Those skills have helped her fend off threats and cement her as leader of her party in the House since 2003, and seem likely to carry the day on Jan. 3, when the Constitution requires the new Congress to begin.

"Yeah, I do," Pelosi told a reporter this week when asked if she had the votes wrapped up.

In what seemed an indication of confidence, Pelosi told reporters Wednesday that Rep.-elect Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, will be sworn in, even as Democratic opponent Rita Hart's challenge to the election results remains under review by the House. Miller-Meeks is certain to vote against Pelosi to be speaker.

Even so, the terrain Pelosi faces will allow almost no margin for error.

The full House elects the speaker, and Democrats will have the chamber's smallest majority in 20 years in a vote in which Republicans are certain to vote unanimously against her, joined by Democratic defectors. Democrats will have a 222-211 edge, with one race still undecided and one vacancy after Rep.-elect Luke Letlow, R-La., died Tuesday after battling COVID-19.

The raging coronavirus pandemic, combined with routine illnesses and the usual risks of wintertime travel, could make attendance unpredictable for the first House roll call in months that lawmakers will have to attend in person. To avoid risks of exposure to COVID-19, the House altered its rules this year to let its members vote by proxy from their homes, but that change dies with the old Congress.

"I'm fine," Pelosi said when asked if COVID absences were a concern.

The speaker's election, in which members traditionally vote verbally in alphabetical order, has long been the first vote taken by the new House. Because of COVID concerns, lawmakers will be voting in groups in a roll call expected to last three to four hours.

"It's extraordinarily tricky" for Pelosi, said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., an 18-year congressional veteran. Still, he said, he expects her to prevail "because I don't see what the alternative is" for Democrats.

To make sure they're at full strength, both parties' leaders are urging lawmakers to take health precautions and return to Washington well ahead of Sunday to avoid travel snags.

"I still have people come up to me who say, 'Well, I can vote remotely, right?'" House Rules Committee Chairman Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., said earlier this month of his colleagues. "No, you can't."

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In a memo this week, Congress' chief physician, Dr. Brian Monahan, and House Sergeant at Arms Paul Irving told House members that any guests, including family, will have to follow local District of Columbia requirements for COVID testing.

On a day when members' families and friends normally swarm all over the Capitol, incoming House freshmen will be allowed just one guest apiece in the chamber's gallery to watch them take their oaths. Returning members will not be allowed any guests in the gallery.

Top Democrats have checked on the availability of lawmakers who've had serious health problems. McGovern says Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Fla., 84, who's been fighting pancreatic cancer, has told him he intends to attend. Rep. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Calif., who nearly died from pneumonia after falling while running in March and has been convalescing ever since, says he's told Pelosi he will return to the Capitol for opening day.

"I'm planning on going back because that's my job," said DeSaulnier, 68.

Pelosi retains the support of most Democrats, who revere her for leading their 2018 recapture of House control and their battles against President Donald Trump. She's kept her party's moderates and progressives largely united and raised boatloads of campaign cash.

But at 80, about the same age as her top two lieutenants, Pelosi remains a source of frustration for younger Democrats eager to climb the leadership chain. Discontent and division have grown after expected gains in last month's elections evaporated and 12 Democrats lost House seats, prompting calls for fresh messengers in response to criticism that party leaders did a poor job of campaigning on the country's deep economic problems.

No Democratic rival to Pelosi has emerged, greatly diminishing the odds she'll be toppled. Perhaps unanimously, Republicans will back Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California for speaker, but he seems destined to become minority leader again.

Even so, Pelosi must minimize the number of Democrats opposing her.

Of 15 Democrats who bucked her when she was elected speaker in January 2019, three lost reelection last month. One is in a race where votes are still being counted and another became a Republican.

That leaves 10 Democrats who opposed her two years ago. Of those, Washington Rep. Kurt Schrader has said he's now open to backing her and at least two others have said they will do so, Jason Crow of Colorado and Jim Cooper of Tennessee.

"She has led a contentious Democratic caucus well during the pandemic and the Trump presidency," Cooper said.

It's unknown how many of the 15 incoming Democratic freshmen might oppose Pelosi.

Some suggest the tight numbers might encourage Pelosi's Democratic critics to force the balloting into a rare second round, when she could eventually win but perhaps be forced into promises about bills the House would consider or other concessions. People mentioning this scenario insisted on anonymity to describe behind-the-scenes conversations.

Voting for speaker has needed multiple ballots only 14 times, including in 1923, the only time that has occurred since the Civil War.

2020: A year where the fist-bump became mainstream greeting

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Sports Writer

The moment called for a handshake. Or would have, under what used to be considered normal circumstances.

As in, before 2020.

Here's the scene, from Dec. 21: Tabe Mase, the director of employee health services and a nurse practitioner at ChristianaCare Christiana Hospital in Newark, Delaware, had just inserted a needle — one delivering the COVID-19 vaccine — into the left arm of President-elect Joe Biden. After Biden said a few words about the magnitude of the moment, Mase extended her right arm to begin bidding him farewell.

Not for a handshake. For a fist bump — the official greeting of 2020, and probably beyond.

"It certainly would have been a handshake if it was 2019," Mase said several days after the fist bump

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seen live around the world. "But we're in the middle of a pandemic. We're trying to figure out ways to keep our patients safe and keep that human connection. ... That fist bump was, 'I see you, I hear you, I'm connecting with you, but I'm keeping you safe.'"

Safety is the primary reason why the status of the fist bump elevated big-time this year. The handshake was simply a casualty of the coronavirus. Once a customary greeting, it has become beyond frowned upon. No less of an authority than Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading infectious disease expert, flatly called for the end of shaking hands believing it not only would be a deterrent against spreading coronavirus, but even other viruses such as influenza.

So, now we bump, not shake. Some — Fauci among them — seem to prefer the elbow bump, maybe even a brush of forearms.

But let's face it: They lack the coolness of the fist bump. It's been here for years - just look to athletes' celebrations - but never more popular than now.

Barack and Michelle Obama famously fist-bumped when he clinched the Democratic presidential nomination in June 2008, making the move very cool in some circles, causing outrage in others. A Fox News analyst suggested at the time the then soon-to-be First Lady offering the fist bump to her husband was akin to a "terrorist's fist jab."

"Let me tell you, I'm not that hip. I got this from the young staff," Michelle Obama said that year on ABC's "The View." "That's the new high-five."

Now, it's the new handshake.

Santa Claus fist-bumped kids this year in lieu of trips to his lap. Heads of state from around the world — Japan, China, Malaysia, Canada, Kenya, France, Greece, Cyprus and many more — openly fist-bumped in 2020. Even in the demonstrations that dominated much of the year in the U.S., as racial tensions and cries to end social inequality reached new heights following the deaths of Black men and women at the hands of police, cops and protesters sometimes would tap their fists as a sign of compromise or even peace.

"When you think about it, it is definitely weird how we've converted and transitioned into doing this, with the fist bump all we do," Miami Heat guard Tyler Herro said. "But I feel like just everyone across the world ... has just gotten used to it and that's what we do because of the circumstances."

The handshake has been around for centuries. A widely held belief is that the handshake originated to prove to someone that a person was offering peace and not holding a weapon.

Turns out, maybe they were holding weapons after all.

"The reality of it is, in modern times, you may well be harboring a bio-weapon," Dr. Gregory Poland of the Mayo Clinic's Vaccine Research Group said earlier this year.

Poland's point mirrors the one Fauci has made repeatedly this year: Hands carry germs, and shaking hands simply exposes someone to the germs of another.

"I never was a big believer in shaking hands," President Donald Trump said in late March, as the nation was in the earliest throes of the pandemic that has caused more than 330,000 deaths already and with the toll certain to keep climbing. "Once I became a politician, you shake hands and you get a little bit used to it. You don't have to shake hands anymore with people. That might be something good coming out of this."

Trump shared a three-fist bump with then-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the G-20 summit — in 2019, long before we knew what the coronavirus was.

But in 2020, the bump exploded.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell fist-bumped Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Capitol Hill; the prime minister of Japan, Yoshihide Suga, fist-bumped Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Tokyo; cadets at the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York fist-bumped at their graduation.

The player who wins the Memorial golf tournament, hosted by golf great Jack Nicklaus, traditionally gets a handshake from the 18-time major champion. Jon Rahm won the tournament on July 19 and happily accepted a fist bump from Nicklaus, who revealed he battled the coronavirus in March and April.

"I've been dreaming of that handshake many times," Rahm said. "Well, it was a fist bump because of the situation, but still, how many people can say they got a congratulatory fist bump from Jack Nicklaus?"

This year, probably more than ever.

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Fitting, it seems, that the fist bump punctuated one of the year's most significant moments — Biden getting the vaccine that may eventually deliver some normalcy again. Mase said fist-bumping the soon-to-be President of the United States, after he received the vaccine that we can all hope reverts the world to some sort of normal again, "just came naturally."

"It's going to be here as long as the pandemic is," Mase said. "But I do hope we get back to handshakes. As soon as the pandemic goes down, I hope we get back to handshakes and that human connection. But a fist bump is still good. It's still a human connection. And it's safe."

Coastal Carolina's Jamey Chadwell is AP coach of the year

By RALPH D. RUSSO AP College Football Writer

Coastal Carolina's Jamey Chadwell is The Associated Press college football coach of the year after leading the Chanticleers to a surprising, near-perfect season.

Chadwell received 16 first-place votes and 88 points from the AP Top 25 panel to finish ahead of Indiana's Tom Allen, who was second with 14 first-place votes and 66 points. Cincinnati's Luke Fickell was third (5, 44) and Alabama's Nick Saban was fourth (8, 42).

Chadwell is the first Sun Belt Conference coach to win the AP award, which was established in 1988, and the third coach to earn it with a team from outside the Power Five leagues. UCF's Scott Frost was AP coach of the year in 2017 and Gary Patterson won the first of his two AP awards with TCU in 2009 when the Horned Frogs were competing in the Mountain West.

San Jose State's Brent Brennan finished fifth, meaning Group of Five teams had three of the top five coaches in this year's voting.

The 43-year-old Chadwell directed a breakout season for No. 9 Coastal Carolina (11-1) in his third year leading the program.

The Chanticleers were picked last in the Sun Belt's East Division after finishing 5-7 (2-6) last year.

"I knew we weren't as bad as people were going to pick us to be," Chadwell said. "I thought we were going to be pretty good. I knew we were going to be better."

Instead, behind freshman quarterback Grayson McCall running a creative option offense, Coastal Carolina had its best season since transitioning to the Bowl Subdivision in 2017.

The Chanticleers made the Sun Belt championship game, though they did not get to play in it because of COVID-19 issues within the program. But they finished with a perfect regular season that included victories over Sun Belt West winner Louisiana-Lafayette and three-time conference champion Appalachian State.

McCall was injured during the victory against Louisiana-Lafayette and didn't play the following week. When the Chanticleers still beat Georgia Southern the next week without McCall, Chadwell knew he had something special.

"Nobody panicked," Chadwell said. "We started getting all kinds of national attention after that Louisiana game and I started worrying that's going to go to our head, and it didn't. And after that game when we found a way to win it, I thought we're going to be tough to beat from here on out."

Coastal Carolina also beat BYU in one of best games of this strange season. After a virus outbreak forced Liberty to pull out of a nonconference game scheduled for Dec. 5 in Conway, South Carolina, the Cougars and Chants agreed to play on short notice.

Coastal won a 22-17 thriller, stopping BYU on the final play a yard short of the goal line and a winning touchdown.

Earlier this week, senior defensive end Tarron Jackson was named an AP All-American and senior defensive tackle C.J. Brewer was selected to the third team.

"This has been the best senior leadership class I have ever been around," Chadwell said.

The Chants' perfect season came to an end last week when they lost in overtime to Liberty in the Cure Bowl.

Chadwell came to Coastal Carolina in 2017 as offensive coordinator for former coach Joe Moglia after four successful seasons at FCS Charleston Southern. Instead of being offensive coordinator, Chadwell served

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as interim head coach at Coastal in his first season when Moglia needed to sit out for health reasons.

"That was the worst professional year of my life. It was so challenging," Chadwell said. "It was basically being a substitute teacher when everybody knew the teacher was coming back."

Moglia returned for one season in 2018 and then retired, handing it off to Chadwell, who quickly brought the program to new heights.

"I never doubted that it would work. I felt strongly about what we were doing," Chadwell said. "I think this year was maybe the first time it was truly my team."

And it turned out to be the best team in school history.

"Everybody wants 2020 to end. I kept telling my wife I hope it gets to Dec. 31 and we just keep running it over because it's been unbelievable," Chadwell said.

Voting

Jamey Chadwell, Coastal Carolina - 88 points (16 first-place votes).

Tom Allen, Indiana - 66 (14).

Luke Fickell, Cincinnati - 44 (5).

Nick Saban, Alabama - 42 (8).

Brent Brennan, San Jose State - 25 (3).

Jimbo Fisher, Texas A&M - 7 (2).

Brian Kelly, Notre Dame - 7 (1).

Matt Campbell, Iowa State - 7.

Billy Napier, Louisiana-Lafayette - 2

Kalani Sitake, BYU - 2.

Ryan Day, Ohio State - 1.

Dave Doeren, North Carolina State - 1.

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Lives Lost: Families find solace in memories and mementos

By PETER PRENGAMAN and RAGHURAM VADAREVU, with illustrations by PETER HAMLIN Associated Press
Long after the funeral or memorial, if one was even possible, and long after the condolence cards, the phone calls of support, there is simply the emptiness. That's when the memories rush in.

They can come from the feel of wearing a loved one's necklace, its closeness trying to bridge an impossible distance. Or the embrace of the teddy bear made from their old flannel shirts, familiar and safe. Or the sight of a heron, a symbol of a family's heritage, regal and proud.

The search for solace takes many forms. But when a global tragedy, a pandemic, disrupts that most delicate of life's moments — a loved one's passing — finding comfort also takes on new importance. A single life can become lost among many, seemingly blending into an ever-growing death toll.

Over the last year, Associated Press journalists profiled dozens of ordinary people around the world who died from the coronavirus, aiming to tell the story of COVID-19, one person at a time. As the turbulent year comes to a close, the AP revisited the families and friends of 10 of those lost to see how they are coping.

In their stories, windows into private grief amid a public calamity, they are finding comfort in the act of remembering, whether it's in the cradling of an item their loved one left behind, in a vow to fulfill a promise they would've blessed — or in imagining them, their strength, in better days.

The gray sandals Yurancy Castillo left in her family's home in Venezuela sit next to her bed with a Tweety bird pillowcase.

Keeping the shoes there allows her mother to briefly trick herself into thinking that her spunky curly-haired daughter will return soon. But now, six months after her death at 30 from COVID-19, that grows harder to do.

"Life isn't the same for me," Mery Arroyo says. "Every hour, I'm thinking of my girl."

Castillo fled Venezuela three years ago as her country's economic and political turmoil worsened and her family's fridge grew empty. By bus, she traveled across four countries to Peru.

It wasn't long before she found odd jobs like selling sewing machines and waitressing — work that offered a measly salary, but enough to send money back home, so that her parents could buy food. She'd call her mother, telling her she dreamed of home.

Then, the virus took her life. Now, her ashes sit in a Lima apartment, where her sister is watching over them until she can return them home.

In Venezuela, Arroyo's home is filled with reminders of her daughter. Photos of her smiling fill tables and walls.

And then there are the sandals, worn and faded. Arroyo imagines her daughter left them behind because they were too tattered to take on the journey to a new life. At first, they were a reminder that her absence was only temporary.

Sometimes, for a brief moment, Arroyo can convince herself that's still true.

— Christine Armario

Saferia Johnson's favorite chair, a rocker with a blue cushion, is empty. Clothes that she excitedly bought hang with tags, unworn. And the smile of the Thomasville, Georgia, native, so beaming and inviting, now lives on only in a heart-shaped photograph on a necklace her mother wears.

Tressa Clements has found herself continuing to talk to her since her daughter died from COVID-19 in August and hearing her voice echo in her mind. Sometimes it's the mundane, like the Christmas lists of

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Johnson's two sons, 5 and 7. Other times it's the void that sends Clements into tears.

"She tells me, 'Mom, stop crying,'" Clements says. "She tells me how beautiful it is where she is."

The pain of the 36-year-old's death is complicated for those she left behind by the absence that preceded it. Johnson had been serving a prison sentence in Florida on fraud charges and, though visits and calls and messages kept her connected, normalcy had already been upended.

Johnson's loved ones are now trying to find their footing in a world that's familiar and different.

Her aunt still makes macaroni and cheese, but it comes out of the oven without its most enthusiastic fan waiting. Johnson's little boys are as inquisitive as ever, but now they're asking if mommy might still be here if she only had a mask to protect her.

Holidays still come, but Clements was too sad to get out of bed on Thanksgiving and she wondered if a Christmas tree was right, too.

When Clements sees her grandsons upset, she shakes herself to cheer the boys. That's what convinced her to put the tree up, complete with the ornaments Johnson made as a child – little bells she decorated, and a paper heart with a picture of her in the center from second grade.

"Mommy would want you to be so happy during Christmas," she says she told the boys.

— Matt Sedensky

Dr. Amged El-Hawrani's family remembers his hands.

His wife, Pamela, thinks about every scar, every shape, every millimeter of the hands that made her feel safe, protected and loved. His brother Amal recalls their strength — a reflection of the confidence that helped Amged become a respected ear, nose and throat specialist in England.

"You know, surgeons are supposed to have long, delicate fingers," Amal says. "But his hands were made for boxing or something."

When Amged, 55, died from COVID-19 on March 28, he was one of the first doctors in Britain to succumb to the virus, becoming a symbol of the danger faced every day by healthcare workers battling the virus.

His family recall simpler things, like his passion for cars. His son, Ashraf, remembers his father behind the wheel, talking about World War II and introducing him to the music of Bob Marley and Jimi Hendrix.

There were deeper lessons as well. "He taught me the significance of respect and equality," Ashraf wrote in a memorial honoring his father. "He also stressed the importance of not worrying about the things I cannot control, which he displayed to me right up until the end of his life."

That philosophy was forged early. Born in Sudan, Amged grew up in western England, where he and his brothers were often the only non-white children in the neighborhood. But he loved his new home, committed himself to medicine and never let anyone else's opinion bother him.

He persevered. And now, so does his family.

"Life just takes you forward," Amal says. "Regardless of whether you are ready or not."

— Danica Kirka

Amid profound heartache, Marc Papaj is looking to his roots for solace.

A member of the Seneca Nation's Heron Clan, Papaj and his family have long drawn pride from the graceful bird. Since his mother, grandmother and aunt died of COVID-19 in late May and mid-June, he's been drawing strength from images of herons.

"Friends and family have been sending drawings of three herons together," says Papaj, while recently cleaning out his mother's house in Salamanca, New York, on the Allegany Reservation. "Our tribe is matrilineal, so to lose three prominent members who were mothers is such a blow."

Papaj's grandmother, Norma Kennedy, and his mother, Diane Kennedy, both had long careers with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, taking on various roles that ranged from distributing funds to native communities to being a peacemaker judge on a tribal court. Papaj's aunt, Cindy Mohr, was a long-time elementary school teacher.

Normally during the holidays, there are negotiations about where the celebrations will take place: Papaj's home, his mom's home or the homes of his grandmother or aunt. Before the pandemic changed every-

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thing, they all lived within an hour's drive of each other in western New York state.

"It was always a great holiday no matter what," says Papaj.

This year, there is just silence.

"I tend to well up first, get that tickle in my throat," says Papaj, recounting how his wife, two teenage daughters and 10-year-old son took time at Thanksgiving at home to remember who wasn't with them. "It speaks volumes because this would have been the Thanksgiving to lean on family."

— Peter Prengaman

Since Raymond Millare's football coach died from the coronavirus, there have been times when the Hawaii teen would sink into his own world.

Millare would throw on cordless headphones to listen to melancholy music and scroll through old photos with Willie Talamoa on his phone. Some afternoons, he would think back to how Talamoa would swing by his house to pick him up for practice.

"Honestly it's like it's not even real. But it's reality. So I kind of just got to hang in there and stay strong for him, like he would do for me," the 18-year-old high school senior says.

Talamoa died at 36 in August. Fellow coaches and players in the Honolulu neighborhood of Kalihi where he grew up remember him as a mentor and father figure who generously gave his time and money to provide young people opportunities he didn't have.

Millare was one of them, and he's felt his absence. Sadness has at times made it hard for Millare to control his feelings and focus in school. But his parents remind him that Talamoa is still with him, even if the coach is no longer present physically.

"That kind of motivates me and makes me want to be active again," he says, adding he wants to finish the school year strong for coach.

The coronavirus pandemic prevents Millare and his teammates from holding group practice or playing. So Millare works out at home or a park. He likes to put on the pair of cleats Talamoa gave him because it makes him feel like he's warming up for a game or going to practice.

And, most of all, he likes them because they remind him of "Coach Willie."

— Audrey McAvoy

Anisha Khanna isn't sure when her older sister Priya got the necklace, but it was clear she loved it — a pendant, with her initials, "PK," inside, a flower and a symbol of an eye meant to ward off bad luck.

Now, it is among Khanna's most cherished possessions, a reminder of her sister, a fellow physician in New Jersey, who she admired for her kindness and intelligence and who she lost to COVID-19 in April.

"It was something small, but I know she liked it a lot and that meant the world to me," she says.

Dr. Priya Khanna died at 43 just days ahead of their father, Dr. Satyender Khanna, 77, who also succumbed to the virus. They both died in the same northern New Jersey hospital.

The ensuing months have compounded the pain, with the family's Hindu burial traditions being upended by the pandemic restrictions and their mother, Dr. Kamlesh Khanna, overcoming the virus and then getting shingles.

"Every day is a struggle, a lot of ups and downs," said Anisha Khanna, the youngest of three sisters who followed their surgeon father and pediatrician mother into medicine.

The family has found comfort in the company of others, both in person and virtually.

On Priya's birthday in November, Anisha and several of her sister's friends met at a restaurant, a rare outing during the pandemic, and ate some of Priya's favorite dishes. Kamlesh Khanna joined a Facebook group of COVID-19 survivors, some of whom seek out her medical advice.

"It makes her feel like she's not the only one," Anisha says.

— Dave Porter

José Miguel Cruz da Costa has been busy. Since his grandmother Hannelore Cruz passed away from COVID-19 in March, he has been refurbishing the house she left behind in Portugal — and adding a very

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personal touch.

In a "special corner" of the living room, he's placed her black upright piano, beneath a painting of an orchestra made by one of her uncles in Austria. It's a tribute to the "angelic voice," as he calls her, with a passion for classical music.

"I'm sure she'd approve," he says.

Cruz, who died at 76, arrived in Portugal as a child evacuee from devastated Vienna after World War II. She eventually pursued a singing career in the northern Portuguese city of Braga, taught singing and performed at local weddings and church recitals.

A flamboyant dresser, she'd turn heads on the streets of conservative northern Portugal.

Her grandson visited her almost every day after she moved into a care home for the elderly. He has lost, he says, a "cherished" routine — joining her for coffee after breakfast and, on Fridays, taking her to the hairdressers and then out for lunch.

The Christmas holiday laid bare another absence: her homemade pumpkin muffins and other traditional desserts of northern Portugal.

Her grandson says the family misses their "kitchen virtuoso."

— Barry Hatton

The big green taco truck's engine started to rattle, and Isaac Lopez thought of his late dad.

"I wish I could talk to him to ask him about it," he says. "I'll probably have to get a mechanic. He would have fixed it himself."

Tomas Lopez died at 44 from COVID-19 in April. The jovial face of the family's Taco El Tajin restaurant and food trucks in Seattle, he had long served Amazon employees, construction workers and other customers with a hearty "Hello, my friend!"

Isaac, 19, has taken over many of his father's roles in the business.

"I didn't know what to do with my life," Isaac says. "Now I do, and I love it."

Still, it's hard work, especially without his dad's companionship and guidance.

Isaac used to sleep until 7 a.m. before his shift in one of the trucks. Now he's up with his mom by 4, making sure there's gas and propane for the trucks, getting supplies at the store and preparing food at the restaurant before driving one of the trucks to Seattle.

More than anything else, Isaac says, the taco truck his dad always drove — the biggest one — reminds him of the old man.

He doesn't usually drive that one, though. It's too big, too scary to handle. He drives a smaller one to the same neighborhood his father served for years, dishing up burritos, tortas and flan to many of the same customers.

As they approach the truck, those customers hear a familiar greeting: "Hello, my friend!"

— Gene Johnson

When Tri Novia Septiani sometimes visits the Jakarta apartment of Michael Robert Marampe, her fiancée who died from coronavirus, the memories are so overwhelming that she has had to put away things that remind her of him — a teddy bear, books and some of his clothes.

"I cannot stand to see them around," she says.

There are several items that she won't put away: an electronic keyboard, a piano and several guitars he used to compose the song, "You Are The Last One," for her. It was to be sung at their wedding in April, the same month he died at 28 of COVID-19 in Indonesia.

Music brought the couple together. Septiani, a fashion designer and singer, met him at the church where he played piano. They formed the duo, Miknov, covering popular songs and composing their own music they uploaded to Instagram and YouTube.

Over the last several months, Septiani has been working with musicians to produce the song. She sings the solo, just as they planned, but without the man she was to make a life with.

"It is very difficult to sing that song with a different pianist," she says. It took her a very long time to

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finish the song because the recording sessions frequently ended with her in tears.

"I have accepted that he is gone," she says. "But I do not want to say goodbye."

Still, producing the song was a way to honor his love for music. When she sees his keyboard and piano, she is reminded that she will go on with her memories of him and the spirit he showed in the passions he pursued.

— Edna Tarigan

Meghan Carrier remembers how her dad, Cleon Boyd, loved his flannel shirts, how he'd wear them during ski season and how he couldn't be talked out of them — even when the weather in Vermont warmed up.

Carrier has turned to her dad's flannels collection lately as she wrestles with the sadness of losing him and his twin brother Leon to COVID-19.

She's knitted a teddy bear out of her dad's oversized flannel shirts, and included a collar from one of them. She can still smell her dad's favorite cologne, Jovan Musk, on them. She sometimes pulls the bear out and gives it a hug.

"It just makes me feel closer to my dad. It still smells like him," she says. "It gives me a little bit of comfort."

The twins died a week apart in April, leaving a hole in everything from birthdays to musical jam sessions that are so important to the Boyd family. Another of Cleon Boyd's children, Chris, says he can't take listening to his dad's favorite country songs.

"I don't play my guitar as much as I should. Songs on the radio, I have to shut them off," he says. "It makes me cry. I can't do it."

Relatives haven't been able to have a traditional funeral for them, settling instead to spread their ashes around favorite haunts: the sugar shack where the brothers held court during maple syrup season; Haystack Mountain; and the summit of Mount Snow.

"It was the one spot my dad absolutely loved," Carrier said of Mount Snow, where he groomed the ski trails for years. "To be able to watch the sun come up and feel the sun touch your face, it warms you up, and reminds me of my dad."

— Michael Casey

This story is part of a yearlong series, "Lives Lost," which tells the stories of ordinary people from across the world who died from the coronavirus and the impact they had on their loved ones and their communities.

After a tumultuous 2020, Black leaders weigh next steps

By KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — As a barrier-breaking year draws to a close, there's one undeniable fact: the strength of Black political power.

Black voters were a critical part of the coalition that clinched President-elect Joe Biden's White House bid. The nation will swear in its first Black woman and first person of South Asian descent as vice president, Sen. Kamala Harris, who herself may be a leading presidential candidate in four years. And as the global push for racial justice continues, Congress is set to welcome several new Black, progressive freshmen next year.

But while Black political and civil rights leaders see opportunity to work with a Biden-Harris administration to build upon the momentum created in 2020, they acknowledge the road ahead won't be easy given the makeup of Washington and a narrowly divided Congress.

This was a year in which America experienced a racial awakening, fueled by longstanding racial inequities and structural racism laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic's disparate impact on Black Americans. But Black leaders believe next year will be one that defines the trajectory of America and whether the nation has truly learned from the racism embedded deeply in its history.

"What I think we need to do now is support this new administration that seems to have leadership as

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a part of his agenda," said House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, a close ally of Biden. "We are where we are today because of a lack of leadership and I think that Joe Biden has demonstrated in his articulations that he's prepared to provide the kind of leadership that we need."

Biden's decisive win was seen in part as a repudiation of the racist rhetoric of President Donald Trump. But activists and civil rights leaders believe years of grassroots organizing helped bring about Biden's victory and they intend to seek a return on their investment.

The NAACP has urged Biden to consider creating a new Cabinet-level position focused on racial justice, equity and advancement. Derrick Johnson, the NAACP's president and CEO, said it would be a bold action with potential to yield significant results.

"Trump is a symptom to a larger problem that has gone unaddressed in this country for decades," Johnson said. "The NAACP specifically takes the position that if you state a priority for your administration, someone must own that portfolio for the entirety of the administration and be accountable for delivering on a commitment. And one of the things that was promised was the issue of racial equity being addressed."

Biden has faced intense pressure to create a diverse Cabinet that is not only representative of America but able to implement tangible policies. Clyburn has publicly urged Biden to include more Black men and women in his administration.

"You don't get a second chance to make a first impression," Clyburn said, before adding, "It was not a good impression."

Biden has named a handful of Black leaders to his Cabinet, including Rep. Marcia Fudge to run the Department of Housing and Urban Development and retired Gen. Lloyd Austin as defense secretary. But Clyburn said opportunity remains for him to appoint more, including as attorney general.

In recent weeks, Biden and his transition teams have held meetings with various civil rights leaders and grassroots activists, who have pledged to hold him accountable for promises made during the campaign.

Maurice Mitchell, a national director of the Working Families Party, a progressive multiracial grassroots effort, was one of 10 who met recently with Treasury pick Janet Yellen to discuss racial and economic justice. Mitchell said Yellen made a commitment to repairing historical harms that have been inflicted upon Black and other communities of color.

"They've expressed a willingness to engage with advocates and organizers, so we're going to hold them to that," said Mitchell, who is also a Movement for Black Lives strategist. "A lot of Black people are suffering and if we don't go forward and keep this momentum and keep our focus on structural change, we will be missing a significant opportunity."

The Movement for Black Lives plans next year to continue pushing proposed federal legislation it unveiled this year. The BREATHE Act would radically transform the nation's criminal justice system, including by eliminating agencies like the Drug Enforcement Administration and the use of surveillance technology.

The proposal came during a national reckoning around brutality from law enforcement and systemic racism that spurred global protests and cries for change after the police killings of George Floyd and other Black Americans.

"We defeated Trump and that was a mandate of the Black movement to really defend Black lives and ensure that he could no longer terrorize in a really public and institutional way," said Jessica Byrd, who leads the Movement for Black Lives' Electoral Justice Project. "I also know for sure that the only way the Democrats are going to win anything else in 2022 isn't if they quell progressive calls for change but if they actually govern and change people's lives."

But to push any real federal policy change, Congress will be key. Democrats faced serious setbacks in congressional races this year, losing so many seats in the House that the party has the narrowest majority in at least two decades. Control of the Senate hinges on two runoff elections in Georgia next week.

Still, several progressives will join the House next year, bringing a fresh perspective for a party with an aging leadership.

Activist Cori Bush, who led protests after the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, ousted longtime Rep. William Lacy Clay in Missouri's Democratic primary, ending a political dynasty that had

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spanned more than a half-century. Bush said among her first priorities is a more robust COVID-19 relief package that provides greater assistance to families.

"I'm not so far away from my own pain and struggle and adversity that I can't remember what it was like," Bush said, noting the immense pressure facing families right now. "I'm not taking off the hat of the activist at all, it's who I am. And so I'll use that power and drive, and that moxie."

Jamaal Bowman, a former middle school principal, ousted longtime incumbent U.S. Rep. Eliot L. Engel in New York's Bronx.

"I'm very encouraged, but we have to be vigilant," Bowman said. "We cannot let up and we have to continue to engage, organize and build a nation that works for all of us. There are people on the other side who can care less about the progressive movement or about wealth sharing or Black people. ... So we cannot stop, we have to be relentless to really build and get this country where we need it to be."

In another series of firsts, New York Democrats Mondaire Jones and Ritchie Torres became the first two openly gay Black men to serve in the House. Torres identifies as Afro-Latino.

But California Rep. Karen Bass, a progressive who has pushed for criminal justice reform and other key legislation, said while it's important to make note of a history-making year, Democrats face an enormous uphill battle if the party is unable to win the Georgia Senate seats.

"Everything resides on Jan. 5 and whether or not we win those Senate seats," Bass said. "If we do not win those Senate seats, then it is not going to be the full-force, full agenda that all of us would like to see take place."

Bass said Biden could run into challenges similar to those President Barack Obama faced from a Republican-majority Senate that stalled much of his agenda. And beyond the Georgia races, the Senate is losing its only Black woman when Harris takes the oath of office in January.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom faced pressure to name a Black woman as her replacement, with both Bass and U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee floated as possible choices. But Newsom appointed California Secretary of State Alex Padilla last week, making him the state's first Latino in the U.S. Senate.

"There will not be a Black woman in the U.S. Senate and frankly there will only be one Black Democrat and that's Cory Booker," Bass said ahead of Newsom's announcement. "Everyone wants to celebrate Black women and what a wonderful outsized role we played in the election, but our representation is not important. So, of course, I think it is vital that that happens."

Though a tough road lies ahead, many remain hopeful that real change is on the horizon — including Bush, who noted that her political ascension is the result of a rich legacy of Black grassroots organizing done by civil rights legends like Shirley Chisholm and Fannie Lou Hamer.

"I'm so encouraged because now we can expect more and I will be one of those people alongside my brother, Jamaal Bowman, in helping to usher in more and make room," Bush said. "We got in the door — now we're just holding it open."

Stafford is a member of AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at http://twitter.com/kat__stafford.

Virus aid, police reform dominate new US laws for 2021

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

Responses to the coronavirus pandemic and police brutality dominated legislative sessions in 2020, leading to scores of new laws that will take effect in the new year.

Virus-related laws include those offering help to essential workers, boosting unemployment benefits and requiring time off for sick employees. A resolution in Alabama formally encouraged fist-bumping over handshakes.

Legislatures also addressed police use of force against Black people and others of color after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis led to widespread protests against police brutality. Among other things, new laws will mandate oversight and reporting, create civilian review panels and require more disclosures

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about problem officers.

States including California, Delaware, Iowa, New York, Oregon and Utah passed bans on police chokeholds. Floyd, who was Black, died after a white officer pressed a knee into his neck for several minutes while being recorded on video, even as Floyd pleaded for air.

New York state Assemblyman Walter T. Mosley noted the hundreds of Black men and women killed at the hands of police between the cries of "I can't breathe" by Eric Garner, who died after being put in a chokehold by New York City police in 2014, and those of Floyd in May.

Mosley, a Brooklyn Democrat who is Black, said the Eric Garner Anti-Chokehold Act was "an important step forward, but it will not be the last."

Despite reforms in some states, the response to Floyd's death was not uniform. Similar use-of-force or disciplinary proposals in several other states failed, and some even moved in the opposite direction.

Georgia created a new crime beginning Jan. 1 defined as bias-motivated intimidation, which would apply to the death or serious bodily injury of police, firefighters and emergency personnel. It also extends to cases involving more than \$500 worth of damage to their property because of "actual or perceived employment as a first responder." Violations are punishable by one to five years in prison and a fine of as much as \$5,000.

The law was passed by Republicans over the objections of Democrats and civil liberties groups, who said police already have enough protections. Republicans insisted on the law as part of a deal to pass a new hate crimes law in Georgia that drew bipartisan support.

While legislatures tackled some elements of the coronavirus outbreak this year, most sessions had ended before the current wave of cases, deaths and renewed stay-at-home orders. Lawmakers of both major parties have vowed to make the pandemic response a centerpiece of their 2021 sessions, addressing issues ranging from school reopenings to governors' emergency powers.

The virus also refocused attention on the nation's uneven and expensive health care system. Tackling issues of coverage and costs were common themes in 2020.

A Washington measure caps the monthly out-of-pocket cost of insulin at \$100 until Jan. 1, 2023, and requires the state Health Care Authority to monitor the price of insulin. A new Connecticut law requires pharmacists to dispense a 30-day emergency supply of diabetes-related drugs and devices, with a price cap, for diabetics who have less than a week's supply. Both laws take effect Jan. 1.

"It's unconscionable that anyone should have to limit or go without a common and widely-available life-saving drug on an emergency basis in America in 2021," Connecticut state Sen. Derek Slap, a West Hartford Democrat, said in a statement.

A much-anticipated Medicaid expansion is coming to Oklahoma in the new year after years of resistance from Republicans in the Legislature and governor's office. Voters narrowly approved a constitutional amendment expanding the federal-state insurance program to an additional estimated 215,000 low-income residents. It takes effect in July.

Lawmakers must determine how to cover the projected \$164 million state share during their 2021 session. The cost could be considerably higher, given the number of Oklahomans who have lost their jobs and work-related health insurance because of the pandemic.

Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt had urged voters to reject the plan. He said the state would have to "either raise taxes or cut services somewhere else like education, first responders, or roads and bridges" to pay for the expansion.

A new law in Georgia aims to limit consumers from getting stuck with surprise medical bills by requiring insurers in many cases to pay for care by a doctor or at a hospital not within their network of providers. The law protects patients from financial responsibility beyond what they would normally have to pay. Instead, insurers and providers can take disputes to the state insurance commissioner. Minnesota also has what's being called a continuity of care law, going into effect Jan. 1.

Other notable laws taking effect in the new year:

— Voters in Arizona, Montana, New Jersey and South Dakota approved measures legalizing recreational

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marijuana. New Jersey's Democratic-led Legislature and Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy are working to set up a legal marketplace and to update laws already on the books to decriminalize marijuana possession.

— Colorado will prohibit landlords from refusing to show, rent or lease housing based on a person's source of income or involvement in the type of contract required to receive public housing assistance. Landlords can still do credit checks, but the act makes it an unfair housing practice unless they're conducted checks for every prospective tenant.

— New Hampshire will make multiple changes to state laws regarding sexual assault. Starting Jan. 1, the definition of sexual assault will be expanded to include any sexual contact between school employees and students between the ages of 13 and 18. Previously, such contact could be considered consensual and not a crime if the student was 16 or 17. Other legislation taking effect in mid-January increases protections for sexual assault victims and requires colleges and universities to adopt sexual misconduct policies. The bill requires colleges to provide free access to medical and legal support services, anti-retaliation protections, confidential advising services, data on sexual violence, and prevention and response training.

— Georgia will require an audit starting in 2021 before movies and television productions are awarded the state's generous tax credit, which has allowed the highest subsidies of any state. The credit, which rebates up to 30% of a production's value, cost nearly \$900 million in foregone tax revenue in 2019 as movie and TV production boomed in Georgia. Examinations were highly critical of the tax credit, finding some companies that received tax credits didn't earn them.

— California will require companies based there to have at least one board director by the end of 2021 who is a racial or sexual minority, with larger numbers required by 2022. Companies with 100 or more employees also must start sending information on employees' race, ethnicity and gender to the state.

— Connecticut employers must begin taking deductions from their employees' paychecks for a new paid family and medical leave program, under a state law passed in 2019. The state's estimated 100,000 businesses will be responsible for withholding half a percent from worker wages. Qualified employees can begin receiving benefits on Jan. 1, 2022. Massachusetts also begins a new paid family medical leave program in the new year. It offers a 12-week benefit in most cases, extending to 26 weeks for those caring for a military member undergoing treatment.

— Oklahoma will extend a property tax exemption for religious institutions to include property owned by a church if it conducts instruction of children from pre-K through grade 12.

Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Jeff Amy in Atlanta; Mike Catalini in Trenton, N.J.; Sue Haigh in Hartford, Conn.; Steve Karnowski in Minneapolis; Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Wash.; Steve LeBlanc in Boston; Sean Murphy in Oklahoma City; Patricia Nieberg in Denver; Holly Ramer in Concord, N.H.; Don Thompson in Sacramento, Calif.; and Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City.

Nieberg is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Restoring longleaf pines, keystone of once vast ecosystems

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY Associated Press

DESOTO NATIONAL FOREST, Miss. (AP) — When European settlers came to North America, fire-dependent savannas anchored by lofty pines with footlong needles covered much of what became the southern United States.

Yet by the 1990s, logging and clear-cutting for farms and development had all but eliminated longleaf pines and the grasslands beneath where hundreds of plant and animal species flourished.

Now, thanks to a pair of modern day Johnny Appleseeds, landowners, government agencies and non-profits are working in nine coastal states from Virginia to Texas to bring back pines named for the long needles prized by Native Americans for weaving baskets.

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Longleaf pines now cover as much as 7,300 square miles (19,000 square kilometers) — and more than one-quarter of that has been planted since 2010.

"I like to say we rescued longleaf from the dustbin. I don't think we had any idea how successful we'd be," said Rhett Johnson, who founded The Longleaf Alliance in 1995 with another Auburn University forestry professor.

That's not to say that the tall, straight and widely spaced pines will ever gain anything near their once vast extent. But their reach is, after centuries, expanding rather than contracting.

Scientists estimate that longleaf savannas once covered up to 143,750 square miles (372,000 square kilometers), an area bigger than Germany. By the 1990s, less than 3% remained in scattered patches. Most are in areas too wet or dry to farm.

Fire suppression played a critical role on the longleaf's decline. Fires clear and fertilize ground that longleaf seeds must touch to sprout. Properly timed, they also spark seedlings' first growth spurt. And, crucially for the entire ecosystem, they kill shrubs and hardwood trees that would otherwise block the sun from seedlings, grasses and wildflowers.

"The diversity of the longleaf pine system is below our knees," sad Keith Coursey, silviculturist for about 70% of the 529,000-acre (214,100-hectare) DeSoto National Forest in south Mississippi.

Of the 1,600 plant species found only in the Southeast, nearly 900 are only in longleaf forests, including species that trap bugs as well as fire-adapted grasses and wildflowers.

The forests harbor turkeys and quail — but also about 100 other kinds of birds, nearly 40 types of animals and 170 reptile and amphibian species found only among longleaf. One is the gopher tortoise whose burrows shelter scores of animal species including mice, foxes, rabbits, snakes, even birds, and hundreds of kinds of insects.

Plants and animals have lost ground along with the longleaf. Nearly 30 are endangered or threatened. Dozens more are being studied to decide whether they should be protected.

Johnson, who retired in 2006 as director of Auburn's Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center in south Alabama, said working surrounded by longleaf made him realize that stands were losing quality and shrinking in range. "Just as alarming, people who understood longleaf were disappearing as well," he said.

Johnson and alliance cofounder Dean Gjerstad spread the word about the tree's importance. "We were like Johnny Appleseed — we were on the road all the time," said Johnson, who retired from the alliance in 2012.

By 2005, the alliance, government agencies, nonprofits, universities and private partners were working together. In 2010, they launched America's Longleaf Restoration Initiative, with a goal of having 12,500 square miles (32,370 square kilometers) of longleaf by 2025.

The initiative built on efforts by federal and state agencies including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service to provide incentives for owners to return land to longleaf pines, Johnson said.

Most of the land planted in the last 10 years had been "highly erodible cropland," he said. "Better a longleaf plantation than a cotton field."

The initiative is trying to ensure that at least half the restored land is close enough to existing forests that plants and animals could, over generations, turn the new stands into functioning ecosystems.

When the ecosystem returns, landowners can look forward to annual income from activities such as hunting and wildlife photography rather than only from intermittent timber harvests, said Kevin Norton, acting chief of the National Resources Conservation Service.

Because most longleaf acreage is privately owned, 80% to 85% of the planting so far has been on private land, said Carol Denhof, president of The Longleaf Alliance.

Another 5,160 square miles (13,360 square kilometers) must be planted or reclaimed from stands overly mixed with other tree species to meet the initiative's 2025 deadline, she said. "I'm hopeful we can get there but ... we have a lot of work to do."

About 400 acres (160 hectares) of land returned to longleaf were planted by the Alabama-Coushatta

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Tribe of Texas, for their needles. But branches from most of the first planting are now too high to reach. So Gesse Bullock, the tribe's fire management specialist, said he is pushing for another planting on the 10,200-acre (4,100-hectare) reservation.

Basket weavers include the tribe's realty officer, Elliott Abbey. "When I was younger," he said, "I thought it was work – something my aunts made me do,"

Now, Abbey said, "It strikes me in the heart that this could die out."

This story has been corrected to show that the U.S. Department of Agriculture's agency is called the Natural Resources Conservation Service, not the National Resources Conservation Service.

Follow Janet McConnaughey on Twitter: @JanetMcCinNO

COVID cluckers: Pandemic feeds demand for backyard chickens

By TERENCE CHEA Associated Press

ROSS, Calif. (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic is coming home to roost in America's backyards.

Forced to hunker down at home, more people are setting up coops and raising their own chickens, which provide an earthy hobby, animal companionship and a steady supply of fresh eggs.

Amateur chicken-keeping has been growing in popularity in recent years as people seek environmental sustainability in the food they eat. The pandemic is accelerating those trends, some breeders and poultry groups say, prompting more people to make the leap into poultry parenthood.

Businesses that sell chicks, coops and other supplies say they have seen a surge in demand since the pandemic took hold in March and health officials ordered residents to stay home.

Allison and Ron Abta of Northern California's Marin County had for years talked about setting up a backyard coop. They took the plunge in August.

The couple's three kids were thrilled when their parents finally agreed to buy chicks.

"These chickens are like my favorite thing, honestly," said 12-year-old Violet, holding a dark feathered hen in her woodsy backyard. "They actually have personalities once you get to know them."

The baby birds lived inside the family's home for six weeks before moving into the chicken run in the yard. A wire-mesh enclosure now houses the five heritage hens — each a different breed — and protects them from bobcats, foxes and other predators.

Mark Podgwaite, a Vermont chicken breeder who heads the American Poultry Association, said he and other breeders have noticed an uptick in demand for chicks since the pandemic began. His organization, which represents breeders and poultry-show exhibitors, has seen a jump in new members.

"Without question, the resurgence in raising backyard poultry has been unbelievable over the past year," said Podgwaite, who keeps a flock of roughly 100 birds. "It just exploded. Whether folks wanted birds just for eggs or eggs and meat, it seemed to really, really take off."

The Abta family bought the chicks from Mill Valley Chickens, which sells chickens, feed and supplies and builds coops and runs. Owner Leslie Citroen also offers classes for first-time chicken keepers. She estimates her sales have grown 400% this year.

"Once COVID hit, my phone just started ringing off the hook and it just has not slowed down," Citroen said. "I don't think it's going to slow down. I think this new interest and passion in chickens is permanent."

Citroen said most of her customers this year are first-time chicken keepers. They range from parents looking for something to keep homebound children busy to "preppers" who want their own protein supply in case the world falls apart.

"Demand is just through the roof right now," Citroen said. "I've sold all my baby chicks. I've sold all my juveniles. And I'm starting to sell some of my family flock."

One of her newest customers is Ben Duddlestone, who lives in nearby San Anselmo. He stopped by her home to buy three hens.

The self-described "first-time chicken dad" wanted to surprise his kids, ages 5 and 10, on Christmas.

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"I think it's totally pandemic related. I don't think that I'd be doing this if in normal times," Duddleston said.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Dec. 31, the 366th and final day of 2020.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 31, 2019, the health commission in the central Chinese city of Wuhan announced that experts were investigating an outbreak of respiratory illness and that most of the victims had visited a seafood market in the city; the statement said 27 people had become ill with a strain of viral pneumonia and that seven were in serious condition.

On this date:

In 1775, during the Revolutionary War, the British repulsed an attack by Continental Army generals Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold at Quebec; Montgomery was killed.

In 1857, Britain's Queen Victoria decided to make Ottawa the capital of Canada.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed an enabling act paving the way for Virginia's western counties to become the state of West Virginia, which took place in June 1863.

In 1879, Thomas Edison first publicly demonstrated his electric incandescent light by illuminating some 40 bulbs at his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

In 1904, New York's Times Square saw its first New Year's Eve celebration, with an estimated 200,000 people in attendance.

In 1951, the Marshall Plan expired after distributing more than \$12 billion in foreign aid.

In 1972, Major League baseball player Roberto Clemente, 38, was killed when a plane he chartered and was traveling on to bring relief supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua crashed shortly after takeoff from Puerto Rico.

In 1974, private U.S. citizens were allowed to buy and own gold for the first time in more than 40 years.

In 1978, Taiwanese diplomats struck their colors for the final time from the embassy flagpole in Washington, D.C., marking the end of diplomatic relations with the United States.

In 1986, 97 people were killed when fire broke out in the Dupont Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. (Three hotel workers later pleaded guilty in connection with the blaze.)

In 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation (he was succeeded by Vladimir Putin).

In 2001, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani spent his final day in office praising police, firefighters, and other city employees in the wake of 9/11, and said he had no regrets about returning to private life.

Ten years ago: Tornadoes fueled by unusually warm air pummeled the South and Midwest, killing a total of eight people in Arkansas and Missouri.

Five years ago: Belgian authorities announced the arrest of a 10th person in connection with the Nov. 2015 bloodbath in Paris. A towering inferno engulfed a 63-story luxury hotel in Dubai as officials went ahead with a massive New Year's fireworks display (there were no serious injuries reported). Death claimed singer Natalie Cole at age 65; actor Wayne Rogers at age 82; and actor Beth Howland at age 74.

One year ago: Dozens of Iraqi Shiite militiamen and their supporters broke into the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad and set fire to a reception area; the mob had been angered over deadly U.S. airstrikes targeting the Iranian-backed militia. Pope Francis slapped the hand of a well-wisher who had grabbed him and yanked him toward her as he strolled in St. Peter's Square to admire the Vatican's Nativity scene; the pontiff apologized a day later for his "bad example." Former Nissan chairman Carlos Ghosn (gohn), who had skipped bail while awaiting trial in Japan on allegations of financial misconduct, surfaced in Lebanon, saying that he had fled to avoid "political persecution." Wall Street finished its best year since 2013; the S&P 500 soared 28.9 percent during 2019, with technology stocks leading the gains.

Today's Birthdays: TV producer George Schlatter is 91. Actor Sir Anthony Hopkins is 83. Actor Tim Con-sidine (TV: "My Three Sons") is 80. Actor Sarah Miles is 79. Actor Barbara Carrera is 79. Rock musician

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Andy Summers is 78. Actor Sir Ben Kingsley is 77. Producer-director Taylor Hackford is 76. Fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg is 74. Actor Tim Matheson is 73. Pop singer Burton Cummings is 73. Actor Joe Dallesandro is 72. Rock musician Tom Hamilton (Aerosmith) is 69. Actor James Remar is 67. Actor Bebe Neuwirth is 62. Actor Val Kilmer is 61. Singer Paul Westerberg is 61. Actor Don Diamont is 58. Rock musician Ric Ivanisevich (Oleander) is 58. Rock musician Scott Ian (Anthrax) is 57. Actor Gong Li is 55. Author Nicholas Sparks is 55. Actor Lance Reddick is 51. Pop singer Joe McIntyre is 48. Rock musician Mikko Siren (Apocalyptica) is 45. Donald Trump Jr. is 43. Rapper PSY (Park Jae-sang) is 43. Rock musician Bob Bryar is 41. Rock musician Jason Sechrist (Portugal. The Man) is 41. Actor Ricky Whittle is 41. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., is 41. Actor/singer Erich Bergen is 35. DJ/vocalist Drew Taggart (The Chainsmokers) is 31. Olympic gold medal gymnast Gabby Douglas is 25.