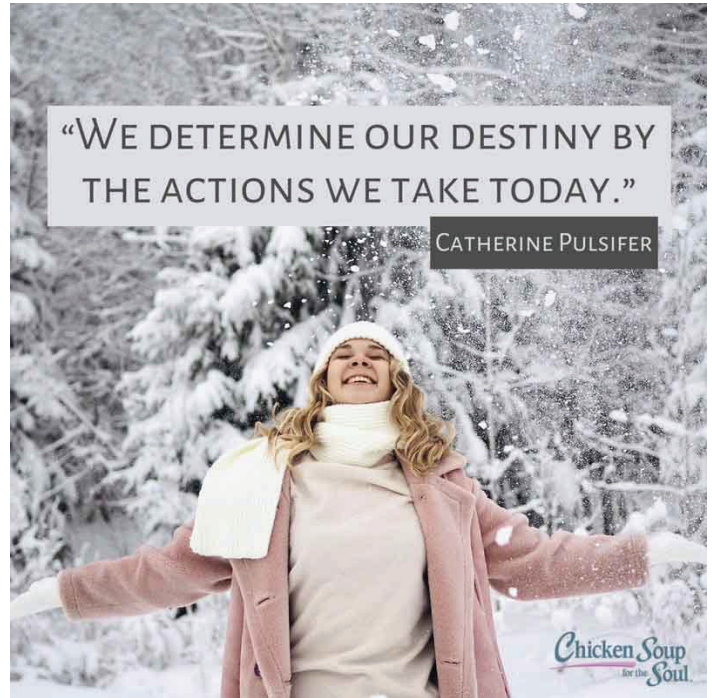


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Yesterday's Scores

Boys Varsity: Groton 58, Faulkton 43

Boys JV: Groton 41, Faulkton 15

Girls Varsity: Faulkton 52, Groton 35

Girls JV: Faulkton 22, Groton 9

Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Jackelopes 6, Cheetahs 5, Shih Tzus 3, Chipmunks 2

Men's High Games: Brad Waage 219, Alfred Tastad 188, Doug Jorgensen 172

Women's High Games: Brenda Madsen 193, Brenda Waage 186, 183, Darci Spanier 175

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 538, Doug Jorgensen 507, Alfred Tastad 466

Women's High Series: Brenda Waage 520, Darci Spanier 490, Brenda Madsen 443

Conde National League

Team Standings: Mets 22, Giants 19, Cubs 19, Braves 17, Pirates 14, Tigers 5

Men's High Games: Butch Farmen 217, Jeremy Reyalts 204, Tim Olson 188

Men's High Series: Jeremy Reyalts 531, Tim Olson 529, Butch Farmen 520

Women's High Games: Nancy Radke 177; Vickie Kramp 165, 159; Sam Bahr 155

Women's High Series: Vickie Kramp 451, Nancy Radke 439, Sam Bahr 426



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



*Over and Darlene
Finnesand*
**60th Anniversary
on Feb. 11, 2021**

**Greetings may
be sent to
505 3rd Ave. W.
Groton, SD
57445**

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Upcoming Schedule

Friday, Feb. 5

Wrestling at Lyman High School, 5 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 6

Girls Basketball at DAK12-NEC Clash in Madison.

Boys Basketball at Tiospa Zina (C game (Charla Imrie) at 1 p.m., JV (Jim and Shirley VanDenHemel) at 2:30 p.m. followed by varsity.

Monday, Feb. 8

Junior High Basketball hosts Webster. 5:30 p.m.
School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 9

Girls Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina. JV game (Ed and Connie Stauch) at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Wednesday, Feb. 10

LifeTouch Pictures in GHS Gym, 8:30 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Thursday, Feb. 11

Parent-Teacher Conference, 1:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m.
Basketball Doubleheader with Milbank in Groton.
JV girls (Trent and Heather Traphagen) at 4 p.m. followed by JV boys, Varsity Girls and Varsity Boys.

Saturday, Feb. 12

Basketball Doubleheader at Mobridge. JV girls (Rich and Tami Zimney) at 1 p.m., JV boys at 2 p.m., Varsity Girls at 3 p.m. followed by Varsity Boys.

Monday, Feb. 15

Junior High Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli Elementary School (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)
Boys Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli (C game at 5 p.m., JV at 6:15 and Varsity at 7:30).

Thursday, Feb. 18

Junior High Basketball hosts Mobridge-Pollock in the Arena. 7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.

Friday, Feb. 19

Basketball Doubleheader with Deuel in Groton. JV girls at 4 p.m., JV boys at 5 p.m. followed by Varsity Girls and Varsity Boys.

Saturday, Feb. 20

Regional Wrestling Tournament in Groton, 10 a.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 23: GBB Region

Thursday, Feb. 25: GBB Region

Friday, Feb. 26

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Tuesday, March 2: BBB Region

Thursday, March 4: GBB SoDAK 16

Friday, March 5: BBB Region

Tuesday, March 9: BBB SoDAK 16

March 11-13: State Girls Basketball Tournament in Watertown

March 18-20: State Boys Basketball Tournament in Sioux Falls

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#347 in an Update

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

The news is mostly good with a large dark spot. We are up to 26,716,500 reported cases in the US, 0.5% more than yesterday. There were 126,400 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations are continuing downward, now at 91,440. And we set a record for deaths: 5076 reported today. Closest we've been to that is 4476 on January 12, so this is really, really bad. We have lost 455,643 lives to this virus so far in the pandemic, 1.1% more than yesterday. We need to see this number slow down soon.

Edit: I want to note that I've just read there are backlogged deaths in Indiana reported in today's numbers. This means today's total may not accurately reflect the deaths that occurred/were reported today. This could be something of a relief.

I'll note that we passed 450,000 deaths yesterday. This is a number that is still accelerating. It took us 36 days to go from 300,000 to 400,000 deaths and just 15 days to go from 400,000 to 450,000. The new CDC ensemble forecast for deaths is now between 496,000 and 534,000 by February 27—a whole lot of loss. Given deaths is the most important metric in the pandemic, this is not great.

The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, an influential modeling team, has made an extended projection that something like 631,000 of us will have died from Covid-19 by June 1, with a worst-case projection of 703,000. They are factoring in a whole lot of elements here: "The balance between new variant spread and associated increased transmission and the scale-up of vaccination in our most likely scenario suggests continued declines in daily deaths through to June 1." That, of course, is supposing declines continue and no new variant moves in with a vengeance. They note polling which finds the proportion of people willing to be vaccinated has risen from 54 percent to 66 percent; we can hope that percentage grows. They are projecting that by June 1, nearly 124,000 lives will be saved by vaccination. They also note that if we could increase mask usage to 95 percent from the current 77 percent, another 44,000 lives could be saved. Seems a shame some of us don't care enough about our neighbors to slap on a mask, doesn't it?

Novavax has enrolled two-thirds of the 30,000 US and Mexico participants it needs for its phase 3 clinical trial of its vaccine candidate. Trials in the UK were very promising, so we are hoping for good numbers here and in Mexico as well. You may recall this is a protein subunit vaccine which is designed for a two-dose regimen. Then if the company can demonstrate to regulators that it can manufacture its product reliably at scale, they could be in line for authorization as soon as late spring. With manufacturing capacity being put into place now, this could represent another 110 million doses of this two-dose vaccine by late June. This one ships and stores at refrigeration temperatures, which certainly eases the logistics of vaccination. And as always, more vaccines is better.

The UK is beginning a study of vaccine interchangeability, that is, to determine whether, in a two-dose regimen, different vaccines can be used for the two doses. You may recall talk about letting people switch brands of vaccine between the first and second doses and the attendant concerns whether this is a good idea since we have no evidence at all on the point. A group of researchers has decided to find out the sciencey way. The vaccines used in the study will be the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Preliminary data readouts are expected by summer.

Janssen/Johnson & Johnson has officially requested an EUA for its vaccine candidate as of today, and the FDA has scheduled a meeting of its Vaccines and Related Biological Products Advisory Committee for February 25 to review the candidate. Because the data were just submitted, this scheduling will permit FDA experts to do their thoroughgoing review of these before turning to its Advisory Committee. This meeting will be, as they were with the prior candidates considered, open to the public online. We have discussed the steps from here, and we'll review them again as we move along. Looks like we will see an EUA (if one is warranted) some time in March; that would be most helpful, especially since this is a single-dose candidate which is stable at refrigeration temperatures for up to three months. The candidate is an adenovirus-vectored DNA vaccine.

Novavax is submitting data from its phase 3 clinical trials in the US and the UK as they come in; this is

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what's called a rolling review, one which allows regulatory bodies (like our FDA) in several countries to get a head start on reviewing what's coming in; this may speed the authorization process once trials have reached their end points. This two-dose protein subunit vaccine has some promising early results. We'll wait to see what develops.

For the record, the CDC reports around 8.5 percent of the US population has received at least one dose of a vaccine. We're holding on our average of 1.3 million doses going into arms per day. There are delays in reporting, so the actual number is going to be somewhat higher than this, and we are seeing great improvement in the efficiency and effectiveness of our vaccination program. I'll continue to say we want to get to where we're administering vaccine just as fast as it can be produced and distributed. Our only chance of staying ahead of the variants we see emerging is stepped-up precautions and widespread vaccination. I hope that's enough.

The FDA has also announced it will use the same process as it currently uses for updating flu vaccines as a template for authorizing any modifications made to currently-authorized Covid-19 vaccines. Their announcement says, "Our agency has had experience with evolving infectious diseases. Influenza vaccines and diagnostics are often modified each year to address the predicted predominant strains circulating globally. We will utilize our experience with influenza to help inform a path forward if SARS-CoV-2 variants emerge against which currently authorized vaccines are not sufficiently effective."

They are also monitoring whether tests are still detecting emerging variants, an important issue as we go along. The statement says they do not expect these variants will "impact overall testing accuracy of molecular tests." That's a good thing. Last thing we need is to lose our testing capability.

I see Italy, Denmark, and Norway are all recommending against the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine for people over 65 (55 in Italy) years of age. All are citing a lack of data showing efficacy in this older age group. The clinical trial for this vaccine did not include a large number of older participants, a deficiency the company is remedying in a trial being enrolled now in other countries around the world, including the US. By the time it is approved in the US, there will be data on older people.

Here's a question that popped up yesterday: whether it's OK to take over-the-counter (OTC) pain relievers like ibuprofen or acetaminophen (Tylenol) before you go in for your Covid-19 vaccination. This is something people have considered doing as sort of a preemptive strike because of reports of pain at the injection site, aches, and fever following vaccination. I've seen some folks insisting that this is a terrible mistake and others insisting it couldn't hurt anything, so I've done some reading. It seems the question arises because of concerns anti-inflammatory medications may tamp down your immune responses right as we administer an antigen intended to trigger those responses; however, experts aren't coming completely unglued about this. Current CDC recommendation is to avoid taking these medications before vaccination and to limit them to acetaminophen after if at all possible.

Dr. Simone Wildes, infectious disease specialist at South Shore Medical Center in Massachusetts, told ABC, "We do not recommend premedication with ibuprofen or Tylenol before COVID-19 vaccines due the lack of data on how it impacts the vaccine-induced antibody responses." CDC recommendations are similar. There were a couple of small studies in children receiving other vaccines, not Covid-19 vaccine, which indicated there might be a small reduction in antibody response from taking these kinds of pain relievers before vaccination. That's not very definitive; but I would suggest it makes sense to follow the CDC recommendation. It looks like you should treat symptoms after vaccination only if you really need to and that you should take acetaminophen rather than another drug because acetaminophen is not an anti-inflammatory. Jonathan Watanabe, pharmacist at the University of California, Irvine, told the AP, "If you don't need to take it, you shouldn't," further suggesting that if you do take something after, acetaminophen "is safer because it doesn't alter your immune response."

So what do you do if you're on regular doses of pain-relieving or anti-inflammatory medications for a chronic condition? Talk with your physician before you go in for the vaccine. Do not stop taking a prescribed medication without consulting with the physician who prescribed it; there are some medications for which sudden cessation is a significant problem and there are health conditions for which going off the meds is a significant problem. Although we, of course, want to optimize your response to vaccine, I

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do not see anyone recommending you stop a needed medication before vaccination, and certainly no one is suggesting you do that without consulting your doctor.

This is news we've been waiting for: Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, tweeted today, "I am hoping we will have the data to support initiating COVID-19 immunizations for children (beginning with older children ages 12-17) by late spring or summer. We will progress to younger age groups as we have more data. This will help reduce virus transmission." This was during a question-and-answer session at which he was also asked whether it's safe for children to resume normal life if adults are vaccinated when the children are not. He said that will depend on the situation in a given community; if virus levels are low, then it's relatively safe, but if they're high, everyone needs to wear masks and distance. Of course, having more vaccinated adults will reduce those virus levels. Let's see what we can do about that so schools can open safely everywhere.

We may soon have some standards for face masks outside the medical-grade ones used by health care professionals. ASTM International (formerly the American Society for Testing and Materials) and the National Personal Protective Technology Laboratory are working together to formulate these standards for "minimum design, performance (testing), labeling, user instruction, reporting, and classification, and conformity assessment requirements for barrier face coverings." The standards are in draft and were scheduled for review yesterday by ASTM's Subcommittee on Respiratory Hazards, a committee with representatives from academia, industry, and government, as well as independent experts. The idea is that each mask would come with user instructions for sizing, fit, and cleaning. Manufacturers would be required to test masks in accredited labs to certify their performance. This would permit them to register and label masks according to the standards so that consumers could tell whether the masks are appropriate for a particular use, for example, preventing the spread of coronaviruses. This may settle down that wild west environment we talked about a couple of days ago so that consumers can fairly assess the value of the various masks available to them. At this delicate time when this pandemic could finally settle down—or blow up in our faces if one (or more) of these new variants gets hold in the population, knowing how best to protect ourselves could be a literal matter of life and death. We are, sadly, yet predictably, behind the European Union on this; they've been certifying masks already. We'll keep an eye on this, but please understand that even a relatively low-efficacy mask is beneficial and far better than none at all. Wear some kind of mask whenever you leave the house.

The FDA revised the EUA for convalescent plasma today. Changes include limitations to use of only plasma with high antibody titers and only for hospitalized patients early in the course of disease. You may recall that convalescent plasma is made from the blood of people who have recovered from Covid-19; the blood cells are removed, leaving behind only the fluid portion of blood, which is where antibodies reside. The original EUA was issued in August; changes are because new clinical trial data have become available. Science changes as new information becomes available; it's how we progress.

Gentrification is a thing that sounds pretty good to affluent young people who live in cities and want to find ways to move into established neighborhoods. They buy up housing in a neighborhood that has deteriorated, improve the buildings, and bring in new businesses, which all sounds like a great idea; but there's a downside. It is that the current inhabitants get shoved out as housing values rise, and these people don't have anywhere in the city to go that they can afford to live. Since these are typically poorer and older, often minority, residents who are frequently displaced into unsafe, broken-down areas where rents are lower—or out onto the streets. In the process, they lose not only a place to live, but the primary source of generational wealth in the US, their homes.

Some older neighborhoods are populated by these lower-income residents who cannot always afford to maintain their homes. Often, what happens is that developers come through an area, note lawns that are not mowed, buildings which need repairs or painting, landscaping which is not up to standard, and they notify the city code enforcement authorities who then cite the residents. At that point, the homeowners must bring the place up to code or sell. Since many of these residents are on fixed incomes and poor, often too elderly to do the work themselves, they are unable to bring their homes up to code and are forced to sell at fire-sale prices to the developers who were counting on this outcome and then make a

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killing on the deal as they turn over the properties to gentrifying buyers.

Some folks don't see this as an entirely fair system, so they intervene to prevent those outcomes. One such is the nonprofit, House Proud, in Atlanta. The organization began in the '90s to provide assistance to homeowners so they could stay in their homes and in their neighborhoods. They provide a tool lending library and services to seniors, veterans, and disabled adults who are unable to do work themselves. Volunteers do simpler repairs under the supervision of a contractor, and more complex repairs are done by licensed workers like electricians, roofers, and plumbers. They rebuild, repair, and restore, as well as fixing up yards and exterior features. The organization deploys teams of 25 volunteers, one thousand of them per year across Atlanta, and they have a positive impact on communities. This way, communities are maintained, people can stay in them, and their single source of wealth is preserved.

Stay healthy. I'll be back tomorrow.

Governor's Office response to Mainstream Media

Folks – Some inconvenient truths for all those reading the mainstream media's devious reporting about South Dakota's Covid response.

From Arizona to New York, cases and deaths are up nationwide. The U.S. appears to be at the peak of a second wave of the pandemic. South Dakota (like our neighboring states) was on the front end of this wave, peaking in November and steadily improving since then.

As a whole, the U.S. appears to be peaking in deaths right now as well. The only days in which national deaths eclipsed 4,000 were all in January 2021 – notably, this is long after Covid had made its way across South Dakota.

An apples-to-apples comparison of South Dakota's Covid wave versus those experiencing it today is extremely difficult, especially given that other states are still on the upswing.

Here's what we can compare:

➔ South Dakota hospitals were never full. South Dakota also has the highest hospital bed capacity per capita in the country.

➔ South Dakota is a national leader in vaccine distribution, by all accounts the best way that we can fight this virus over the long-run.

➔ South Dakota has the lowest unemployment rate in the country, lower than it was prior to the pandemic.

➔ South Dakota is a national leader in folks moving to the state. By all accounts, this is out of a desire to escape pandemic lockdowns in other states. This is setting our economy up for long-term expansion.

➔ South Dakota is enjoying a state budget surplus. We are in a far better spot than states that resorted to rigorous lockdowns and decimated their economies as a result:

* New York is expecting a \$15 billion budget gap.

* Neighboring Minnesota is facing a \$1.3 billion budget deficit.

* Because South Dakota is not in a similar situation, we are able to make targeted investments to set our state up for long-term success.

The Governor has always said, public policy should be holistic. Daily needs must still be met. People need to eat and keep a roof over their heads. And they still need purpose. That means policymakers cannot have tunnel vision. They must balance public health concerns with people's mental and emotional needs, their economic livelihoods and social connections, and liberty, among many other important factors.

But Philip Bump's latest piece on Governor Noem ignores her holistic approach and instead, hurls the same, stale attacks the MSM has resorted to for the last several months.

For those of us on Team Noem, this is just the latest example of media manipulation.

Bump presented carefully selected facts without context and assembled an argument that falls apart when the whole truth is offered. The Mount Rushmore Event resulted in zero cases. The Sturgis rally claim has long been debunked (also, anyone who understands basic facts about the virus' incubation period knows that the early August rally didn't drive mass infection in November...).

Beyond this, Bump refuses to admit that states that have had much harsher restrictions than South Dakota are suffering spikes and greater fatality rates than South Dakota.

We all know there are negative side effects for public health, mental health, education, and the economy associated with strict measures like mandates and lockdowns. Take this horrific story from NPR this week. Public officials have a duty to provide information to the people, and private individuals must weigh the costs and benefits on both sides of the equation. South Dakota's Governor Kristi Noem has done this better than any Governor in America.

Stay well,

Maggie Seidel

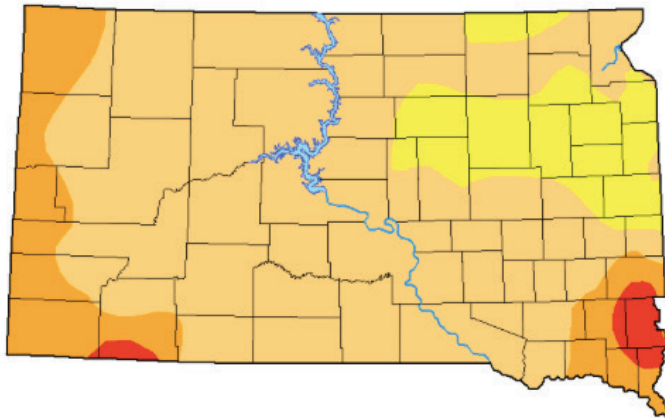
Senior Advisor & Policy Director

Office of Governor Kristi Noem

Drought Monitor

Map released: Thurs. February 4, 2021

Data valid: February 2, 2021 at 7 a.m. EST



Intensity:

- None
- D0 (Abnormally Dry)
- D1 (Moderate Drought)
- D2 (Severe Drought)
- D3 (Extreme Drought)
- D4 (Exceptional Drought)
- No Data

Summary

California's most powerful storm of the season to date delivered drought-easing precipitation, including heavy mountain snow, but caused local flooding and landslides. Impacts from the multi-day storm system extended beyond California, adding to the benefit of other mid-winter weather systems in portions of the Western drought area. As the calendar turned from January to February, the Western storm finally turned eastward, producing wind and wintry precipitation in the Midwest and Northeast, as well as rain showers in the Southeast. As the drought-monitoring period ended, the former Western storm became a powerful low-pressure system along the middle and northern Atlantic Coast. In contrast, mostly dry weather prevailed throughout the 7-day period in several regions, including the northern Plains and the south-central U.S.

High Plains

Much of the region settled into a cool, dry pattern, following the central Plains' snowstorm that peaked on January 25. Further assessment of the that storm led to some additional reductions in drought coverage across the central Plains. In addition, a subsequent weather system clipped eastern Kansas with rain on January 30, helping to further reduce coverage of dryness (D0) and moderate drought (D1). For the areas that were affected by the January 25 storm, snow remaining on the ground into February has helped to boost topsoil moisture. (On January 24, just prior to that storm's arrival, topsoil moisture was rated at least one-half very short to short in each of the states in the High Plains region, led by Wyoming at 90%, and followed by Colorado at 79%, North Dakota at 75%, South Dakota at 62%, Nebraska at 60%, and Kansas at 55%.) Daily-record snowfall totals in Nebraska for January 25 included 14.5 inches in Lincoln, 11.9 inches in Omaha, and 10.2 inches in Grand Island. For Lincoln, it was the snowiest January day on record (previously, 11.4 inches on January 3, 1971) and the snowiest day in any month since February 11, 1965, when 19.0 inches fell. Lincoln also achieved a January snowfall record, with 18.9 inches (previously, 15.6 inches in 2011). For Omaha, it was the snowiest day since January 10, 1975, when 12.1 inches fell.

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County	Positive Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% RT-PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	451	425	827	16	Moderate	5.00%
Beadle	2617	2519	5561	39	Moderate	4.64%
Bennett	377	363	1132	9	Minimal	0.93%
Bon Homme	1500	1471	1993	25	Minimal	1.56%
Brookings	3450	3287	11098	34	Substantial	3.32%
Brown	4986	4741	11976	80	Substantial	11.35%
Brule	679	663	1797	8	Moderate	7.50%
Buffalo	420	402	868	13	Minimal	16.00%
Butte	959	921	3057	20	Moderate	6.60%
Campbell	126	119	244	4	Moderate	13.64%
Charles Mix	1232	1167	3760	18	Substantial	10.00%
Clark	347	326	909	4	Moderate	0.00%
Clay	1758	1720	4934	16	Substantial	3.20%
Codington	3769	3599	9226	74	Substantial	9.29%
Corson	461	445	976	11	Minimal	13.04%
Custer	729	706	2583	12	Moderate	8.45%
Davison	2908	2805	6182	59	Substantial	4.35%
Day	614	566	1667	27	Substantial	10.53%
Deuel	458	445	1073	8	Moderate	11.63%
Dewey	1389	1353	3707	21	Substantial	6.45%
Douglas	415	395	863	9	Minimal	6.67%
Edmunds	463	438	974	10	Substantial	6.67%
Fall River	510	482	2475	15	Moderate	9.52%
Faulk	341	317	660	13	Moderate	6.67%
Grant	925	849	2098	37	Substantial	18.75%
Gregory	504	466	1182	27	Moderate	0.00%
Haakon	242	231	508	9	Minimal	0.00%
Hamlin	671	615	1672	38	Moderate	8.06%
Hand	320	310	757	6	Minimal	4.55%
Hanson	341	325	670	4	Moderate	22.58%
Harding	91	89	173	1	None	0.00%
Hughes	2216	2133	6193	32	Substantial	2.01%
Hutchinson	760	717	2223	23	Moderate	8.33%

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Hyde	135	133	388	1	None	0.00%
Jackson	268	253	887	13	None	0.00%
Jerauld	268	246	534	16	Minimal	8.33%
Jones	82	80	208	0	Minimal	7.14%
Kingsbury	608	581	1543	13	Moderate	6.00%
Lake	1149	1093	3085	17	Substantial	5.88%
Lawrence	2759	2683	8145	42	Moderate	7.19%
Lincoln	7497	7253	19056	74	Substantial	10.27%
Lyman	590	575	1818	10	Moderate	7.69%
Marshall	289	274	1110	5	Moderate	4.84%
McCook	721	687	1529	24	Moderate	13.95%
McPherson	236	218	529	4	Moderate	2.52%
Meade	2486	2399	7255	31	Substantial	10.38%
Mellette	241	236	706	2	Minimal	8.70%
Miner	269	244	539	7	Moderate	28.57%
Minnehaha	27149	26222	73430	312	Substantial	8.64%
Moody	604	574	1677	16	Substantial	6.67%
Oglala Lakota	2040	1956	6452	43	Substantial	10.78%
Pennington	12444	11991	37264	172	Substantial	8.97%
Perkins	338	310	745	12	Substantial	27.50%
Potter	353	334	788	3	Moderate	8.70%
Roberts	1114	1055	3938	35	Substantial	9.63%
Sanborn	325	316	654	3	Minimal	3.39%
Spink	778	723	2017	25	Substantial	12.36%
Stanley	319	308	865	2	Moderate	0.00%
Sully	135	131	289	3	Minimal	0.00%
Todd	1213	1171	4028	25	Substantial	4.27%
Tripp	658	635	1417	15	Moderate	6.98%
Turner	1044	977	2559	50	Moderate	2.74%
Union	1883	1772	5809	39	Substantial	9.91%
Walworth	705	670	1755	15	Moderate	3.75%
Yankton	2749	2675	8818	28	Substantial	4.37%
Ziebach	335	323	846	9	Minimal	0.00%
Unassigned	0	0	1890	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	4234	0
10-19 years	12152	0
20-29 years	19534	4
30-39 years	17897	15
40-49 years	15527	35
50-59 years	15332	102
60-69 years	12447	233
70-79 years	6654	406
80+ years	5036	993

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	56789	849
Male	52024	939

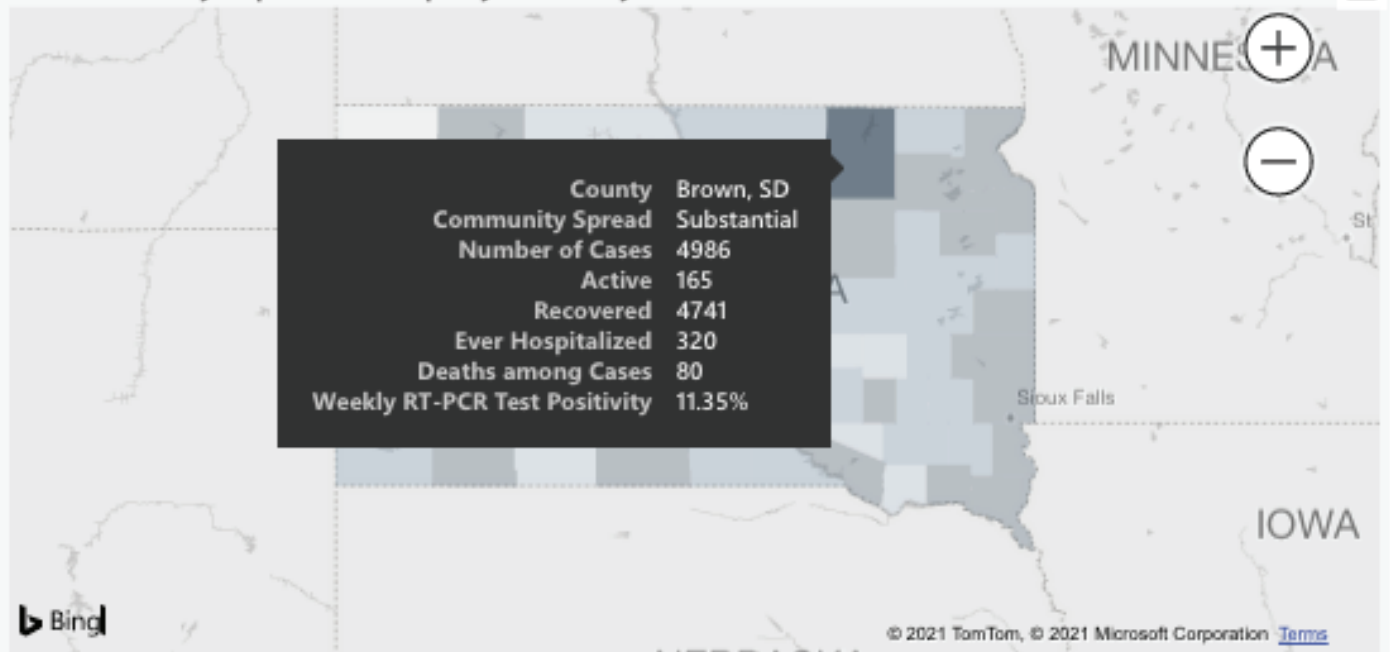
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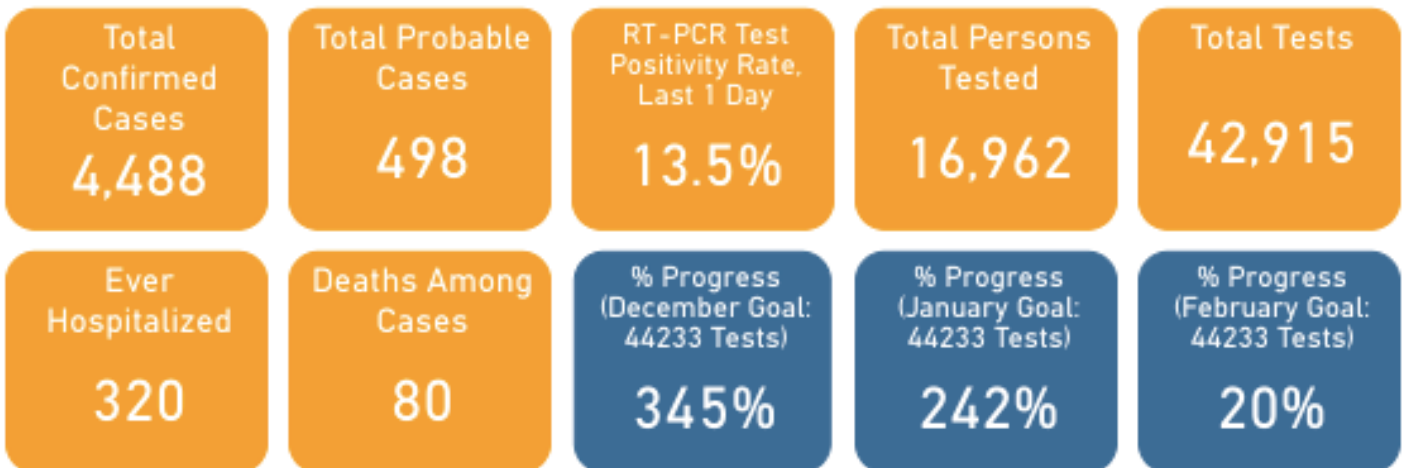
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



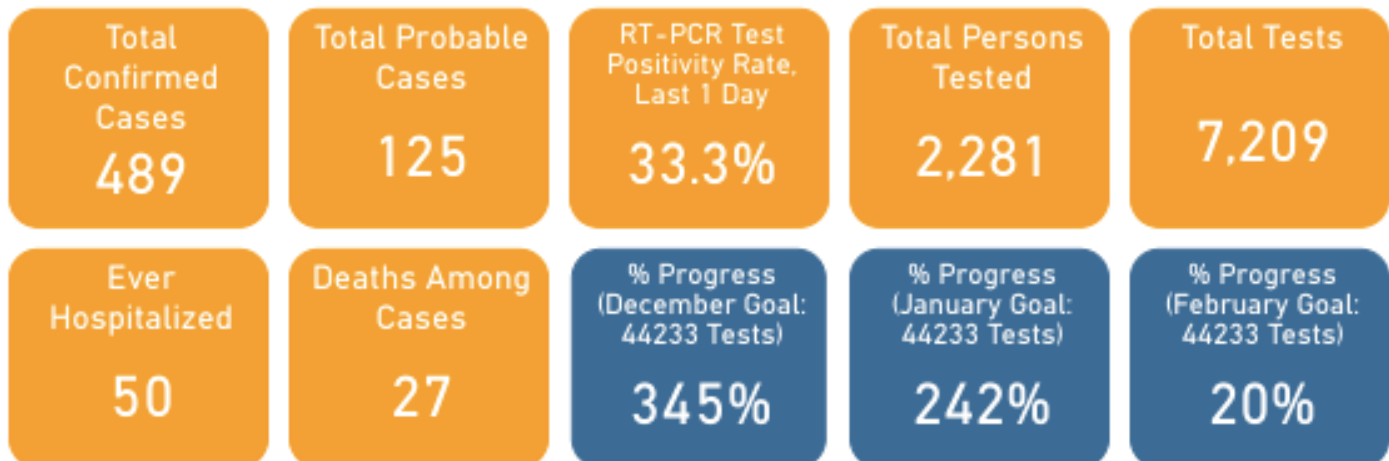
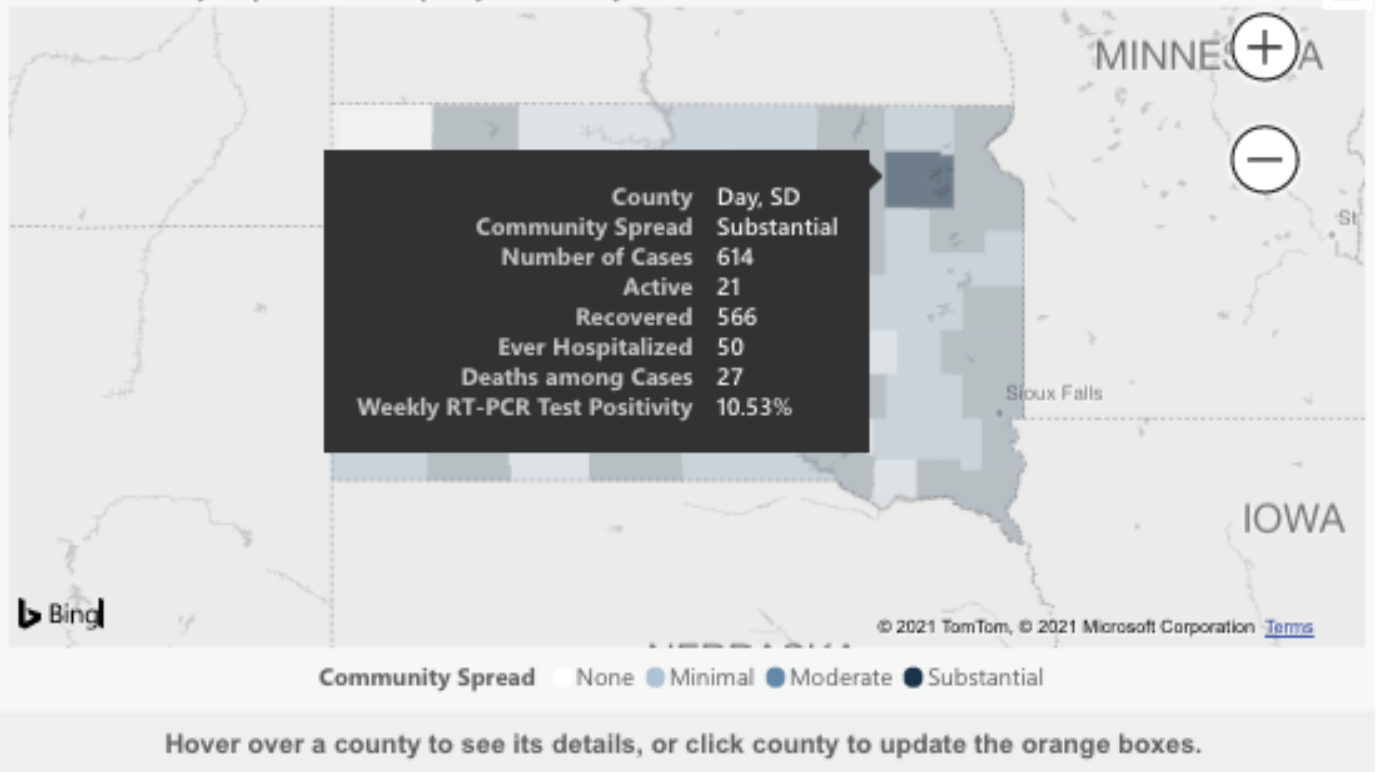
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

109,686

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

76,454

Manufacturer	Number of Doses
Moderna	58,053
Pfizer	51,633

Doses	Number of Recipients
Moderna - 1 dose	26,063
Moderna - Series Complete	15,995
Pfizer - 1 dose	17,159
Pfizer - Series Complete	17,237

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	211	109	51	160
Beadle	2108	902	603	1,505
Bennett*	190	120	35	155
Bon Homme*	1031	331	350	681
Brookings	2988	1,068	960	2,028
Brown	5061	1,857	1,602	3,459
Brule*	630	336	147	483
Buffalo*	46	40	3	43
Butte	603	373	115	488
Campbell	439	79	180	259
Charles Mix*	949	381	284	665
Clark	379	203	88	291
Clay	1811	723	544	1,267
Codington*	3839	1,585	1,127	2,712
Corson*	69	51	9	60
Custer*	800	454	173	627
Davison	2859	759	1,050	1,809
Day*	843	383	230	613
Deuel	499	225	137	362
Dewey*	171	87	42	129
Douglas*	445	171	137	308
Edmunds	392	168	112	280
Fall River*	807	507	150	657
Faulk	243	185	29	214
Grant*	842	326	258	584
Gregory*	547	197	175	372
Haakon*	224	76	74	150

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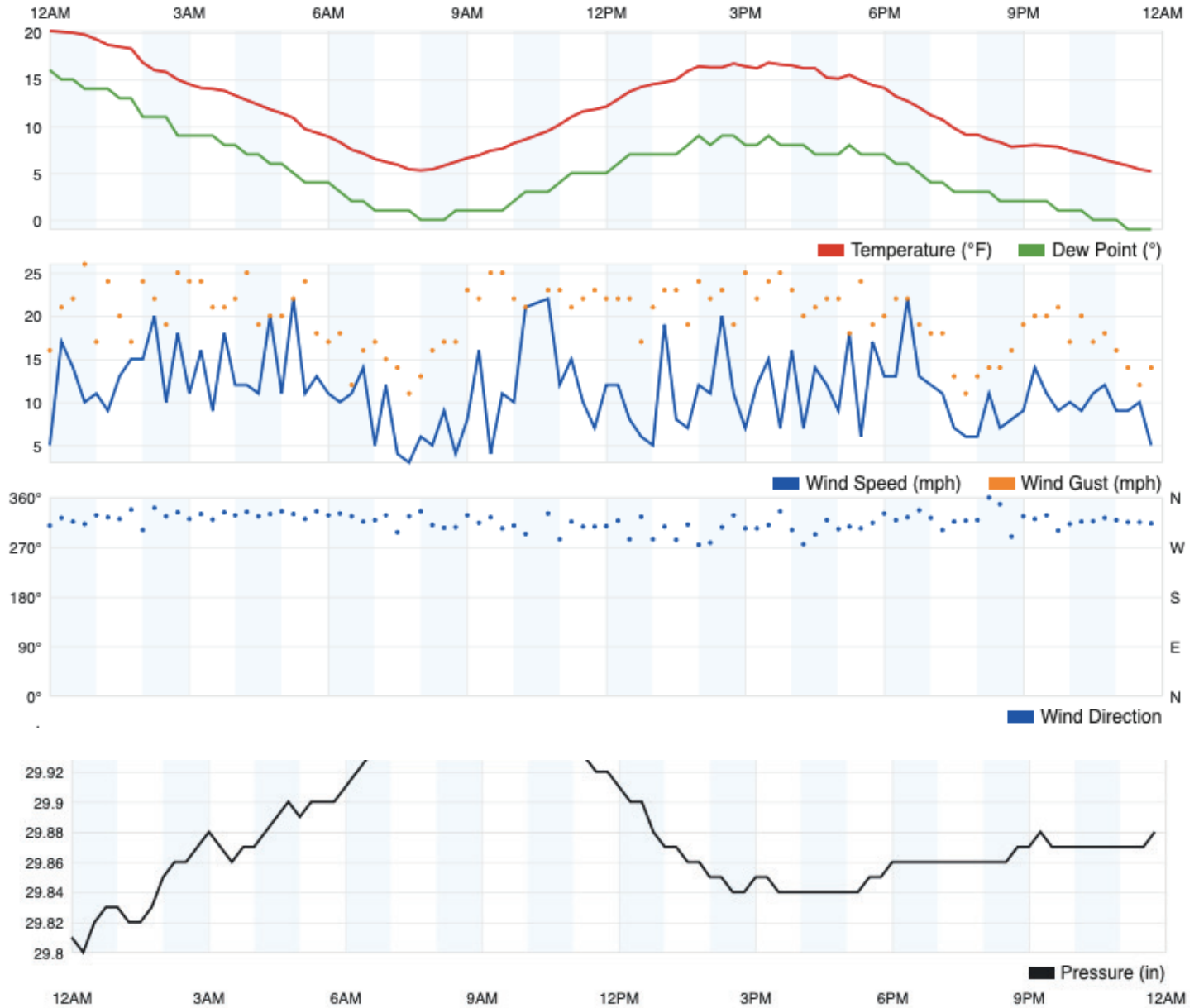
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Hamlin	612	274	169	443
Hand	468	200	134	334
Hanson	149	37	56	93
Harding	16	10	3	13
Hughes*	2488	1,308	590	1,898
Hutchinson*	1286	364	461	825
Hyde*	225	47	89	136
Jackson*	147	85	31	116
Jerauld	197	63	67	130
Jones*	197	123	37	160
Kingsbury	697	229	234	463
Lake	1396	634	381	1,015
Lawrence	2354	1,620	367	1,987
Lincoln	10745	2,921	3,912	6,833
Lyman*	222	138	42	180
Marshall*	457	215	121	336
McCook	774	330	222	552
McPherson	65	27	19	46
Meade*	1771	1,039	366	1,405
Mellette*	14	6	4	10
Miner	303	153	75	228
Minnehaha	29776	9,508	10,134	19,642
Moody*	506	212	147	359
Oglala Lakota*	49	33	8	41
Pennington*	12020	6,478	2,771	9,249
Perkins*	144	98	23	121
Potter	219	65	77	142
Roberts*	1250	878	186	1,064
Sanborn	314	162	76	238
Spink	1085	369	358	727
Stanley*	356	180	88	268
Sully	93	55	19	74
Todd*	60	32	14	46
Tripp*	710	324	193	517
Turner	1398	522	438	960
Union	662	280	191	471
Walworth*	723	337	193	530
Yankton	3892	1,240	1,326	2,566
Ziebach*	28	16	6	22
Other	2792	914	939	1,853

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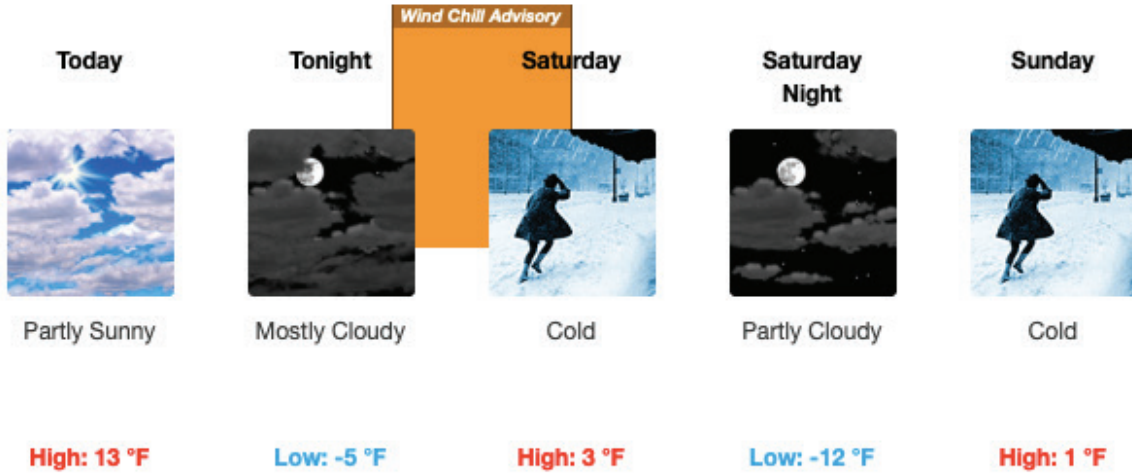
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Bitterly Cold Wind Chills overnight through Saturday Morning!

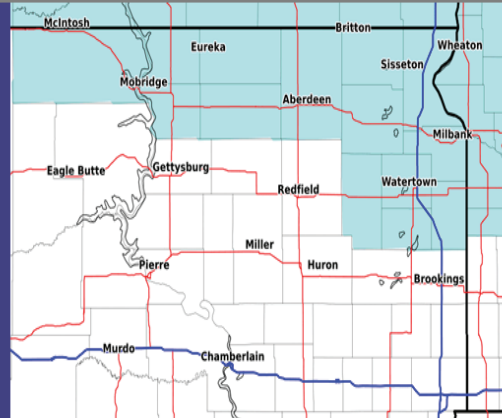
Cold wind chills could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 30 minutes. Pets and other animals may need extra protection from the cold too.

EXTREME COLD

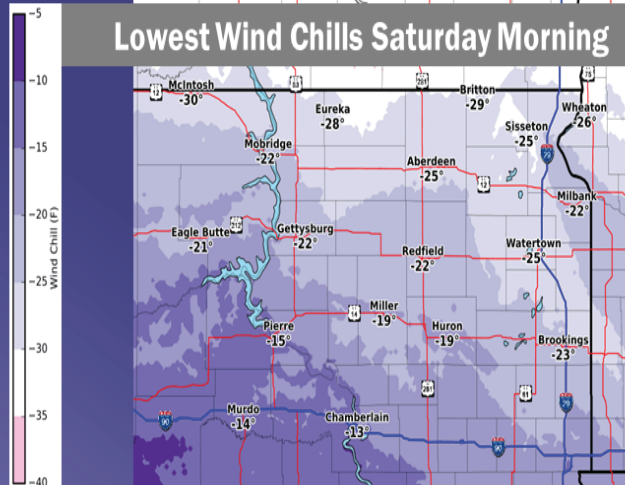


NWS Aberdeen, SD
Updated: 2/5/2021 4:43 AM Central

Wind Chill Advisories Saturday Morning



Lowest Wind Chills Saturday Morning




Bitterly Cold to Dangerous Wind Chills are expected late tonight through Saturday morning, particularly over northern and northeastern South Dakota, and west central Minnesota. Cold wind chills of -20 to -30 degrees could cause frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 30 minutes.

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FROSTBITE

A victim is often unaware of frostbite because frozen tissue is numb.



Signs & Symptoms


- Redness or pain in any skin area may be the first sign of frostbite.

Other signs include:

- a white or grayish-yellow skin area
- skin that feels unusually firm or waxy
- numbness

HYPOTHERMIA

Hypothermia often occurs at very cold temperatures, but can occur at cool temperatures (above 40°F), if a person is wet (from rain, sweat or cold water) and becomes chilled.




Signs & Symptoms

Adults:


- shivering
- exhaustion
- confusion
- fumbling hands
- memory loss
- slurred speech
- drowsiness

Infants:

- bright red, cold skin
- very low energy



If a person's temperature is below 95° get medical attention immediately.



Wind Chill Chart

Wind (mph)

Calrn	5	10	15	20	25	30	35	40	45	50	55	60
40	36	34	32	30	29	28	28	27	26	26	25	25
35	31	27	25	24	23	22	21	20	19	19	18	17
30	25	21	19	17	16	15	14	13	12	12	11	10
25	19	15	13	11	9	8	7	6	5	4	4	3
20	13	9	6	4	3	1	0	-1	-2	-3	-3	-4
15	7	3	0	-2	-4	-5	-7	-8	-9	-10	-11	-11
10	1	-4	-7	-9	-11	-12	-14	-15	-16	-17	-18	-19
5	-5	-10	-13	-15	-17	-19	-21	-22	-23	-24	-25	-26
0	-11	-16	-19	-22	-24	-26	-27	-29	-30	-31	-32	-33
-5	-16	-22	-26	-29	-31	-33	-34	-36	-37	-38	-39	-40
-10	-22	-28	-32	-35	-37	-39	-41	-43	-44	-45	-46	-48
-15	-28	-35	-39	-42	-44	-46	-48	-50	-51	-52	-54	-55
-20	-34	-41	-45	-48	-51	-53	-55	-57	-58	-60	-61	-62
-25	-40	-47	-51	-55	-58	-60	-62	-64	-65	-67	-68	-69
-30	-46	-53	-58	-61	-64	-67	-69	-71	-72	-74	-75	-76
-35	-52	-59	-64	-68	-71	-73	-76	-78	-79	-81	-82	-84
-40	-57	-66	-71	-74	-78	-80	-82	-84	-86	-88	-89	-91
-45	-63	-72	-77	-81	-84	-87	-89	-91	-93	-95	-97	-98



Frostbite Times

- 30 minutes
- 10 minutes
- 5 minutes



Do you know the symptoms of frostbite and hypothermia? An extended period of cold weather and low wind chills will result in the potential for frostbite in as little as 30 minutes most mornings through the upcoming work week.

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Today in Weather History

February 5, 1978: Another winter blizzard plagued the northern half of the state beginning on February 5th and continuing until the 9th. The unusual aspect of this blizzard was that the wind came from the southeast between 25 to 45 mph. Only one to three inches of new snow accumulation fell during the five days but was piled high on the existing large snowdrifts. Most of the northern half of the state was paralyzed due to blocked roads. Eighteen counties across the north part of the South Dakota were declared a disaster by the governor. There were also numerous livestock losses.

1745: Today is National Weatherman/Meteorologist day commemorating the birth of John Jeffries in 1745. Jeffries, one of America's first weather observers, began taking daily weather observations in Boston, MA, in 1774, and he made the first balloon observation in 1784. You can read a narrative from the [Library of Congress](#) of the two aerial voyages of Doctor Jeffries with Mons. Blanchard: with meteorological observations and remarks. The first voyage was on November 13th, 1784, from London into Kent. The second on January 7th, 1785, from England into France.

1887: San Francisco experienced its most significant snowstorm of record. Nearly four inches was reported in downtown San Francisco, and the western hills of the city received seven inches. Excited crowds went on a snowball throwing rampage.

1920: An intense nor'easter dumped 17.5 inches of snow over three days in New York City Central Park, New York. Boston, MA, saw 12.2 inches of snow on this day.

1986: A supercell thunderstorm tracked through the Tomball area northwest of Houston, TX, and produced four tornadoes along with damaging microburst winds and up to tennis ball size hail. An F3 tornado killed two people, injured 80 others, and devastated a mobile home park and the David Wayne Hooks Airport. 300 aircraft were either damaged or destroyed. Much of the more substantial hail was propelled by 60 to 80 mph winds, resulting in widespread moderate damage. The total damage from this storm was 80 million dollars.

2008: The Super Tuesday 2008 Tornado Outbreak has been one of the deadliest tornado outbreaks in the US, with 59 fatalities reported. So far, it ranks in the top 15 deadly tornado outbreaks (and the highest number of tornado deaths since 1985). According to the [SPC Storm Reports](#), there were over 300 reports of tornadoes, large hail (up to 4.25 inches in diameter in Texas, Arkansas, and Missouri), and damaging wind gusts from Texas to Ohio and West Virginia. The outbreak produced at least 64 tornadoes, some producing EF-3, and EF-4 damage. Click [HERE](#) for Satellite information.

1987 - Thunderstorms in the Southern Plains Region caused flooding in parts of south central Texas. Del Rio TX was soaked with two inches of rain in two hours prior to sunrise. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Cold and snow invaded the southern U.S. Roswell NM was buried under 16.5 inches of snow in 24 hours, an all-time record for that location. Parts of the Central Gulf Coast Region reported their first significant snow in fifteen years. Strong winds in Minnesota and the Dakotas produced wind chill readings as cold as 75 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Severe cold gripped much of the nation. Thirty cities reported new record low temperatures for the date. Morning lows of 9 above at Astoria OR and 27 below zero at Ely NV were records for February. In Alaska, Point Barrow warmed to 24 degrees above zero, and Nome reached 30 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - For the second time in two days, and the third time in a week, high winds plagued the northwestern U.S. Winds in Oregon gusted to 60 mph at Cape Disappointment, and wind gusts in Washington State reached 67 mph at Bellingham. The first in a series of cold fronts began to produce heavy snow in the mountains of Washington and Oregon. Ten inches of snow fell at Timberline OR. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006 - Mount Washington Observatory in New Hampshire reaches a high of 41°F, the warmest February 5th on record at the summit and two degrees off the monthly mark, where records have been kept since 1932. The Weather Doctor

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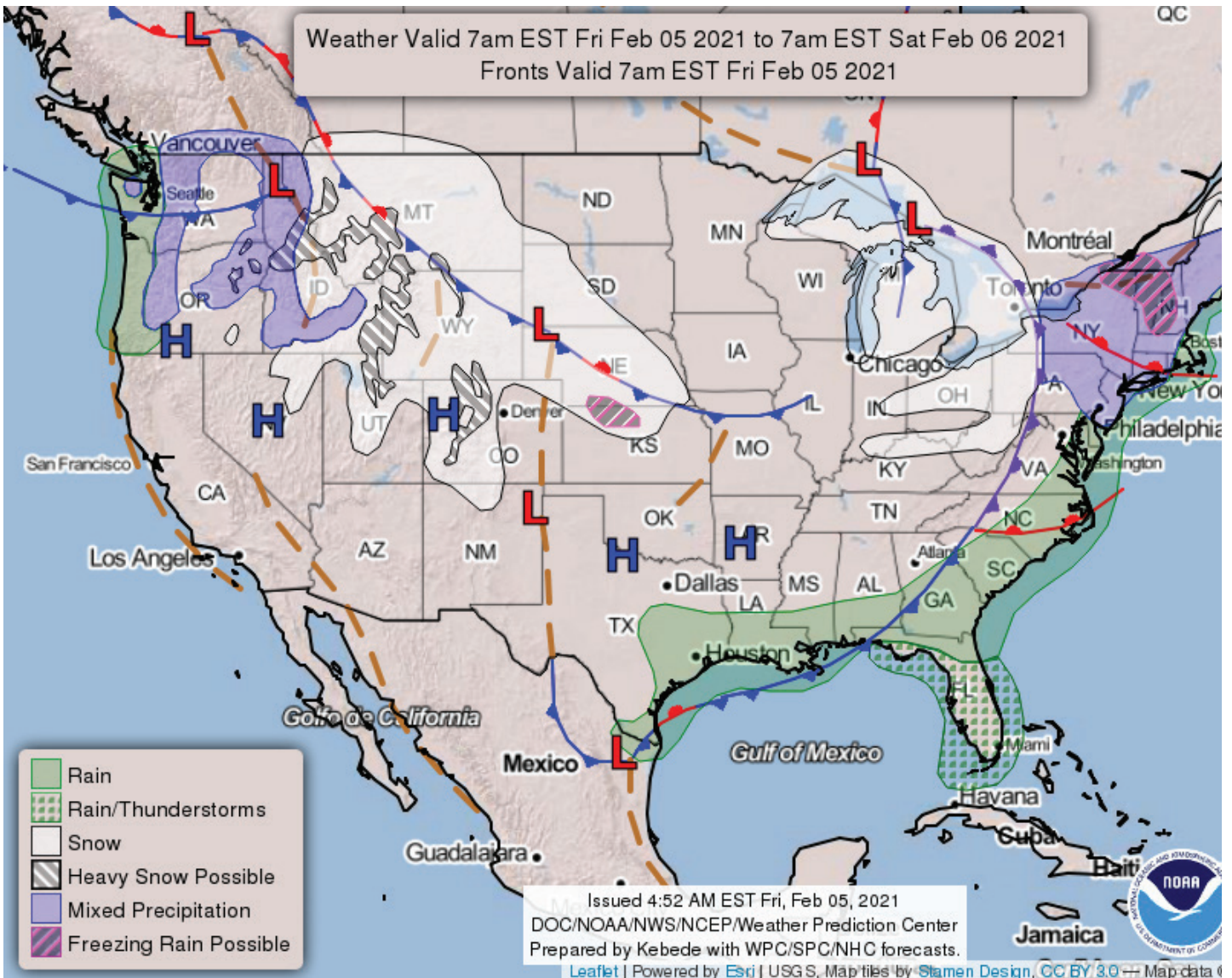
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 20 °F at 12:02 AM
Low Temp: 5 °F at 11:49 PM
Wind: 28 mph at 1:51 AM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 57° in 1991
Record Low: -36° in 1907
Average High: 25°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.06
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14
Average Precip to date: 0.53
Precip Year to Date: 0.14
Sunset Tonight: 5:47 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:48 a.m.



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GOODNESS AND GOD

"Why be good?" he asked. Before I could respond, he answered his own question: "I guess it's because I can't have any fun if I'm good. Everything 'good people' do is boring at best. It's like living in a cell in prison. The good times are beyond me."

But there are at least three basic reasons to "be good."

The first comes from "looking inside." Self-respect, for a Christian, comes from honoring the "gift of life" God has given us. Our "life" is a gift from God. However, what we do with our "life" is our gift to God. If we are careless or foolish with the habits we cultivate in the way we live, we put our entire life at risk. This may result in our being unable to fulfill the plan that God has designed for us. Any self-imposed physical "damage" limits our usefulness to God. Care for our bodies, as reflected in a healthy lifestyle, is a priority for the Christian who sincerely wants to serve the Lord.

The second is "looking at." Others are constantly watching everything we do for two reasons. First, they want to know if we are sincere about our faith. Do we live lives that reflect God's teachings that are clearly stated in His Word? And, second, does our faith "work?" Does God make a difference in the way we treat others? Do our lives reflect a sense of peace and satisfaction? Where's "my" joy?

The third is "looking down." Is God satisfied with our lives? Are we "doing right?" We are all accountable to Him. One day we will stand before Him in judgment and hear what He has to say about the way we have lived. As the hymn says, "He sees all you do."

Prayer: Lord, it's not about us, it is about You. May our lives be as You designed them to be - for Your sake. May we live out our faith and please You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord looks down from heaven on the entire human race; he looks to see if anyone is truly wise, if anyone seeks God. Psalm 14:2

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 59, Clark/Willow Lake 56

Alcester-Hudson 48, Freeman 38

Burke 68, Marty Indian 45

Canistota 63, Parker 46

Castlewood 70, Wolsey-Wessington 66

Chamberlain 71, Stanley County 44

Dakota Valley 81, Elk Point-Jefferson 54

DeSmet 74, Elkton-Lake Benton 52

Dell Rapids 69, Tri-Valley 38

Dell Rapids St. Mary 79, Lake Preston 56

Deubrook 52, Arlington 47

Douglas 71, Huron 53

Estelline/Hendricks 52, Colman-Egan 42

Ethan 59, Scotland 27

Florence/Henry 51, Waubay/Summit 50

Great Plains Lutheran 55, Wilmot 42

Groton Area 58, Faulkton 44

Hanson 57, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 33

Harrisburg 50, Yankton 47

Howard 71, Mitchell Christian 34

Ipswich 63, Miller 43

James Valley Christian 57, Iroquois 43

Lower Brule 71, Wessington Springs 66

Milbank 54, Britton-Hecla 22

Philip 53, Lead-Deadwood 34

Platte-Geddes 58, Kimball/White Lake 33

Rapid City Christian 80, Kadoka Area 49

Sioux Falls Washington 68, Pierre 53

Sioux Valley 62, Flandreau 49

Wagner 72, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 48

Warner 50, Leola/Frederick 38

White River 82, Wall 48

LMC Tournament=

First Round=

Faith 62, Newell 38

Harding County 69, Dupree 46

Lemmon 75, Bison 16

Timber Lake 83, McIntosh 68

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Northwestern vs. Aberdeen Christian, ppd.

West Central vs. Tea Area, ppd.

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 60, Clark/Willow Lake 29

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Andes Central/Dakota Christian 49, Wagner 46
Bon Homme 56, Avon 51
Castlewood 68, Wolsey-Wessington 31
Corsica/Stickney 55, Irene-Wakonda 48
Dakota Valley 61, Elk Point-Jefferson 27
Dell Rapids St. Mary 50, Freeman Academy/Marion 19
Faulkton 52, Groton Area 35
Freeman 60, Alcester-Hudson 53
Hamlin 65, Redfield 41
Hanson 60, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 39
Harrisburg 76, Yankton 33
Herreid/Selby Area 57, Faith 37
Highmore-Harrold 53, Lyman 41
Hill City 61, Newell 53
Howard 45, Mitchell Christian 22
James Valley Christian 74, Iroquois 42
Lennox 43, Baltic 32
Lower Brule 42, Wessington Springs 40
Miller 54, Ipswich 34
Mobridge-Pollock 53, North Central Co-Op 49
New Underwood 42, Jones County 31
Philip 49, Lead-Deadwood 17
Rapid City Christian 71, Kadoka Area 48
Scotland 64, Platte-Geddes 63
Sioux Falls Christian 48, Vermillion 43
Sioux Falls Washington 70, Pierre 20
Sundance, Wyo. 50, Harding County 35
Tiospa Zina Tribal 47, Deuel 42
Tri-Valley 54, Dell Rapids 17
Warner 57, Leola/Frederick 33
Waverly-South Shore 61, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 44
Webster 70, Sisseton 62, OT
White River 61, Wall 51
Wilmot 41, Great Plains Lutheran 29
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Northwestern vs. Aberdeen Christian, ppd.

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

Great Western Bank Names Rick Robinson as President of Wealth Management

SIoux FALLS, S.D.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Feb 4, 2021--

Great Western Bank (NYSE: GWB) has named Rick Robinson as its President of Wealth Management. Robinson, who will be based in Chandler, AZ, will oversee Trust, Investments & Insurance, and Retirement Services.

Robinson has over 20 years of experience in leading successful Wealth Management teams, most recently serving as the President of East West Trust Company in Pasadena, CA. Previously, Robinson spent most of his career at Wells Fargo excelling through various positions that led to a role as SVP, Regional Manager Investment & Fiduciary Services.

"Rick comes to GWB with extensive experience and reinforces our commitment to growing our Wealth Management business," said Chief Executive Officer, Mark Borrecco. "He is a perfect fit for us and our goals, and I'm excited to have him as part of our team."

Robinson is an active member in his community, serving as a trustee of the Desert Botanical Garden Board (DBG), President of DBG Foundation, member of CTFA advisory board and member of Rose Bowl Legacy Foundation Advisory Board.

"I could not be more excited about the opportunity to be a part of GWB," Robinson said. "I look forward to building upon the success the team has already achieved by aligning our Wealth Management focus with a shared vision for growth."

About Great Western Bank

Noem welcomes transgender people, declines to discuss bills

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Thursday that she hopes transgender people feel welcome to visit the state, while declining to discuss bills making their way through the Legislature that have been decried by LGBTQ advocates.

The Republican-dominated Legislature is considering two bills that would place limitations on transgender people's ability to live as the gender with which they identify. One would ban people from changing the sex designation on their birth certificates; the other would prohibit transgender females from participating in school sports leagues for girls.

Among some conservative lawmakers, the bills are seen as stands against shifting attitudes to gender and sex in American society. But opponents say they are discriminatory and send a message that transgender people are not welcome in the state. They have argued that such legislation also threatens the state's ability to attract businesses and events, which has been a focus of Noem's administration.

States like North Carolina that have passed laws targeting transgender people have lost out on billions of dollars after sporting events and businesses shied away.

"Everybody understands that South Dakota is a welcoming place, especially after this last year that we went through in 2020," Noem said when asked what message she wanted to send to transgender people. "So if they would like to be a part of our communities, our way of life, if they value their freedoms, I would encourage them to come visit."

But the Republican governor declined to discuss her views on the bills, saying she would weigh them if the Legislature passes them.

Meanwhile, Republicans are divided on the legislation. The birth certificate proposal passed by eight votes in the House last week. The vote was carried by Republicans who argued that a birth certificate is an objective record of someone's sex at birth and should not be changed. The bill is now being evaluated in the Senate, where it is expected to receive greater scrutiny.

Meanwhile, the proposal regarding school sports leagues has yet to receive a committee hearing — the first hurdle in the Legislature.

The state's high school athletics association currently allows transgender athletes to get an exemption to compete as the gender that is different from that on their birth certificate, though no transgender girls are currently competing in girls leagues.

The debate over transgender athletes has played out in statehouses across the country, with Idaho last year becoming the first to pass a ban. The Department of Education under former President Donald Trump ruled that allowing transgender girls to compete as girls in high school sports violates the civil rights of girls who are not transgender under Title IX, the federal law that guarantees equal opportunities in education.

But transgender athletes and their advocates expect that President Joe Biden will become an ally as they seek to participate as their identified gender. However, some policy experts have said that it may ultimately fall on Congress to clarify once and for all whether Title IX protects or bars the participation of transgender females in women's sports.

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Meanwhile, Democrats in South Dakota's Legislature, where they hold just 11 seats, urged Republicans to drop the battle and turn to more pressing issues.

"Bills that aim to divide us are not what we're here for," said House Minority Leader Jamie Smith. "We're here to work for the people of South Dakota."

This story has been updated to correct the number of votes the bill to ban changes to the sex on birth certificates based by. It passed by eight votes, not nine.

Prep volleyball players given OK to wear religious headwear

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — High school volleyball players will be allowed to wear religious headwear during games without the approval of a state governing body beginning next season, the National Federation of State High School Associations announced Thursday.

It was part of a rules package approved by the board of directors of the national governing body, which is headquartered in Indianapolis. The new rule requires religious headwear to be made of non-abrasive or soft material that fits securely and states "head coverings worn for religious reasons are not considered hair devices"

Players who wear headgear for medical reasons still must receive state approval.

The move comes after Valor College Prep, a charter school in Nashville, Tennessee, asked state and NFHS officials to reconsider the rule after one of its players was held out of a match because she was wearing a hijab.

"Our goal is always to have our athletes be able to participate as long as there isn't a safety concern involved," said Jo Auch, assistant executive director of the South Dakota High School Activities Association who chairs the NFHS volleyball rules committee. "It made perfect sense to relax that rule and remove the requirement for the states to authorize the wearing of religious headwear."

Other rules changes relax the penalty for submitting a late lineup card and allows officials to wear blue or gray shirts in addition to white shirts.

South Dakota receives more COVID-19 vaccine doses next week

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's weekly allotment of the coronavirus vaccine from the federal government is increasing.

The state will receive 13,550 doses by next week, according Department of Health Secretary Kim Malsam-Rysdon. That's 2,550 additional doses that South Dakota originally received and about 700 more doses than recently allocated per week.

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates nearly 9% of South Dakotans have received at least one of the two doses needed and 3.6% have received the initial shot.

Malsam-Rysdon says a federal retail pharmacy program will also activate next week and a limited number of pharmacies across the state will begin to have access to some vaccines.

She expects the initial rollout will include pharmacies at Walmart, Hy-Vee, Lewis Drug and pharmacies that get their drug supplies from Cardinal Health, the Rapid City Journal reported.

South Dakota is among the top six states to administer doses per capita at 12,543 per 100,000 according to CDC data. South Dakota is surpassed only by Alaska, West Virginia, North Dakota, New Mexico and Connecticut, respectively.

New DEA head for Omaha division covering 5 states announced

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The federal Drug Enforcement Administration has announced its new special agent in charge of its Omaha Division that covers all of five Upper Plains states.

The agency named Justin King as the division head overseeing the division's 11 offices, according to a news release sent Thursday. King began his new duties on Monday, replacing Richard Salter Jr., who

retired from the DEA in January.

King's territory includes Nebraska, Iowa, Minnesota, South Dakota, North Dakota and a handful of counties in western parts of Wisconsin and Illinois.

King is a 19-year veteran of the agency and comes to the Omaha Division after serving three years as assistant special agent in charge of the Little Rock District Office, where he was responsible for all DEA activities in Arkansas.

"I understand and appreciate the concerns our Midwestern communities face as we contend with the threats posed by methamphetamine, counterfeit pills, opioids and other dangerous drugs on a daily basis," King said in a written statement.

Raven Adds Smooth-Edge Technology to Extruded Geomembranes

SIOUX FALLS, S.D.--(BUSINESS WIRE)--Feb 4, 2021--

Raven Industries, Inc. (the Company; NASDAQ:RAVN) announced today that its Engineered Films division has incorporated new smooth-edge technology onto its 7-layer barrier extrusion line for the production of 23' wide textured sheet geomembranes.

The new smooth-edge extrusion process creates a high-quality smooth surface edge on the top side, bottom side, or on both sides of double-side textured products. This new technology increases the thermal fusion welding surface and weld integrity of the Company's 23' wide single- and double-side textured HydraLine™ products in thicknesses of 30-80 mil (0.75 mm-2.0 mm), including:

HDT-Series high-density polyethylene (HDPE) geomembranes.LLT-Series linear-low-density polyethylene (LLDPE) geomembranes.The Raven HydraLine™ HDT- and LLT-Series are designed with a textured surface for more challenging applications that require increased friction angles to provide higher stability on steep slopes, stabilization for earthen and secondary geosynthetics, and increased work-site safety.

"We are excited about this new addition to our textured HydraLine™ seamless products; this enhancement will provide our customers with major upside in quality welds and reduced labor while installing our products in the field," said Tim Hart, Director of Sales for Raven Engineered Films. "This product line was designed with our customers top of mind, offering a competitive price point advantage to significantly drive their sales and market share in the geosynthetics space."

This complex line enhancement was accomplished in just over 12 months — including design, build, and installation time to complete — and its massive 66-inch extrusion die body weighs in at over 10,000 lbs. With an annual output capacity of 16 million pounds, this multi-layer line is capable of producing smooth 23' seamless geomembranes along with complex multi-layer barrier structures for the effective containment of hazardous volatile organic compounds (VOCs) in liquid, solid, odor and gas form.

Raven HydraLine™ textured geomembranes are manufactured in a quality environment under a stringent ISO 9001 certified management system and tested in an accredited GAI-LAP laboratory to meet and exceed the GRI-GM13 and GM17 industry performance standards, respectively. Raven textured HydraLine™ is formulated for high tear and puncture resistance and includes a 20-year manufacturer warranty for long-term protection from thermal oxidation and ultraviolet degradation.

Raven is an innovator in developing and manufacturing lighter, thinner, stronger polymer film and sheeting solutions to help solve application and product challenges across the globe. Contact Raven for additional information and a product quotation at +1 (800) 635-3456. Raven produces all HydraLine™ products from its centrally-located facility in Sioux Falls, S.D., providing for virtually two-day shipments across the nation with quick order and delivery timelines.

About Raven Industries, Inc.

Raven Industries (NASDAQ: RAVN) provides innovative, high-value products and systems that solve great challenges throughout the world. Raven is a leader in precision agriculture, high-performance specialty films, and aerospace and defense solutions, and the company's groundbreaking work in autonomous systems is unlocking new possibilities in areas like farming, national defense, and scientific research. Since 1956, Raven has designed, produced, and delivered exceptional solutions, earning the company a reputation

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for innovation, product quality, and unmatched service. For more information, visit <https://ravenind.com>.

Air Force bombers from Dakotas will do Super Bowl flyover

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Air Force bombers from military bases in the Dakotas will be flying over Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Florida, on Sunday for the Super Bowl.

Three different bombers are scheduled to fly over during the national anthem. They include a B-1 Lancer from Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City, South Dakota; a B-52 Stratofortress from the Minot base in North Dakota; and a B-2 Spirit from the Whiteman base in Missouri.

It is the first time all three types of bombers will fly over during the game, KOTA-TV reported.

Major Michael Webster, from the Ellsworth base, considers it a distinct privilege.

He said that "to be able to showcase our capabilities from an Ellsworth standpoint as far as getting the jets ready and all of the support agencies on base that it takes to get a jet launched, and then obviously from the aircrew's perspective being able to be part of it and actually be over Raymond James for the Super Bowl, it's an incredible honor."

The bases were notified in December that they were selected for the flyover and have been planning ever since.

"So, we're all going to take off from our separate bases, different take off times," Webster said. "We have a pre-planned re-join point, so we're all going to get real close together and then hang out, and then fly to Tampa hold around there, then push in and make sure we hit our time over the stadium like we're supposed to and make sure we look good as well."

Hundreds protest coup in Myanmar as resistance spreads

YANGON, Myanmar (AP) — Hundreds of students and teachers took to Myanmar's streets on Friday to demand the military hand power back to elected politicians, as resistance to a coup swelled with demonstrations in several parts of the country, even in the tightly controlled capital.

In the largest rallies since the takeover, protesters at two universities in Yangon flashed a three-fingered salute, a sign of resistance borrowed from "The Hunger Games" movies, that they adopted from anti-government protesters in neighboring Thailand. They chanted "Long live Mother Suu" — a reference to ousted leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been detained — and "We don't want military dictatorship."

"We will never be together with them," lecturer Dr. Nwe Thazin said of the military at a protest at the Yangon University of Education. "We want that kind of government to collapse as soon as possible."

Resistance has been gathering steam since the military declared Monday that it would take power for one year — a shocking setback for the Southeast Asian country that had been making significant, if uneven progress, toward democracy after decades of military rule. The opposition began with people banging pots and pans outside their windows in Yangon, the country's largest city — under the cover of darkness each evening to avoid being targeted. But now people are beginning to take to the streets, including students and medical workers, some of whom are refusing to work.

Students have been central to previous protest movements against military dictatorship.

The military has tried to quash the opposition with selective arrests and by blocking Facebook to prevent users from organizing demonstrations. Facebook is the primary tool for accessing information on the internet for most people in Myanmar, where traditional media is state-controlled or self-censored because of threats of legal action by the state.

The latest politician detained is Win Htein, a senior member of Suu Kyi's deposed National League for Democracy party.

Despite that pushback, on Friday, about 200 people joined the protest at the Yangon University of Education, and a similar number marched at the city's Dagon University, with many carrying papers printed with images of red ribbons — the symbol of the civil disobedience campaign that Suu Kyi's party has called for.

Leading that march were four students carrying the party's peacock-adorned red flag. At the student union, another held a sign saying, in English, "soldier back to barrack!"

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"I believe we will have to lead this movement," said student Min Han Htet. "All the people, including the students, will have to bring down the military junta. We will have to make sure that juntas never appear again in the next generation."

The military's takeover Monday began with the detention of senior government officials, including Suu Kyi, who was the country's de facto leader. She is healthy and remains under house arrest at her official residence in the capital, Naypyitaw, party spokesman Kyi Toe said.

Win Htein, Suu Kyi's longtime confidant, meanwhile, was taken from his home in Yangon to Naypyitaw, on Friday, according to Kyi Toe.

The 79-year-old had publicly called for civil disobedience to oppose the coup. He told Britain's BBC radio in a phone call early Friday that he was being arrested for sedition, which carries a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

There was also at least one demonstration Friday in Naypyitaw — highly unusual for city, which was purpose-built under the previous military government, has a heavy military presence and lacks the tradition of protest of the former capital, Yangon. Medical staff at the city's biggest hospital gathered behind a big banner condemning the coup. Medical personnel have been at the forefront of the resistance.

Another protest was held in Myanmar's southern Tanintharyi Region, where about 50 chanting people marched, reported the online news agency Dawei Watch.

According to Myanmar's Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, at least 133 officials or lawmakers and 14 civil society activists were detained by the military in connection with its takeover, though some have already been released. The NLD has said Suu Kyi and ousted President Win Myint are being held on minor charges unrelated to their official duties — seen by many as merely providing a legal veneer for the military to detain them.

The takeover has been criticized by U.S. President Joe Biden and others internationally who pushed for the elected government to be restored.

"The Burmese military should relinquish power they have seized, release the advocates and activists and officials they have detained, lift the restrictions on telecommunications, and refrain from violence," Biden said Thursday at the U.S. State Department in Washington, using Myanmar's former name.

The U.N. Security Council, in its first statement on the matter, "stressed the need to uphold democratic institutions and processes, refrain from violence, and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law." While the U.S. and others have described the military's actions as a coup, the Security Council's unanimous statement did not.

Protests against the coup were also held Friday in India, Indonesia and South Korea, sometimes led by people from Myanmar.

The military seized power shortly before a new session of Parliament was to convene, accusing Suu Kyi's government of refusing to address allegations of voting irregularities in the election her party won in a landslide. The state election commission has said it found not evidence of fraud.

The military assumed all state powers and has formed a new election commission to investigate the fraud allegations. It has said it will hold a new election in a year and turn over power to the winner.

Myanmar was under military rule for five decades after a 1962 coup, and Suu Kyi's five years as leader had been its most democratic period, despite continued use of repressive colonial-era laws.

Pariah with benefits: US aiding Saudi defense despite chill

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

As a presidential candidate, Joe Biden laid out a tougher line on Saudi Arabia than any U.S. president in decades. He said he would make the kingdom "pay the price" for human rights abuses and "make them in fact the pariah that they are."

But if Biden is making Saudi Arabia a pariah now, it's a pariah with benefits.

While Biden announced Thursday he was making good on his campaign commitment to end U.S. support for a five-year Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen, his administration is making clear it won't abandon

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U.S. military assistance for the kingdom and plans to help Saudi Arabia strengthen its own defenses.

His approach reflects the complexity of the U.S.-Saudi relationship. While Biden is taking a tougher line than his predecessors, he and his foreign policy team recognize the U.S. can't allow relations to unravel. They see the importance of maintaining aspects of a military, counterterrorism and security relationship seen as vital for security of both nations.

"The United States will cooperate with Saudi Arabia where our priorities align and will not shy away from defending U.S. interests and values where they do not," the State Department said in an emailed response to questions from The Associated Press.

The aligned priorities have included a longstanding U.S. emphasis on playing a lead defending the kingdom and its oil from attacks that would jolt the world's energy markets and economies. U.S. leaders also see Saudi Arabia as a regional counterweight to Iran.

Biden said Thursday that the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen has "created a humanitarian and strategic catastrophe." He said he would stop arms sales related to the Yemen offensive, but gave no immediate details what that might mean. At the same time, he also reaffirmed that the United States was committed to cooperating in the kingdom's defense.

That will include helping protect Saudi Arabia's territory, critical infrastructure and shipping routes from the kingdom's opponents in neighboring Yemen, the Houthis, the State Department said. The Biden administration has yet to spell out how it plans to boost defense of the kingdom. Saudi Arabia points to missile and drone strikes and other cross-border attacks launched by Houthis in Yemen.

Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat and critic of U.S. involvement in the Saudi air campaign in Yemen, agreed that the U.S. may still have a security interest in helping guard the kingdom.

"Our focus should be providing basic defensive capabilities to help Riyadh defend itself from external threats, not fighting those threats for the Saudis," Murphy said.

But the U.S. should provide no "additional military support to Saudi Arabia unless we can clearly conclude that support...will not be used as irresponsibly as it has been in Yemen," Murphy said. He called the kingdom an important partner nonetheless, and said he would work with the administration to reset relations with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf nations.

International criticism of Saudi Arabia has mounted since 2015, under King Salman and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Saudi Arabia that year led the United Arab Emirates and others in launching a war targeting Houthi rebels who had seized territory including the ancient city of Sanaa in Yemen, the Arabian peninsula's poorest country. Saudi-led airstrikes since then have killed numerous Yemeni civilians, including schoolboys on a bus and fishermen in their fishing boats. The stalled war has failed to dislodge the Houthis and is deepening hunger and poverty. International rights advocates say Yemen's Houthis also have committed abuses, including repeated attacks on civilians.

The CIA and others also hold the crown prince responsible for the murder and dismemberment of a U.S.-based Saudi journalist, Jamal Khashoggi. The kingdom has imprisoned women who requested government permission to drive and other peaceful advocates. It detained numerous businesspeople and members of the sprawling royal family.

Saudi Arabia has been conciliatory as the Biden administration settles in. It said Thursday it welcomes international diplomacy in the Yemen conflict. Its leaders stress the shared history and cooperation on intelligence, education and other matters. On Thursday, in what was seen as the latest gesture to Biden, the kingdom conditionally released two dual Saudi-American citizens held in a crackdown on civil society and shortened the sentence of a third, the State Department said. The latter, Dr. Walid Fitaihi, had been convicted of "disobedience" to the government.

"I believe we will have a great relationship with them, because all the pillars upon which the relationship stands are still there," Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told Saudi-funded Al Arabiya television about Biden officials.

It was the Obama administration — focused at the time on closing a nuclear deal with Saudi Arabia's rival, Iran — that greenlighted Saudi Arabia's military offensive in Yemen. American involvement with Saudi

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Arabia's command and control was supposed to minimize airstrikes on civilians, but often did not. Yemeni survivors displayed fragments showing it was American-made bombs that hit them. Some of those same Obama officials have since expressed regret, and are now in the Biden administration as it moves to end involvement with the offensive.

It's not yet clear how far Biden will go in fulfilling his campaign pledge to stop the multibillion U.S. arms trade with Saudi Arabia.

Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of the Democracy for the Arab World Now rights advocacy organization, said she was pleased at the administration's messaging so far involving Gulf countries and the Yemen war. The organization was founded by Khashoggi shortly before Saudis killed him

Whitson said she would watch to see if the U.S. maintained arms sales to the kingdom simply by re-branding offensive weapons as defensive, however.

Ultimately, stepped-up U.S. pledges to help Saudi Arabia build up its defenses could give the kingdom the face-saving cover it needs to give up on its Yemen offensive, said Steven Cook, a Middle East researcher at the Council on Foreign Relations think-tank.

It could be "convincing the Saudis to declare victory and go home is really the only way," Cook said. "Hold our nose and do it."

EXPLAINER: What US ending Saudi war support means for Yemen

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — President Joe Biden's announcement that the U.S. will end its support of a Saudi-led coalition's yearslong war against Yemen's Houthi rebels likely will increase pressure on the kingdom to end its campaign there. However, reaching an enduring peace for the Arab world's poorest country still remains in question.

The Iran-backed rebels remain firmly entrenched in the country's north and hold its capital, Sanaa. The rest of the country is being held by competing tribal, regional and political alliances, backed overall by the Saudi-led coalition that's been fighting there since 2015.

How those fractious forces respond will be key as the United Nations, the West and regional countries try to find a power-sharing political arrangement agreeable to all sides. Yemen's long-troubled modern history suggests any deal will be difficult to reach and perhaps even harder to stick to.

WHO IS FIGHTING IN YEMEN AND WHY HAS IT BEEN SO BLOODY?

Yemen's war began in September 2014, when the Houthis seized Sanaa and began a march south to try to seize the entire country. Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates and other countries, entered the war alongside Yemen's internationally recognized government in March 2015.

The war has killed some 130,000 people, including over 13,000 civilians slain in targeted attacks, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Project. The aid group Save the Children estimates that 85,000 children under age 5 have died from starvation or disease since the war began. Meanwhile, the coronavirus pandemic rages unchecked as Yemen's health care system has been decimated by the war and the Houthis suppressed information about the crisis.

The war has seen atrocities from all sides. Saudi airstrikes using American-made bombs killed school children and civilians. The UAE paid off local al-Qaida fighters to avoid fighting and controlled prisons where torture and sexual abuse was rampant. The Houthis employ child soldiers and indiscriminately lay landmines.

WHY IS YEMEN AT WAR?

Situated along the southern tip of the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen had been split in the Cold War between a Marxist south and a northern republic. The two nations became a unified Yemen in 1990, fought a civil war in 1994 and later came under the rule of Ali Abdullah Saleh, a strongman who once described governing his nation's myriad of tribal groups, militant groups and alliances as "dancing on the heads of snakes."

Saleh began losing his grip on power during the Arab Spring protests a decade ago. He ultimately agreed

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to have his vice president, Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, take over. Hadi's government struggled and Saleh, seeing a second chance to regain power, had his forces side with the same Houthis he had battled as president as they swept into the capital in 2014. Saleh ultimately switched sides again to back Hadi but his luck had run out — the Houthis killed him in 2017.

Iran, seeing the opportunity to aid a war of attrition against rival Saudi Arabia, has backed the Houthis. Arab countries, the West and United Nations experts say Iran has armed the Houthis with everything from assault rifles to ballistic missiles, something long denied by Tehran despite evidence to the contrary. Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies fear the Houthis could grow as powerful as Lebanon's Shiite Hezbollah militant group. The Houthis already launched drone and missile attacks deep into the kingdom.

All the while, Yemen's endemic poverty, lack of water and other resources have worsened. The war merely compounded the misery, and this country of 29 million people is now on the brink of famine.

WHY IS THE U.S. INVOLVED?

There's another conflict hidden inside Yemen's war that directly involves the U.S. America has been targeting members of al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, considered by Washington to be the most-dangerous franchise of the militant group that carried out the Sept. 11 attacks. In 2000, al-Qaida militants attacked the USS Cole off Yemen's port city of Aden, killing 17 American sailors.

Every U.S. president since George W. Bush has conducted drone strikes in Yemen, killing over 1,300 people, including at least 115 civilians, according to the Washington-based organization New America. U.S. forces had been operating in Yemen under Saleh and later left. American special forces troops have deployed in the country in the time since, including a raid early in President Donald Trump's administration that killed a Navy SEAL, al-Qaida militants and civilians.

Meanwhile, the U.S. sold bombs and fighter jets to Saudi Arabia that the kingdom later used in strikes on Yemen that also killed civilians. The Obama administration in 2015 initially offered U.S. targeting assistance to Saudi Arabia's command-and-control that was supposed to minimize civilian casualties in airstrikes. It didn't, and Obama ultimately cut back on the program. Under Trump, that assistance continued although his administration later stopped U.S. refueling operations for Saudi jets.

America also has deployed U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia after it came under a drone-and-missile attack in 2019 that temporarily halved its oil output. While the Houthis claimed the attack, the kingdom, the U.S. and U.N. experts believe Iran carried out the attack. Biden made a point to say the U.S. would "continue to support and help Saudi Arabia defend its sovereignty and its territorial integrity and its people."

WILL THIS END THE WAR?

Biden's announcement appeared designed to put new pressure on Saudi Arabia to end its coalition campaign there. The UAE pulled out its ground forces in 2019 and has been urging a negotiated settlement to the war. Saudi Prince Khalid bin Salman, a deputy defense minister and son of King Salman, wrote on Twitter the kingdom wants to work toward "implementing a sustainable political settlement" in Yemen. The war has been a costly, bloody stalemate for his father, as well as his brother Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

However, previous U.N.-led efforts have yet to end the conflict. Meanwhile, secessionists allied to the UAE have openly battled other troops allied to the coalition. Any peace between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis may only see the country divided again in the future.

Follow Jon Gambrell on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP.

Super Bowl ads aim to comfort and connect

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Super Bowl ads each year offer a snapshot of the American psyche. And this year, it's a doozy.

After a year of pandemic fear and isolation, a tumultuous election capped by a riot at the Capitol, and periodic uncertainty as to whether there would even BE a Super Bowl, marketers have to tread carefully.

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The ideal: promote their brands to a weary audience looking for comfort and escapism without crossing any lines that might trigger viewers.

So Will Ferrell is teaming with GM — and Awkwafina and Kenan Thompson — on a madcap cross country dash to promote electric vehicles. Amazon toys with sexual innuendo when a woman is distracted by her new Alexa assistant that looks like the actor Michael B. Jordan. And Anheuser-Busch offers a hopeful look toward a time when we can say “let’s get a beer” to friends and coworkers again.

“Comfort is key,” said Villanova University marketing professor Charles Taylor. “Being edgy is going to get attention, but it risks getting out of the comfort zone at a time people have been cooped up in their homes and economic times are tough for many.”

The prize for those who get the balance right? The chance to break into the psyche and (virtual) watercooler talk of an estimated 100 million viewers who will be watching the CBS broadcast of Super Bowl LV on Sunday.

NEW WORLD ORDER

With big names such as Coke, Hyundai and Kia sitting it out this year, newcomers are rushing in. This year’s Super Bowl will showcase more than 20 first-time advertisers — more than double the 8 from last year if you exclude campaign ads, according to a tally by research firm iSpot. Many are flush with cash thanks to changing consumer habits during the pandemic.

It’s a bellwether when a brand can afford the estimated \$5.5 million cost-of-entry for a 30-second spot during the Super Bowl. This year’s class includes the companies that brought us our food, let us shop online and helped us work from home. Among them are delivery services DoorDash and Uber Eats, the job site Indeed, the car site Vroom, the recently headline-grabbing investing app Robinhood, and the computer accessories company Logitech.

Most are taking tried-and-true ad approaches. DoorDash enlists Sesame Street characters for a dose of nostalgia. Logitech goes the celebrity route with an endorsement from hip hop artist Little Nas X intended to underscore that its products like keyboards and mice help artists and makers “defy logic.”

And in what is surely a first in Super Bowl history, an ad for Inspiration4, a SpaceX supported all-civilian space launch, touts a chance for viewers to join the mission. Courtesy of payment processor Shift4 Payments, whose CEO, Jared Isaacman, will command that mission.

PANDEMIC LIFE

Some marketers took aim at the changing habits and ways we live during the pandemic. Tide’s ad depicts a boy not wanting to wash a clean-looking sweatshirt with the face of “Seinfeld” star Jason Alexander on it. But as the sweatshirt collects garbage and dog drool, Alexander’s face starts scowling, and only perks up when Tide saves the day.

By suggesting that you may be wearing the same clothes more, and washing them less, the ad encourages more detergent use, said Kim Whitler, a marketing professor at the University of Virginia. “They wouldn’t have run this ad if COVID hadn’t happened,” she said

Amazon, meanwhile, knows people stuck at home all year might be fantasizing about something new. So a woman’s new Amazon Alexa takes on the voice — and body — of actor Michael B. Johnson, to the consternation of her hapless husband.

Meanwhile, a Cheetos ad shows real life married couple Mila Kunis and Ashton Kutcher wrangling over a bag of Cheetos Crunch Pop Mix — to the tune of Shaggy’s “It Wasn’t Me,” evincing the frayed nerves of a couple who have been stuck inside too long.

“This is what happens when you lock Mila and I in a house together for a year,” Kutcher tweeted about the ad.

ELECTION? WHAT ELECTION?

In stark contrast to last year’s Super Bowl, which featured campaign ads from both Donald Trump and Michael Bloomberg, politics is out of sight this year. With, that is, the possible exception of online gig marketplace Fiverr, which has teased that its ad involves Four Seasons Total Landscaping.

Also MIA are any ads referring to the Black Lives Matter movement, which spurred vast protests across

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the country last summer. Advertisers may still be smarting from a disastrous 2017 Pepsi ad in which Kendall Jenner played a protestor who charms police with a frosty soda. It took serious flak for minimizing protests and was eventually pulled.

Marketers who want to pull at viewers' emotions this year are offering up vaguely hopeful, look-forward-to-the-future messaging.

Toyota's spot looks ahead to the Olympics and Paralympics, although both again face potential postponement as the pandemic drags on. Its ad showcases Paralympic swimmer Jessica Long's journey from orphan in Siberia to Olympian, ending with the line, "We believe there is hope and strength in all of us."

And Anheuser-Busch's corporate brand spot shows typical pre-pandemic scenes of people sharing a beer — kitchen workers, orchestra players, cubicle dwellers, strangers at an airport bar and reminds people to look forward to that again.

"So when we're back, let's remember, it's never just about the beer," a voiceover states. "It's about saying that simple human truth, we need each other."

Fiercely divided House kicks Greene off both her committees

By ALAN FRAM and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fiercely divided House has tossed Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene off both her committees, an unprecedented punishment that Democrats said she'd earned by spreading hateful and violent conspiracy theories.

Underscoring the political vise her inflammatory commentary has clamped her party into, nearly all Republicans voted against the Democratic move Thursday but none defended her lengthy history of outrageous social media posts.

Yet in a riveting moment, the freshman Republican from a deep-red corner of Georgia took to the House floor on her own behalf. She offered a mixture of backpedaling and finger-pointing as she wore a dark mask emblazoned with the words "FREE SPEECH."

The chamber's near party-line 230-199 vote was the latest instance of conspiracy theories becoming pitched political battlefields, an increasingly familiar occurrence during Donald Trump's presidency. He faces a Senate trial next week for his House impeachment for inciting insurrection after a mob he fueled with his false narrative of a stolen election attacked the Capitol.

Thursday's fight also underscored the uproar and political complexities that Greene — a master of provoking Democrats, promoting herself and raising campaign money — has prompted since becoming a House candidate last year.

Eleven Republicans joined 219 Democrats in backing Greene's ejection from her committees, while 199 GOP lawmakers voted "no."

Addressing her colleagues, Greene tried to dissociate herself from her "words of the past." Contradicting past social media posts, she said she believes the 9/11 attacks and mass school shootings were real and no longer believes QAnon conspiracy theories, which include lies about Democratic-run pedophile rings.

But she didn't explicitly apologize for supportive online remarks she's made on other subjects, as when she mulled about House Speaker Nancy Pelosi being assassinated or the possibility of Jewish-controlled space rays causing wildfires. And she portrayed herself as the victim of unscrupulous "big media companies."

News organizations "can take teeny, tiny pieces of words that I've said, that you have said, any of us, and can portray us as someone that we're not," she said. She added that "we're in a real big problem" if the House punished her but tolerated "members that condone riots that have hurt American people" — a clear reference to last summer's social justice protests that in some instances became violent.

Greene was on the Education and Labor committee and the Budget committee. Democrats were especially aghast about her assignment to the education panel, considering the past doubt she cast on school shootings in Florida and Connecticut.

The political imperative for Democrats was clear: Greene's support for violence and fictions were dangerous and merited punishment. Democrats and researchers said there was no apparent precedent for

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the full House removing a lawmaker from a committee, a step usually taken by their party leaders.

The calculation was more complicated for Republicans.

Though Trump left the White House two weeks ago, his devoted followers are numerous among the party's voters, and he and Greene are allies. Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., hopes GOP victories in the 2022 elections will make him speaker. Republicans could undermine that scenario by alienating Trump's and Greene's passionate supporters, and McCarthy took no action to punish her.

"If any of our members threatened the safety of other members, we'd be the first ones to take them off a committee," Pelosi angrily told reporters. She said she was "profoundly concerned" about GOP leaders' acceptance of an "extreme conspiracy theorist."

At one point, No. 2 Democratic leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland strode to the GOP side of the chamber carrying a poster of a Greene Facebook post from last year. "Squad's Worst Nightmare," Greene had written in the post, which showed her holding an AR-15 firearm next to pictures of three of the four Democratic lawmakers, all young women of color, who've been nicknamed "The Squad."

"They are people. They are our colleagues," Hoyer said. He mimicked Greene's pose holding the weapon and said, "I have never, ever seen that before."

Republicans tread carefully but found rallying points.

McCarthy said Greene's past opinions "do not represent the views of my party." But without naming the offenders, he said Pelosi hadn't stripped committee memberships from Democrats who became embroiled in controversy. Among those he implicated was Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., who made anti-Israel insults for which she later apologized.

"If that's the new standard," he said of Democrats' move against Greene, "we have a long list."

Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., said Democrats were setting a precedent by punishing lawmakers for statements made before they were even candidates for Congress. Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, warned, "You engage in wrong-speak, you're in the Thunderdome," a term for an enclosed wrestling arena.

Committee assignments are crucial for lawmakers for shaping legislation affecting their districts, creating a national reputation and raising campaign contributions. Even social media stars like Greene could find it harder to define themselves without the spotlights that committees provide.

Not all Republicans were in forgiving moods, especially in the Senate. There, fringe GOP candidates have lost winnable races in recent years and leaders worry a continued linkage with Trump and conspiracists will inflict more damage.

That chamber's minority leader, Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., this week called Greene's words a "cancer" on the GOP and country. On Thursday, No. 2 Senate GOP leader John Thune of South Dakota amplified that thinking.

Thune said House Republicans needed to issue a "really strong" rebuke of Greene's conspiratorial formulations. Republicans must "get away from members dabbling in conspiracy theories," Thune said. "I don't think that's a productive course of action or one that's going to lead to much prosperity politically in the future."

The fight came a day after Republicans resolved another battle and voted to keep Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., in their leadership. Pro-Trump conservatives tried removing her because she supported Trump's impeachment.

The House resolution punishing Greene was barely over a page. It said House rules require lawmakers' behavior to "reflect credibly" on the chamber and said Greene should be removed "in light of conduct she has exhibited."

News organizations have unearthed countless social media videos and "likes" in which Greene embraced absurd theories like suspicions that Hillary Clinton was behind the 1999 death of John F. Kennedy Jr. Greene responded, "Stage is being set," when someone posted a question about hanging Clinton and former President Barack Obama.

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Military coup yet another blow for Myanmar's sagging economy

By ELAINE KURTENBACH and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — The military coup in Myanmar is unlikely to do the country's struggling economy, once considered a promising "last frontier," any good at all.

Myanmar's economy has languished as the pandemic added to its challenges and the prospect of fresh Western sanctions in the wake of this week's army takeover will only make things tougher for those on the ground, economists say.

It's unclear if China might help make up for lost business due to the increased political risks and potential for turmoil if public anger over the ouster of massively popular Aung San Suu Kyi and fellow civilian leaders erupts in mass protests.

Apart from raising the risk of political unrest, economic sanctions and other disruptions, the coup likely will prove to be a huge setback to efforts to improve Myanmar's investment environment, curb crony capitalism and build a more sustainable path to growth.

"With this kind of situation the sad thing is that you don't even need to put sanctions in place because the dire economic consequences of the conflict, combined with what happening now makes the country look very unstable and not the right place to invest right now. So the repercussions are immediate," said Laetitia van den Assum, a former diplomat and a member of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, which was set up by former U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan to improve Myanmar's treatment of minority Rohingya Muslims.

The military seized power shortly before a new session of Parliament was to convene on Monday, declaring its actions were legal and constitutional because Suu Kyi's government had refused to address voting irregularities in November's election, which her National League for Democracy won in a landslide.

That provoked a rush to ATMs and food stalls. TV signals were cut and passenger flights were grounded. Authorities urged calm, while moving to suppress dissent through Facebook and other social media.

Commander-in-Chief Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing, who now controls the government, met with business leaders and pledged to maintain financial stability and "continue work on international projects."

Meanwhile, the central bank promised it would not demonetize any of the currency, a reasonable fear: three past demonetizations provoked much anguish and anger.

"The general public can continue using the banknotes and banking services without any worries, and all the banks have been instructed to provide regular banking services," the Central Bank of Myanmar said in a notice.

The economy already was faltering before the pandemic. Sian Fenner of Oxford Economics estimates the coup will likely cut growth this year by half, from an earlier forecast of 4.1% to 2%.

The past decade's average annual growth rate of 7.6% had slowed to just 2.9% in 2019. Last year, the World Bank estimates the economy grew 0.5%.

The economy's performance fell short of popular expectations as growth benefited a tiny part of the population and reforms took a back seat to efforts to end decades of ethnic civil conflict. Tourism has suffered and new sanctions were imposed following a 2017 counterinsurgency campaign that drove about 740,000 of the mostly Muslim Rohingya to flee the country.

Min Aung Hlaing is one of four generals who were blacklisted by the U.S. Treasury Department for the military's abuses in Rakhine and other ethnic majority regions.

Given the recurring risks of falling afoul of such sanctions, many U.S. companies have held back on major direct commitments, instead opting for local partnerships. Fast food giant Yum! Brands Inc., for example, opened its first Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet, a franchise with local partner Yoma Strategic Holdings, in downtown Yangon last year.

President Joe Biden said Monday the coup would bring an immediate review of U.S. sanction laws, "followed by appropriate action."

"We will work with our partners to support restoration of democracy and the rule of law, and impose consequences on those responsible," he said in a speech to State Department employees on Thursday.

The potential impact of sanctions would depend on how far-reaching they are. Many Western brand

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names, including Samsonite, LL Bean, H&M and Bass Pro, have suppliers in Myanmar, based on shipping data from Panjiva.

Exports of clothing, shoes and other consumer goods are a vital source of growth. They doubled after the European Union in 2015 began allowing preferential imports from Myanmar under an "everything but arms" arrangement in recognition of the country's progress toward democracy.

The garment and textiles sector employs 450,000, mostly women, in more than 600 factories, according to the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association.

"The development of a competitive low-end manufacturing sector has traditionally been the route out of poverty for low-income countries in Asia, so throttling textiles would have lasting repercussions," Gareth Leather of Capital Economics said in a report.

Japan's Kirin Holding Co. announced Friday it was ending its joint venture with the military-linked conglomerate Myanma Economic Holdings PLC, whose board is entirely composed of military leaders.

"Given the current circumstances, we have no option but to terminate our current joint-venture partnership," Kirin said. "We will be taking steps as a matter of urgency to put this termination into effect."

The military, which had ruled Myanmar for five decades, does not have a strong track record on handling the economy. Beginning in the 1990s, foreign investment rose as the leadership began sporadic efforts to modernize and reopen the economy.

Business and tourism revived as a result of a transition to a civilian, quasi-democratic government a decade ago. Poverty dropped from about half of the population to just over a quarter, according to the World Bank. But rural areas, home to about 70% of the population, still lag far behind.

The coup threatens the short-term outlook for investment and foreign business, but also the longer-term potential for growth, says Fenner of Oxford Economics.

It is likely to delay or perhaps derail the government's efforts to improve the business environment, build up a modern banking system and other financial industries, cut corporate taxes and move ahead with "strategic infrastructure projects," he noted.

Myanmar has made progress in some areas in recent years, including compliance with anti-money laundering standards, opening a stock exchange and enacting a financial institutions law. The government was preparing to implement a medium- to long-term economic resilience and reform plan after the election.

But the military has retained ultimate control both of the government and much of the economy, enabling cronies to dominate lucrative trading in gems and other natural resources. Private businesses are starved of cash while investment in schools, health and other vital foundations of future growth has suffered.

"You need the kind of investment that helps you build and adapt to climate change, that helps you to make your economy more sustainable in the long run. You need innovation. And that's not going to come from crony capitalism," van den Assum said.

Milko reported from Jakarta, Indonesia.

Surprise tax forms reveal extent of unemployment fraud in US

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Unemployment agencies across the country were bombarded with so many claims during the pandemic that many struggled to distinguish the correct from the criminal.

Now, simple tax forms — barely enough to fill a half-sheet of paper — are revealing the extent of the identity theft that made state-run unemployment offices lucrative targets for fraud after millions of people lost their jobs during the pandemic.

Unemployment benefits are taxable, so government agencies must send a tax form — known as a 1099-G — to people who received the benefits so they can report the income on their tax returns. States are mailing 1099-Gs in huge numbers this year after processing and paying a record number of unemployment claims.

Teri Finneman of Lawrence, Kansas, was surprised when she got a form saying she owed taxes on

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\$1,500 in unemployment payments that she never received — a sign that someone likely stole her personal information and used it to claim benefits.

"It is extremely frustrating how many Kansans have been impacted by this," she wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Nearly 26 million people requested unemployment aid in the initial months after states began ordering shutdowns due to the pandemic. The unprecedented surge strained state unemployment offices that are governed by federal rules but administered in patchwork fashion by state governments, with many relying on 1960s-era software to process applications and issue payments.

The federal government, as part of its \$2 trillion relief package approved in March, significantly expanded jobless aid, making it a richer target for fraud. By November, states across the country said they had paid as much as \$36 billion in improper benefits, with a significant portion obtained through fraud, according to a report from the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Inspector General.

The fraud is so widespread that California issued payments to someone using the name of U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, and in Ohio, Republican Gov. Mike DeWine, his wife, Fran, and Republican Lt. Gov. Jon Husted all learned that fraudulent claims were filed in their names.

Now, unemployment agencies could face another onslaught — this time from people requesting corrected tax forms.

"It does open a can of worms," said Rob Seltzer, a certified public accountant in Los Angeles and a member of the California Society of CPAs. "It really depends upon how fast the (state) is able to send out a corrected form."

Ohio has set up a telephone hotline and created a website allowing residents to report identity theft. Once the state confirms fraud has been committed, taxpayers will receive a corrected 1099-G form. In the past two weeks, 62,000 people had filed a report, according to spokesman Thomas Betti.

"It's really easy for somebody to be like, 'This isn't my problem. They sent me the form, I've never been to Ohio.' Still, you need to take care of this," Betti said. "Every unemployment system in the country is dealing with this massive amount of fraud."

Last month, the IRS said it is likely that many victims won't be able to get a corrected tax form in time to file their federal taxes. In those instances, the IRS says taxpayers should ignore the 1099-G and file their taxes without reporting the fraudulent income.

Christina Elliott, owner of BEM Financial Services, worries that process could delay tax refunds for people who are counting on them to make it through the pandemic. She has two clients — one in California and one in Georgia — who say they received incorrect forms showing they received as much as \$27,000 in unemployment benefits last year.

"They are literally going to have to investigate each one," Elliot said about the IRS. "These people already had their identity stolen that they didn't know about, here lies another problem where they will be waiting months just to get their (tax refunds) that are owed to them."

The problem could be most acute in California, where officials mailed close to 8 million tax forms last month — more than five times the number they send in a normal year. The state Employment Development Department said it has updated its website and hired another 300 agents for its call center, training them on how to handle questions about the 1099-G forms.

Rooting out fraud and identity theft has been an ongoing struggle for the agency. A state audit released last week showed that from April to October, it responded to less than 2% of fraud reports. By November, it had a backlog of more than 77,000 such reports.

That likely included a report by Greg Musson, who owns a business near Fresno. State officials contacted his company in September to let him know one of his employees had filed for unemployment benefits in March. Musson was surprised to learn that person was him. He put a freeze on his credit and filed a fraud report with the state unemployment department, but so far hasn't heard anything back.

"To know that somebody has my information and has been able to get really pretty personal with it, it's like your home being broken into," he said.

Carol Williams, chief deputy director of operations for the California Employment Development Department, said people who get incorrect tax forms should fill out a worksheet on the department website that will allow officials to determine if a fraudulent claim has been filed.

But state lawmakers worry the agency might not be able to handle the workload. Republican state Sen. Scott Wilk said one of his constituents was “dumbfounded” to get a notice that he owed taxes on \$11,000 in unemployment benefits.

“In a time when we really need people to have confidence in their government, going through this pandemic and rolling out the vaccine, the last thing we need to do is additionally shatter their confidence in our ability to be competent,” Wilk said.

Associated Press reporters John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Andrew Welsh-Huggins in Columbus, Ohio; and Christopher Rugaber in Washington contributed reporting.

India clamps down on free speech to fight farmer protests

By SHEIKH SAALIQ and KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — When Vinod K. Jose, executive editor of The Caravan, India’s leading investigating magazine, logged onto Twitter on Monday, he was shocked to find the magazine’s account blocked.

Jose was already dealing with a case of sedition and other charges against him, the magazine owners and a freelance journalist. At the heart of the allegations is the magazine’s coverage of the ongoing farmers’ protests that have gripped India for more than two months.

As the farmers camp out at the edges of the capital, protesting new agricultural laws they say will devastate their earnings, the mainstream and social media have come under unprecedented attacks from Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party. Critics say it has used the massive demonstrations to escalate a crackdown on free speech, detaining journalists and freezing Twitter accounts.

“It’s a very chilling development for the press,” said Apar Gupta, executive director of the Internet Freedom Foundation, a digital rights advocacy group.

Jose shared a screenshot of the blocked account from his personal handle. Soon outrage ensued. Activists, journalists and media watchdogs rushed to condemn Twitter, which said it had acted upon a “valid legal request” issued by an Indian authority.

Hundreds of Indian Twitter accounts, including those of news websites, activists and a farmers’ union, were suspended on Monday. Some, including The Caravan’s, have since been restored.

Offline, at least nine journalists have been charged in the last few weeks for covering the protests.

The trigger for the clampdown was the death of a protester, Navneet Singh, when the largely peaceful rallies turned violent on Jan. 26 after a group of farmers veered from an agreed protest route and stormed New Delhi’s 17th century Red Fort. Hundreds of police and farmers were injured in clashes.

Farmer leaders condemned the violence but refused to call off the protest.

Authorities say no shots were fired and that Singh died because his tractor overturned. His family alleged he was fatally shot. Their account has been published by several outlets, including The Caravan.

Ministers in Modi’s government accused the journalists and a prominent opposition parliamentarian of inciting hatred and endangering the nation’s integrity through inaccurate reporting and tweets. It led to the filing of colonial-era sedition charges, which carry a maximum five-year prison term.

The law, like its equivalent in other former British colonies, is viewed as draconian and was revoked in the United Kingdom in 2010.

Prosecutions on sedition charges are rare but their use to silence journalists, critics and dissenters in India isn’t new and previous governments had resorted to it. But official data shows that Modi’s government has used the law more than any other — up by nearly 30%. It has also repeatedly rejected demands to repeal it.

Calls and messages seeking comment from four BJP spokespersons went unanswered. Calls to the party’s media office also were unsuccessful.

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Media watchdogs and rights groups, including Human Rights Watch, condemned the government's actions as censorship. The Editors Guild of India said the cases against journalists were "an attempt to intimidate, harass, browbeat, and stifle the media."

Daniel Bastard, the head of Reporters Without Borders' Asia-Pacific desk, said the government was trying to impose its own narrative.

Critics say India under Modi is growing intolerant. Its ranking on the World Press Freedom Index has fallen every year, and it ranked 142nd out of 180 places in 2020.

Reporters Without Borders noted "police violence against journalists" and increased "pressure on the media to toe the Hindu nationalist government's line" as a major reason for the demotion.

But similarly, Twitter's reaction of suspending accounts has also "set a terrible precedent" for free speech and press, said Jose.

"We like Twitter to stand neutral as opposed to being vulnerable to the pressures of power," he said.

India's Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology in its notice to Twitter on Monday said that it directed the company to take down accounts that had used incendiary hashtags during the Jan. 26 violence. But Jose said The Caravan never used such hashtags and that Twitter did not notify the magazine before suspending its account.

The ministry did not respond to calls and emails but issued another statement Wednesday, accusing Twitter of "unilaterally" restoring the accounts "despite orders to withhold them."

It said the platform had to adhere to the authorities' directions and may face criminal charges "for not complying with government orders."

Twitter declined to comment.

Gupta from Internet Freedom Foundation said the IT law the government invoked to freeze the Twitter accounts gives it the power to direct online intermediaries and internet service providers to block certain content without providing any explanation.

"In the past, governments have blocked individual journalistic accounts, but the blocking of an account of an entire publication is a level of escalation," said Gupta.

The government's response to the farmer protests has gone beyond India's borders.

On Wednesday, India's Ministry of External Affairs condemned "vested interest groups trying to enforce their agenda" after pop star Rihanna and teenage climate activist Greta Thunberg tweeted in support of the protests.

Entertainers in India haven't been spared either.

On Jan. 1, Muslim comedian Munawar Faruqui was arrested for allegedly insulting Hindu sentiments while performing in Indore, a city in Madhya Pradesh state that's ruled by Modi's party.

In India, intentionally hurting religious sentiments is a criminal offense. But Faruqui was arrested preemptively before his performance even began.

"Before he could even make the joke, before he could even really start the show, police came and dragged him away," said Anshuman Shrivastava, Faruqui's lawyer.

The show was canceled and police have since admitted they have no evidence against the comic. He was granted temporary bail by the Supreme Court on Friday, after three lower courts refused to do so.

The Associated Press reached out to five prominent comedians who didn't want to speak on record but said they were increasingly scared of making jokes against the government and Hindu religion.

"What we are witnessing right now is a blatant violation of free speech in India, which the government has legitimized in full public view," said Sanjay Rajoura, a prominent Indian satirist. "The government first came after Muslims because they are an easily visible minority. But now it is coming after anyone who has an informed, intelligent expression."

The ire of Hindu nationalist groups aligned with Modi's party has also caught streaming platforms off guard. Many of their shows have faced boycott calls and legal cases. Recently, the Supreme Court issued a notice to Amazon Prime over its show "Mirzapur" after a petition claimed it hurt cultural sentiments.

Such incidents haven't inspired much faith in the courts, said The Caravan's Jose. He and the owners are still battling criminal charges.

"I hope the courts see that the world is watching how the largest democracy's judiciary defends personal liberties," Jose said.

Moscow's jails overwhelmed with detained Navalny protesters

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The video, shot by a man detained in a Moscow protest, shows a group of people jammed into a police minibus. One of them says on the recording that they had already been held there for nine hours, with some forced to stand because of overcrowding and no access to food, water or bathrooms.

Another video taken in a dingy holding cell intended for eight inmates shows 28 men crammed inside awaiting transfer, with no mattresses on the cots and a filthy pit latrine-like toilet.

Detainees are recounting their miserable experiences as Moscow jails were overwhelmed following mass arrests from protests in support of opposition leader Alexei Navalny this week. They described long waits to be processed through the legal system and crowded conditions with few coronavirus precautions.

"We were detained on Jan. 31 during a peaceful protest, and we ask for help and public attention to the inhumane conditions we're forced to be in," pleads the man in the police minibus video. The video was first posted Tuesday on the messaging app Telegram by Sasha Fishman, who received it from her friend Dmitry Yepishin, one of the detainees in the vehicle.

More than 11,000 protesters were reported detained across Russia in the pro-Navalny rallies on two straight weekends last month and in Moscow and St. Petersburg on Tuesday, after he was ordered by court to serve nearly three years in prison.

Some of the protesters were beaten on the streets by riot police or subjected to other abuse. Human rights advocates said many police precincts refused to let lawyers in to help detainees, citing what is known as the "Fortress" protocol.

"Many violations (of detainees' rights) we've seen before. ... But probably the scale we see now is much scarier than before," Alexandra Bayeva, coordinator with the OVD-Info rights group that monitors political arrests, told The Associated Press.

While it accounted for less than half of the detentions, the capital's jails quickly filled up as scores of people were sentenced by the courts. Many received misdemeanor charges that resulted in jail terms of five to 15 days.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov acknowledged Thursday there were more detainees than detention centers in Moscow could swiftly process, but he blamed the problem on the protesters themselves.

"This situation wasn't provoked by law enforcement; it was provoked by participants of unauthorized rallies," Peskov said.

Marina Litvinovich, member of the Public Monitoring Commission that observes the treatment of prisoners and detainees, said Moscow simply could not handle such an influx of protesters convicted of misdemeanor offenses and needing to be jailed for several days.

"The first crisis occurred when police vans and buses (with detainees) were driving around Moscow anxiously and jails didn't let them in. They didn't know where to put people," Litvinovich told the AP. "Some people were brought back to police precincts. Some were standing the whole day inside police vans near the jails. Some got lucky and they were given food and taken to toilets. Some didn't have luck and they had to pee in a bottle."

Filipp Kuznetsov was arrested Jan. 23 and sentenced to 10 days in jail but didn't get into his jail cell until Jan. 27. Kuznetsov told AP he spent the first night in a holding cell, and the second night in a police bus waiting for the detention center to accommodate him and about a dozen others.

"It was a very unpleasant situation," Kuznetsov said.

Gleb Maryasov, also detained Jan. 23, had to wait for a bed in a cell to free up for him for 25 hours, spending that time on the back seat of a police car, said his lawyer, Dmitry Zakhvatov.

As jails in Moscow filled, authorities moved people to detention centers outside the capital. Lines of police buses were reported in Sakharovo, 65 kilometers (40 miles) south of the city. By Thursday evening,

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the Sakharovo facility housed over 800 people, around 90% of whom were detained during protests, Litvinovich said told Russia's Tass news agency.

Dmitry Shelomentsev was among those who had to wait in a police bus for several hours in Sakharovo before being taken inside. Sentenced to 15 days in jail for participating in Tuesday's protest, Shelomentsev sent AP the short video Thursday morning from the cell where 28 people were being held, awaiting transfers.

There were not enough beds, which had no mattresses, and policemen dropped off two five-liter bottles of water to share among all the inmates, with no cups, he said. In the video, some of the inmates stood leaning on the short walls that surrounded the dirty toilet.

After nearly five hours in the cell, Shelomentsev said he was transferred to a smaller one -- for four people.

Moscow police said Thursday those awaiting transfer were allocated cells in accordance with regulations, and there was enough space in the Sakharovo facility.

When asked whether there were any virus-related precautions at the detention center, Shelomentsev wrote: "What (coronavirus) measures if there were 28 of us in one cell and ... people drank from the same jug?"

Other protesters detained in Sakharovo described riding all night in police buses before they were taken to their cells, according to their friends and partners.

Getting food parcels and other basics to them required waiting outside the detention facilities for hours in subfreezing temperatures. Anna Chumakova, who spent all day in line Thursday, said about 150 people lined up by midday, but only fewer than 40 were able to get their packages in by sundown.

Lawyer Zakhvatov also pointed to reports that dozens of people slept on the floors of police precincts. These "highlight the absurdity" of prosecuting some Navalny allies for inciting violations of coronavirus protocols by organizing street protests, he said.

Besides Sakharovo, there were at least four more detention centers outside Moscow where protesters were taken, according to Litvinovich of the Public Monitoring Commission. Each facility could hold about 30 people and all were filled.

She called the situation "absolutely unprecedented."

"It's the beginning, it's not just the first time. It's the beginning of the process when these jails will be always full. I think people will keep protesting and authorities will remain brutal," she said. ____

Associated Press journalists Kostya Manenkov and Tanya Titova contributed.

In Egypt, a push to get more orphans families, fight stigma

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

Yasmina El Habbal long dreamed of giving birth to a daughter and planned to name her Ghalia, Arabic for "precious." She never got married, and never did.

But in an Egyptian orphanage at age 40, she finally found her Ghalia: a fussy baby girl with large brown eyes who promptly fell asleep in her arms.

"God has created her for me," El Habbal said. "There's no way I could have loved her more or become more attached to her had I given birth to her myself."

Adoption in the strict sense of the word, with children taking on all the legal rights of biological offspring, is not allowed under Islam, which emphasizes the importance of preserving blood lineage. Instead there is Kafala, an alternative care system under which adults can become guardians of orphaned children.

But elements of Egyptian society have not historically been aware of or enthusiastic about the practice of parents taking orphans into their homes and families, sometimes attaching a stigma to children assumed to have been born out of wedlock or abandoned. Today, El Habbal and others are trying to change that by sharing their Kafala stories on social media, demystifying the practice and challenging such societal prejudices.

Since taking Ghalia in, El Habbal has been sharing snippets of their lives on her blog-style Facebook

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page: The girl giggling as El Habbal rocks and sings to her; bundled up by a campfire; mother and baby sporting matching Superman T-shirts. An initial post was widely shared, and she has also spoken out in Egyptian media.

The message: "Louli" — her nickname — is an ordinary child like any other, who laughs, cries, gets sick and gets better, with no reason for shame.

"I sometimes just look at her and wonder how our lives would have been like this day if we hadn't found each other?" El Habbal once posted. "I don't even remember a life without her."

One of the most prominent Kafala moms-turned-activists is Rasha Mekky, who founded the nonprofit Yalla Kafala to raise awareness and chip away at cultural misconceptions. Its Facebook page answers questions and concerns, discusses issues like how to talk to children about Kafala and explains its requirements to the group's more than 49,000 followers.

Their efforts come as Egypt has been easing those requirements to encourage families to provide orphans with permanent homes. Under Kafala, children may not have the same inheritance rights as biological ones or take on the full name of the guardian father, but they now may take on either his given name or the family name. And the minimum age requirement for couples to apply has been lowered to 21.

Reem Amin of Egypt's Ministry of Social Solidarity said online groups like Mekky's provide a support system for Kafala families or those contemplating it, and are "partners in success" for getting more kids into permanent homes.

"All these ideas will for sure, one day, change the society's awareness and thinking about Kafala," Amin said.

Much work remains.

Mahmoud Schban, director of the family and childhood department at the ministry, said one challenge in promoting Kafala is that some people mistakenly confuse it with adoption and shun it as "haram," or religiously forbidden.

"This is not adoption," he said.

Islam strongly encourages caring for orphans, and clerics supporting the effort often cite a saying of the Prophet Muhammad promising closeness in paradise with those who provide Kafala for orphans.

"These kids who live in facilities are in need of care either through financially sponsoring them or through taking them in and providing them with an adequate home and taking care of their education, financial needs and upbringing," said Sheikh Hassan Khalil, a member of Egypt's High Committee for Alternative Families.

"That way one would have performed a great deed for God" and country, he added.

Kafala raises questions about observing Islamic rules governing the mixing of unrelated males and females after children hit puberty and about veiled women appearing without their headcover before unrelated males.

Many Kafala moms opt to breastfeed, at times inducing lactation — nursing a child five times who is under age 2 forges an Islamically recognized familial bond, Khalil said.

That shouldn't discourage families from taking in children older than 2 so long as they observe etiquette and modesty rules, especially after puberty, he said.

Mekky, an Egyptian-American living in San Francisco, wishes someone had told her about Kafala long before she took in her now-6-year-old boy— it could have spared her years of heartache and a string of failed in vitro fertilization attempts.

Mekky said would-be Kafala parents often encounter resistance from their own families, who see it as "taboo" and advise them to pray to God for a biological child. Her goal is to change that mindset.

"We want people to be proud of what they have accomplished and that they have taken in a child. ... It's a beautiful thing, not something to hide," she said.

She has been bombarded with messages from Egyptian women inspired to follow in her footsteps — including El Habbal, who found "a lifeline" in Mekky's story.

El Habbal had already been helping girls at an orphanage by providing clothes and books and taking them on outings. She sponsored one of them financially, and grew close to others. But she couldn't shake

the feeling they needed more than material possessions and education.

They needed family.

When she hit 40, she decided it was time, despite the prejudices she knew they might confront. Looking at a picture of Ghalia, she felt the baby's eyes piercing her soul.

It hasn't always been easy: El Habbal's father, fearful of her raising a child as a single parent, refuses to have a relationship with the girl.

But El Habbal still encourages others to choose Kafala and is thrilled that a friend of a friend who sought her advice has been approved to become a guardian.

"I want as many people as possible to take this step," El Habbal said. "I want all the children to find homes."

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Israel, a global leader in COVID vaccinations, finds limits

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — When it comes to fighting the coronavirus, Israel is discovering the limits of vaccines.

The country famous for its high-tech prowess and spirit of innovation is home to the world's speediest vaccination drive, fueled from the top by national pride and a deep longing to start "getting back to life," as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put it.

But experts say reopening the country will still take months, complicated by coronavirus mutations that have spread from Britain and South Africa, a refusal among some sectors to adhere to safety rules and wobbles in the pace of vaccinations of people under 60.

While the government is expected to begin easing a third nationwide lockdown in the coming days, there are likely to be further, partial closings as the threat ebbs and flows.

"This is going to be a balancing act," said Eyal Leshem, director of the Center for Travel Medicine and Tropical Diseases at Sheba Medical Center.

In an impressive feat, more than a third of Israel's 9.3 million people have received at least one shot in mere weeks, and over 1.9 million have gotten both doses, perhaps putting the country on track to inoculate nearly its entire adult population by the end of March.

Alongside the praise for its speed, Israel has come under global criticism for excluding Palestinians in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and the blockaded Gaza Strip. The situation has drawn attention to the global disparity in access to vaccines between rich and poor countries.

Rights groups say Israel has the obligation as an occupying power to vaccinate Palestinians. Israel denies having such a responsibility, and says its priority is its own citizens. Nevertheless, Israel this week for the first time transferred 5,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine to the Palestinian Authority to inoculate medical workers.

In Israel, for the first time, researchers are starting to see the effects of the vaccinations, giving other nations a very early glimpse of what might lie ahead for them.

Netanyahu on Thursday said that among people over 60, the first group vaccinated, serious cases of hospitalizations have dropped 26% and confirmed infections have fallen 45% over the past 16 days.

"This is a direct result of the vaccinations," he said. "The vaccines work."

But other key indicators, including deaths and new infections, remain high, in part because of the fast-spreading mutations and the month-long lag time before the vaccine shows its full benefits.

Israel has been reporting some 7,000 new infections a day, one of the highest rates in the developed world. Nearly 5,000 people have died, more than a quarter of them in January alone.

Israel has certain advantages that suggest its success at vaccinations may not be easily duplicated elsewhere. It is small, with 9.3 million people. It has a centralized and digitized system of health care, delivered

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through just four HMOs. And its leader, Netanyahu, has made the vaccination drive a centerpiece of his bid for reelection in March, personally negotiating deals with the CEOs of Pfizer and Moderna.

Still, experts around the world are watching eagerly.

"Israel's aggressive inoculation program demonstrates that it is indeed possible for a country to get vaccines into people's arms quickly and efficiently," said Jonathan Crane, a bioethicist at Emory University in Atlanta. In an email, he praised the centralized effort, compared with the "piecemeal" way vaccines in countries like the U.S. are being delivered by various jurisdictions.

Even with these early signs of success, it's increasingly clear that there will be no pandemic day-after, a celebratory moment when people are cleared to flood back to work, hold large family gatherings or resume the social lives they once knew.

Reopening will depend on many factors, including efforts to halt the spread of the highly contagious variants and whether the public takes the proper precautions. Many Israelis were horrified this week by scenes of big ultra-Orthodox funerals for two revered rabbis, with most mourners mask-free.

Some parts of the population, including the Arab and ultra-Orthodox sectors and younger adults, have shown an apparent reluctance to get vaccinated, which could also hinder the effort to achieve "herd immunity" and stop the virus.

"All of Europe is waiting for the vaccines, and here people don't want to get vaccinated?" Sara Baruch said after receiving her second dose on Wednesday in Tel Aviv. "It's strange."

She said it is a "big mistake" if the trend continues: "We won't be able to go on a holiday and to go back to normal life we had before."

The vaccination campaign has become a feature of pop culture and a point of national pride. Israelis proudly post photos on social media showing themselves getting vaccinated, and one HMO serves cappuccinos afterward so people can be monitored for side effects before they leave.

Experts have recommended a gradual reopening of the country, though political leaders will make the final decision. Closings and reopenings, experts say, will be a cost-benefit analysis that will change according to the course of the outbreak and the state of the economy.

Dr. Nadav Davidovitch, a member of a government advisory panel, said young children along with vaccinated high school students over 16 should be allowed to return to school in the first stage, and only teachers who have been inoculated should be in class. Street shops and restaurants might open for takeout only, followed in later stages by malls and cultural events opened only to people who have been vaccinated.

He said steps should be staggered every two weeks, with a constant eye on infection rates, testing and more vaccinations. Indoor and outdoor public gatherings should continue to be limited for a while, he said. Social distancing and masks will be required for the foreseeable future.

"It will be very gradual in the coming months," said Davidovitch, director of the school of public health at Israel's Ben-Gurion University. "Vaccinations are very important, but they are not going to solve all the problems."

Associated Press writers Josef Federman, Isaac Scharf and Ilan Ben Zion contributed.

Follow Kellman on Twitter at <http://www.Twitter.com/APLaurieKellman>

2 nurses: Her mom battled 1918 pandemic, she fights this one

By HAVEN DALEY and JOHN ROGERS Associated Press

SALINAS, Calif. (AP) — She's 76 years old but nurse practitioner Sigrid Stokes is in no mood to retire.

Stokes is too busy working to save lives during a deadly pandemic, just as her mother did more than a century ago.

While the late Kristine Berg Mueller tended to those stricken by the deadly flu pandemic that swept around the world in 1918, Stokes is giving vaccinations to health care workers battling the coronavirus.

Mueller was a 14-year-old student in her native Norway when the flu pandemic hit. It eventually killed

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an estimated 50 million people, including some 675,000 in the United States, according to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention.

"And so she and a friend volunteered at the local hospital to help out in whatever way they could, which I would imagine would be things like feeding people, bathing people, you know, changing beds, whatever they could do," Stokes said recently as she prepared to administer vaccines at Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital near her Northern California home.

Decades after the flu pandemic passed, Stokes' mother would tell her that was what had inspired her to become a nurse.

The family had no money to send her to nursing school, however, but an aunt in San Francisco agreed to take her in. She moved to the United States in 1923 and enrolled in a U.S. nursing program four years later.

Eventually she married and moved to Los Angeles, where Stokes' father ran a rental bookstore while her mother continued her nursing career.

Among her assignments was being called to movie studios from time to time to make sure child actors stayed safe and healthy while on set. Among the many photos of her mother, Stokes has one that she displays proudly of her in her uniform talking to child star Shirley Temple as both smile broadly.

It's that same sense of joy at helping people that Stokes, her white hair framed by purple-tinted bangs and black-framed glasses, brings to her own work. She's all business though when administering vaccines.

"I give very good shots, I might add, good jabs," she says with a slight smile.

She proves it when, wearing a surgical mask, she deftly plunges a needle into the arm of a masked health care worker who doesn't even flinch.

It wasn't until her late 20s that Stokes decided she wanted to follow her mother into nursing.

"I was volunteering in the pediatric ward and so on and I all of a sudden realized, you know, I really like this," she recalled.

Stokes who was still working part-time when the coronavirus began to sweep the country early last year. She was too old to safely treat COVID-19 patients, but knew she could help with vaccinations.

As she arrives at work each day from her home in Pacific Grove she wears the enamel earrings she fashioned from a Norwegian necklace that her mother proudly wore each day before her death at age 91 in 1995.

"I wear them every time I come to work because I feel like it's a sort of a talisman that she's with me and our family, we're doing it" said Stokes, who also still has the black cape her mother wore for years over her white nurse's uniform.

With COVID-19 having killed more than 2 million people worldwide, including more than 450,000 in the United States, Stokes isn't ready to quit until this virus has been tamed.

"We've got to get this done," she said. "We've got to get people vaccinated so we can get this country moving again."

Rogers reported from Los Angeles.

Volunteer army helps Florida elders book coveted COVID shots

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Jenn Greenberg is pretty busy helping her kindergartner with virtual classes and taking care of a toddler in her Florida home. But somehow she has also found the time to help dozens of seniors she has never met navigate the confusing, often chaotic process of getting a COVID-19 vaccine.

Greenberg is part of a 120-member volunteer force helping South Florida residents 65 and older clear the daunting hurdles of state-run registration systems that are poorly organized and rely heavily on a technology that is often like a foreign language to them.

The problem has emerged in numerous states, where the absence of a streamlined national system has forced local governments to hurriedly cobble together a puzzling patchwork of vaccine distribution and administration plans.

"I realized how many barriers were in place which made lining up appointments very difficult," said

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Greenberg, 36, who was inspired to volunteer her services after she saw how much work it took to get her own parents and grandparents signed up.

"Unfortunately, there are many people in need," she said.

When Florida expanded eligibility for the vaccine to the general elderly population in late December, anxious seniors camped out overnight at vaccination sites, phone lines rang unanswered and websites crashed.

Many seniors have also been thrown by having to register online instead of making an appointment by phone or in person.

Recognizing a need to simplify the process, school principal Russ Schwartz and registered nurse Katherine Quirk of Parkland established the South Florida COVID-19 Vaccination Info page on Facebook.

First set up last month, the page was conceived to be a one-stop shop for seniors — somewhere they could find all the information they needed to sign up for shots. The Facebook group alerted members when vaccination hotlines were listing available spots or when a website was about to accept bookings.

The page's organizers soon found, however, that seniors aren't necessarily glued to their cellphones and laptops, and that it would be much easier for them if someone could sign up on their behalf.

"A lot of our seniors, when they are using their cellphones, you tell them to send you a photo or go to an app and they can't," Schwartz said. "It takes them more time. It's just not their language."

Volunteering has turned into a full-time job for some of the group's participants as they toggle back and forth between the online registration platforms of hospitals, grocery stores and county governments; check on state vaccination supplies and make repeated calls to overloaded hotlines.

Currently there are about 3,000 seniors waiting for one of the 120 volunteers to help them. To boost its efforts, the group is also encouraging younger Facebook users to pitch in and help their older relatives navigate the online systems.

"We are very proud of how we have been able to help, but it has been overwhelming," Quirk said.

Group members' inboxes are filled with emails thanking them for their assistance and displaying photos of strangers with their sleeves rolled up as they prepare to receive the coveted shots.

Georgie DeNitto cried after a volunteer told her over the phone that she would receive a shot in the next two days. The 72-year-old Wellington, Florida, resident said her 14-year-old grandson called her after she got vaccinated.

"He said 'I can't wait, because I haven't seen you and now you can come over to my house,'" DeNitto said, her voice heavy with emotion. "And he lives like eight minutes away."

Similar volunteer groups have popped up in New Jersey and Pennsylvania, and would-be volunteers in Georgia and Southern California have sought advice on establishing them in those states, Schwartz said.

Florida state Rep. Anna Eskamani, an Orlando Democrat, is concerned the majority of the vaccines in her state seem to be available through online platforms, and that local officials are overly relying on social networks to alert constituents of vaccine availability.

She says that the systems not only negatively affects seniors, but also exacerbate income and racial disparities. Eskamani says wealthier communities are already seeing greater vaccination coverage than lower-income neighborhoods.

"There should be robo-dialing, there should be door knocking. We should be going into communities," she said. "People feel it's like a gameshow, like a race and it shouldn't be like that. It should be a more thoughtful and strategic approach that is centralized."

A new online system launched last Friday by the state government for residents to preregister for coronavirus vaccine appointments has aimed to centralize efforts, but it does not match people to all the different places where they could get a vaccine.

Meanwhile, vaccines are going to waste. Last week, Florida state officials acknowledged that 3,344 doses of vaccine were spoiled, in part because they were not used fast enough before the medicine went bad.

Volunteers like Greenberg, Schwartz and Quirk are helping to change that. They have become the first point of contact now for some vaccination providers who count on them to find patients who can show up at the last minute to receive leftover doses that otherwise would have to be thrown out.

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On a recent evening, Greenberg was able to quickly enlist 105 seniors for a vaccine clinic the following day at a community center in Hollywood, Florida, where officials worried about not being able to use leftover doses.

Another time, she tracked down a man who had written a letter to the editor of the South Florida Sun-Sentinel because he hadn't been able to book an appointment for his 65-year-old wife, who suffers from acute respiratory distress syndrome.

"We are just trying to get shots in arms," Greenberg said. "It is rare to find somewhere you can volunteer where you feel so connected to the people you are helping."

Associated Press reporter Anila Yoganathan in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Biden strikes tough tone on Russia in diplomatic push

By AAMER MADHANI, MATTHEW LEE and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden says the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Russian President Vladimir Putin are gone as he called for the immediate release of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

During his first visit to the State Department as president on Thursday, Biden issued his strongest condemnation of Putin as large protests have broken out throughout Russia following the jailing of Navalny. Thousands of protesters have been arrested.

The new American president was also seeking to make clear to the world that he's making a dramatic turn away from Putin following the presidency of Republican Donald Trump, who avoided direct confrontation and often sought to downplay the Russian leader's malign actions.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and Putin's most determined political foe, was arrested Jan. 17 upon returning from a five-month convalescence in Germany from a nerve agent poisoning, which he has blamed on the Kremlin.

"I made it clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions — interfering with our election, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens— are over," said Biden, who last week spoke to Putin in what White House officials called a tense first exchange. "We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people."

Biden's comments on Russia came as he asserted a broad reset of American foreign policy, including reversing Trump's order to withdraw U.S. troops stationed in Germany, ending support for Saudi Arabia's military offensive in Yemen and promising to support LGBTQ rights as a cornerstone of diplomacy.

Using the visit to outline how his foreign policy would differ from that of his predecessor, Biden called for a return to the "grounding wire of our global power." He sought to buck up the diplomatic corps, many of whom were discouraged by Trump's policies and tone.

"America is back. Diplomacy is back," Biden told State Department staff before delivering his foreign policy speech. "You are the center of all that I intend to do. You are the heart of it. We're going to rebuild our alliances"

With Biden's most public diplomatic effort of his young presidency, White House officials said he was hoping to send an unambiguous signal to the world that the United States is ready to resume its role as a global leader after four years in which Trump pressed an "America First" agenda.

He offered a list of issues where he said he would reverse Trump's policies or forge different priorities, including scrapping the former president's plan to withdraw about 9,500 of the roughly 34,500 U.S. troops stationed in Germany. The European nation hosts key American military facilities like the Ramstein Air Base and the headquarters for U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command.

Trump announced the pullback after repeatedly accusing Germany of not paying enough for its own defense, calling the longtime NATO ally "delinquent" for failing to spend 2% of its GDP on defense, the alliance benchmark.

No reductions or changes have been made to U.S. troop levels since Trump's announcement. Defense

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Secretary Lloyd Austin hinted at a likely reconsideration of the order in a conversation with his German counterpart last week, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

Biden also signed a presidential memorandum Thursday that addresses protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals worldwide. The memorandum, which builds off guidance the Obama administration issued in 2011, directs State Department officials and other federal officials working abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomatic and foreign assistance efforts promote and protect LGBTQ rights.

Biden also announced plans to increase the cap on the number of refugees allowed into the United States to more than eight times the level at which the Trump administration left it. Trump drastically reduced the cap to only 15,000.

Biden's plan would raise it to 125,000, surpassing the ceiling set by President Barack Obama before he left office by 15,000. Biden, through executive order, also called for rescinding Trump-era rules that resulted in excessive vetting of applicants, expanding capacity for adjudicating applications for refugee applications, and other steps.

Mark Hetfield, president of the Maryland-based refugee resettlement agency HIAS, said the announcement won't lead to overnight changes but applauded Biden's order as a "head to bottom review of the program so that America can once again lead by example on protecting refugees."

Biden, by contrast, chose longtime confidant Antony Blinken to be his secretary of state, aiming to reinvigorate an American diplomatic corps that had been depleted and demoralized under four years of the Trump administration.

He was greeted by employees eager to hear that diplomacy has returned to the top of the presidential agenda and that the expertise of long-serving foreign service officers will be valued.

"I promise I will have your back," Biden told the department staff. "And I expect you to have the back of the American people."

Although Biden's first nominations and appointments to senior positions at State have trended heavily toward political appointees, the president and Blinken have pledged to promote career staffers.

To that end, the Biden announced he was appointing a longtime U.S. diplomat for the Middle East, Tim Lenderking, as his special envoy in Yemen. The move comes as Biden is searching for a diplomatic end to the Saudi Arabia-led military campaign that has deepened humanitarian suffering in the Arabian peninsula's poorest country.

Lenderking, a career foreign service member, has served in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The State Department visit comes after Biden moved on Wednesday to extend the last remaining treaty limiting Russian and American stockpiles of nuclear weapons, acting just two days before the pact was set to expire. It also follows days after a coup in Myanmar that has emerged as an early proving ground of Biden's approach to multilateralism.

A Moscow court on Tuesday ordered Navalny to prison for more than two and a half years, finding that he violated the terms of his probation while recuperating in Germany. Biden again called for Navalny's release.

"Mr. Navalny, like all Russian citizens, is entitled to his rights under the Russian constitution," Biden said. "He's been targeted, targeted for exposing corruption. He should be released immediately and without condition."

Associated Press writers Ellen Knickmeyer and Lolita C. Baldor contributed reporting to this article.

Trump rejects Dems' request to testify at impeachment trial

By ERIC TUCKER, MARY CLARE JALONICK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Democrats asked Donald Trump to testify under oath for his Senate impeachment trial, challenging him to respond to their charge that he incited a violent mob to storm the Capitol. A Trump adviser said the former president won't testify.

Although Democrats might not have the power to force Trump's testimony, the request from House

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impeachment managers is part of their overall effort to put the violent events of Jan. 6 on the record for history and hold him accountable for his words. Democrats will look to use his refusal to testify against him as they argue that the ex-president has avoided responsibility for his actions.

Hours after the Democrats' Thursday request was revealed, Trump adviser Jason Miller dismissed the trial as "an unconstitutional proceeding" and said the former president would not testify. Separately, Trump's lawyers denounced the request as a "public relations stunt."

The impeachment trial starts Feb. 9. Trump, the first president to be impeached twice, is charged with inciting an insurrection on Jan. 6, when a mob of his supporters broke into the Capitol to interrupt the electoral vote count. Five people died. Before the riot, Trump had told his supporters to "fight like hell" to overturn his election defeat.

Democrats have said a trial is necessary to provide a final measure of accountability for the attack. If Trump is convicted, the Senate could hold a second vote to disqualify him from seeking office again.

In the letter to the former president and his attorneys, Democratic Rep. Jamie Raskin, one of the impeachment managers, asked that Trump explain why he and his team have disputed key factual allegations at the center of their case. He asked that Trump provide testimony about his conduct "either before or during the Senate impeachment trial," and under cross-examination, as early as Monday, Feb. 8, and not later than Thursday, Feb. 11.

The request from Raskin cites the words of Trump's own attorneys, who in a legal brief earlier this week not only denied that Trump had incited the riot but also asserted that he had "performed admirably in his role as president, at all times doing what he thought was in the best interests of the American people."

With that argument, Raskin said, Trump had questioned critical facts in the case "notwithstanding the clear and overwhelming evidence of your constitutional offense." He said Trump should be able to testify now that he is no longer president.

Trump attorneys Bruce Castor and David Schoen responded hours later that the letter proves that Democrats "cannot prove your allegations" and that an impeachment trial is too serious "to try to play these games."

The back-and-forth continued Thursday evening when Raskin said Trump's refusal to testify "speaks volumes and plainly establishes an adverse inference supporting his guilt."

"Any official accused of inciting armed violence against the government of the United States should welcome the chance to testify openly and honestly — that is, if the official had a defense," he said in a statement.

Defense lawyers, and many Senate Republicans, have argued that the trial is unconstitutional because Trump is no longer in office, even though he was impeached while he was still president. In a test vote in the Senate last week, 45 Republicans voted for an effort to dismiss the trial on those grounds.

Democrats say the Republicans are arguing process because they can't defend the former president's actions, and they point to the many legal scholars who have said the trial is on firm constitutional ground.

Raskin said in the letter that if Trump refuses to appear, the managers will use his refusal against him in the trial — a similar argument put forth by House Democrats in last year's impeachment trial, when many Trump officials ignored subpoenas. Trump was eventually acquitted of two charges that he abused his presidential powers by pressuring the Ukrainian government to investigate now-President Joe Biden.

The impeachment managers do not have the authority to subpoena witnesses now since the House has already voted to impeach him. The Senate could vote to subpoena Trump, or any other witnesses, on a simple majority vote during the trial. On Thursday, senators in both parties made it clear they would be reluctant to do so.

Shortly after Raskin's letter was made public, Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., said it would be a "terrible idea" for Trump to testify. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said Trump's statements before and after the attack on the Capitol "are the most powerful evidence. His own words incriminate him. They show his guilty intent."

South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, one of Trump's closest GOP allies, said he thought the letter was

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a “political ploy” and noted that Democrats didn’t invite or subpoena Trump to testify before the House voted to impeach him on Jan. 13.

Asked if he thinks Trump will testify, Graham said it would be a “bad idea.”

“I don’t think that would be in anybody’s interest,” he said.

Associated Press writer Lisa Mascaro in Washington contributed to this report.

GOP eyes path to power by making peace with the far right

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Political Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Over the course of 24 hours this week, House Republicans voted to defend a freshman conspiracy theorist with a history of violent rhetoric and a mainstream party leader who backed Donald Trump’s impeachment.

The seemingly conflicting moves signal that Republican leaders, particularly in the House, are betting they can return to political power by cobbling together a coalition featuring both pro-Trump extremists and those who abhor them. The votes also suggest that Washington Republicans are unable, or unwilling, to purge far-right radicals from their party, despite some GOP leaders’ best wishes.

“I do think as a party, we have to figure out what we stand for,” said Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., warning Republicans to “get away from members dabbling in conspiracy theories.”

House Democrats voted Thursday to do what their Republican counterparts would not the night before, stripping first-term Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., of her committee assignments and leaving her effectively powerless to influence policymaking. The move follows outrage over Greene’s use of social media to promote bigotry, anti-Semitism and violence against Democrats linked to the pro-Trump conspiracy theory group known as QAnon.

The Georgia congresswoman delivered a speech on the House floor before Thursday’s vote indicating that she stopped believing in QAnon in 2018. She declined to apologize for her specific claims, which included suggesting that a wealthy Jewish family may have used space lasers to ignite California forest fires for financial gain.

“I never said any of these things since I have been elected for Congress. These were words of the past, and these things do not represent me,” Greene said, concluding her remarks by likening U.S. media reports to QAnon conspiracy theories.

QAnon’s core theory embraces the lie that Democrats are tied to a global sex-trafficking ring that also involves Satanism and cannibalism.

The GOP’s high-stakes reckoning comes as the party struggles to move past Trump’s norm-shattering presidency and the deadly attack on the Capitol he inspired in its final days. With Democrats now controlling the White House and both chambers of Congress, the Republican Party’s political success — and maybe its survival — depends on its ability to unify its warring factions. And whether Washington Republicans like it or not, those who think like Greene make up a significant portion of the party’s base.

Giddy Democrats celebrated the obvious perils of their rivals’ political dilemma, particularly after all but 11 House Republicans voted to defend Greene’s committee assignments on Thursday. But as they cling to a thin majority in the House and Senate, Democrats face structural challenges of their own ahead of next year’s midterm elections.

Rep. Tom Emmer, R-Minn., who leads the House Republican campaign arm, accused Democrats of focusing on Greene simply to draw attention away from President Joe Biden’s left-leaning early policy moves, including those designed to fight climate change that threaten jobs in the fossil fuel industry.

“This is the same QAnon playbook they tried in 2020, and they lost 15 seats,” Emmer said. “I promise this cycle will be even worse for them.”

In a nod to the party’s anxious establishment wing, House Republicans also voted by secret ballot Wednesday night to preserve Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney’s place in party leadership. Trump loyalists had called for her removal after she blamed Trump for inciting last month’s attack on the Capitol and voted

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to impeach him.

But it was the House Republicans' refusal to distance themselves from Greene that threatened to haunt the party for the foreseeable future.

"Marjorie Taylor Greene will be the face of the party, the face of the midterms, the face of the extremists," said Steve Schmidt, a Republican strategist who co-founded the anti-Trump Lincoln Project, which expects to be a major player in the 2022 midterms.

At the same time, the pro-Democrat group House Majority Forward released a new television ad accusing House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of empowering extremists.

"The QAnon conspiracies sound wild. But the danger is real," the narrator says in the ad, ticking down Greene's list of false claims, which include denying the authenticity of school shootings in Florida and Connecticut and the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The new ad will run in McCarthy's California district and on Washington, D.C., cable beginning Friday.

Republicans gave Greene a standing ovation in their closed-door caucus after she explained herself Wednesday night. McCarthy condemned her past statements but defended her right to serve on House committees.

Despite their challenges, many Republican leaders were optimistic about their political future as they see a real opportunity to seize control of at least one chamber of Congress, if not both.

History is on the GOP's side.

Democrats are clinging to a 10-seat House majority. And since 1994, the party that occupies the White House has lost no fewer than 40 seats in the first midterm election of a new presidency. The one exception is the 2002 midterms, held in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks.

Republican strategist and former White House aide Ari Fleischer was among the optimists.

"As noisy and as messy as this has been, Republicans are in a much better position now than the last time the White House went from Republican to Democrat," he said, reflecting on the 2008 transition from President George W. Bush to President Barack Obama.

That year, Democrats had much larger congressional majorities, and in the subsequent midterms, Republicans seized 63 House seats and the House majority.

Fleischer described the votes on Cheney and Greene as "a key pivot point" for Republicans plagued by infighting in recent weeks.

"They pounded each other and got it off their chest. And Kevin McCarthy successfully walked the tight rope to get them there," Fleischer said. "It gave them the unity they need to now concentrate on taking Nancy Pelosi's job."

With their party largely unified behind Biden, at least for now, Democratic leaders indicated that they would not let voters forget the Republicans' unwillingness to confront pro-Trump extremists anytime soon.

"Kevin McCarthy and his Washington Republican caucus just showed they're too weak to stand up to the violent QAnon mob that is consuming their party," said Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney, D-N.Y., who leads the House Democrats' campaign arm.

"If they're too weak to do that," he added, "they can't be trusted to get the job done for the American people."

Turkey Uighurs fear sellout to China in exchange for vaccine

DAKE KANG and SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Abdullah Metseydi, a Uighur in Turkey, was readying for bed last month when he heard commotion, then pounding on the door. "Police! Open the door!"

A dozen or more officers poured in, many bearing guns and wearing the camouflage of Turkey's anti-terror force. They asked if Metseydi had participated in any movements against China and threatened to deport him and his wife. They took him to a deportation facility, where he now sits at the center of a brewing political controversy.

Opposition legislators in Turkey are accusing Ankara's leaders of secretly selling out Uighurs to China

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in exchange for coronavirus vaccines. Tens of millions of vials of promised Chinese vaccines have not yet been delivered. Meanwhile, in recent months, Turkish police have raided and detained around 50 Uighurs in deportation centers, lawyers say — a sharp uptick from last year.

Although no hard evidence has yet emerged for a quid pro quo, these legislators and the Uighurs fear that Beijing is using the vaccines as leverage to win passage of an extradition treaty. The treaty was signed years ago but suddenly ratified by China in December, and could come before Turkish lawmakers as soon as this month.

Uighurs say the bill, once law, could bring their ultimate life-threatening nightmare: Deportation back to a country they fled to avoid mass detention. More than a million Uighurs and other largely Muslim minorities have been swept into prisons and detention camps in China, in what China calls an anti-terrorism measure but the United States has declared a genocide.

"I'm terrified of being deported," said Melike, Metseydi's wife, through tears, declining to give her last name for fear of retribution. "I'm worried for my husband's mental health."

Suspicious of a deal emerged when the first shipment of Chinese vaccines was held up for weeks in December. Officials blamed permit issues.

But even now, Yildirim Kaya, a legislator from Turkey's main opposition party, said that China has delivered only a third of the 30 million doses it promised by the end of January. Turkey is largely reliant on China's Sinovac vaccine to immunize its population against the virus, which has infected some 2.5 million and killed over 26,000.

"Such a delay is not normal. We have paid for these vaccines," Kaya said. "Is China blackmailing Turkey?"

Kaya said he's formally asked the Turkish government about pressure from China but has not yet received a response.

Both Turkish and Chinese authorities insist that the extradition bill isn't meant to target Uighurs for deportation. Chinese state media called such concerns "smearing," and foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin denied any connection between vaccines and the treaty.

"I think your speculation is unfounded," Wang said at a Thursday press briefing.

Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said in December that the vaccine delay was not related to the issue of the Uighurs.

"We do not use the Uighurs for political purposes, we defend their human rights," Cavusoglu said.

But though very few have actually been deported for now, the recent detentions have sent a chill through Turkey's estimated 50,000-strong Uighur community. And in recent weeks, the Turkish ambassador in Beijing has praised China's vaccines while adding that Ankara values "judicial cooperation" with China — code, many Uighurs fear, for a possible crackdown.

In the past, a small number of Uighurs have traveled to Syria to train with militants. But most Uighurs in Turkey shun jihadis and worry they are hurting the Uighur cause.

Lawyers representing the detained Uighurs say that in most cases, the Turkish police have no evidence of links to terror groups. Ankara law professor Ilyas Dogan believes the detentions are politically motivated.

"They have no concrete evidence," said Dogan, who is representing six Uighurs now in deportation centers, including Metseydi. "They're not being serious."

Even if the bill is ratified, Dogan doubts there would be mass deportations, given widespread public sympathy for the Uighurs in Turkey. But he believes the chances of individuals being deported would go up significantly.

Because of shared cultural ties, Turkey has long been a safe haven for the Uighurs, a Turkic group native to China's far west Xinjiang region. Turkish President Recep Erdogan denounced China's treatment of the Uighurs as "genocide" over a decade ago.

That all changed with an attempted coup in Turkey in 2016, which prompted a mass purge and alienated Erdogan from Western governments. Waiting to fill the void was China, which is loaning and investing billions in Turkey.

Signs of strong economic ties abound, big and small: An exporter with business in China was appointed

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Turkey's ambassador to Beijing. A Chinese-funded \$1.7 billion coal plant is rising on the banks of Turkey's Mediterranean sea. Istanbul's airport obtained the world's first "Chinese Friendly Airport" certification, setting aside check-in counters to receive thousands of tourists from Shanghai and Beijing. And President Erdogan's once-fiery rhetoric has turned dull and diplomatic, praising China's leaders for their assistance.

China also began requesting the extradition of many more Uighurs from Turkey. In one leaked 2016 extradition request first reported by Axios and obtained independently by The Associated Press, Chinese officials asked for the extradition of a Uighur former cellphone vendor, accusing him of promoting the Islamic State terror group online. The vendor was arrested but eventually released and cleared of charges.

Abdurehim Parac, a Uighur poet detained twice in the past few years, said even detention in Turkey was "hotel-like" compared to the "hellish" conditions he was subjected to during three years in Chinese prison. Imim was eventually released after a judge cleared his name. But he has difficulty sleeping at night out of fear that the extradition bill might be ratified, and called the pressure "unbearable".

"Death awaits me in China," he said.

Rising fears are already prompting an influx of Uighurs moving to Germany, the Netherlands, and other European countries. Some are so desperate they're even sneaking across borders illegally, said Ali Kutad, who fled China for Turkey in 2016.

"Turkey is our second homeland," Kutad said. "We're really afraid."

Mehmet Guzel in Istanbul contributed to this report. Fraser reported from Ankara.

Biden ending US support for Saudi-led offensive in Yemen

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

President Joe Biden announced Thursday the United States was ending support for a grinding five-year Saudi-led military offensive in Yemen that has deepened suffering in the Arabian Peninsula's poorest country, calling the move part of restoring a U.S. emphasis on diplomacy, democracy and human rights.

"This war has to end," Biden told diplomats in his first visit to the State Department as president, saying the conflict had created a "humanitarian and strategic catastrophe."

The Yemen reversal is one of a series of steps Biden laid out Thursday that he said would mark a course correction for U.S. foreign policy. That's after President Donald Trump — and many Republican and Democratic administrations before his — often sided with authoritarian leaders abroad, in the name of stability.

The announcement on Yemen fulfills a campaign pledge. But it also shows Biden putting the spotlight on a major humanitarian crisis that the United States has helped aggravate. The reversal of policy also comes as a rebuke to Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia has been conciliatory in its response to rebuffs from Biden, who as a candidate blasted the kingdom's current rulers for rights abuses and as president has made clear he intends to distance his administration from Saudi leaders. But the Biden administration also says it will help the kingdom boost its defenses against outside attacks, as part of maintaining key security, counterterrorism and military ties with Saudi Arabia, a strategic partner and global oil giant. Saudi state media focused on that part of Biden's announcements Thursday.

"We welcome President Biden's stated commitment to work with friends and allies to resolve conflicts, and deal with attacks from Iran & its proxies in the region," Saudi Prince Khalid bin Salman, a son of King Salman and the kingdom's deputy defense minister, tweeted.

Yemen, the biblical kingdom of Sheba, has one of the world's oldest constantly occupied cities — the more than 2,000-year-old Sanaa — along with mud brick skyscrapers and hauntingly beautiful landscapes of steep, arid mountains. But decades of Yemeni misgovernment have worsened factional divisions and halted development, and years of conflict have now drawn in increasing intervention by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Iran.

The Obama administration in 2015 gave its approval to Saudi Arabia leading a cross-border air campaign targeting Yemen's Houthi rebels, who were seizing ever more territory, including Sanaa. The Houthis have

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launched multiple drone and missile strikes deep into Saudi Arabia. The U.S. says the Saudi-led campaign has entrenched Iran's role in the conflict, on the side of the Houthis.

U.S. targeting assistance to Saudi Arabia's command-and-control was supposed to minimize civilian casualties in the Saudi-led airstrikes. But bombing since then has killed numerous Yemeni civilians, including schoolboys on a bus and fishermen in their boats. Survivors have displayed fragments showing the bombs to be American-made.

The stalled war has failed to dislodge the Houthis and is helping deepen hunger and poverty. International rights experts say both the Gulf countries and Houthis have committed severe rights abuses.

Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman, a co-winner of the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize for her role in Yemen's unsuccessful Arab Spring popular uprising, urged Biden to stay involved in Yemen peace efforts.

"Deeper U.S. engagement — and a refusal to side with dictators who have chosen bloodshed over democratic change — is vital so that the Yemeni people can return to the project of democracy" that warring parties inside and outside of Yemen interrupted, Karman said in a statement.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said the U.S. action will give more space and more hope "not only to the talks but, more importantly, more hope to the people of Yemen."

Biden called Thursday for a cease-fire, an opening of humanitarian channels to allow more delivery of aid, and a return to long-stalled peace talks.

Biden also announced an end to "relevant" U.S. arms sales but gave no immediate details on what that would mean. The administration already has said it was pausing some of the billions of dollars in arms deals with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia's main partner in its Yemeni offensive.

The ending of U.S. support for the offensive will not affect any U.S. operations against the Yemen-based al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, or AQAP, group, national security adviser Jake Sullivan said.

In what was seen as the latest in several Saudi gestures toward Biden, the State Department said Thursday the kingdom had conditionally released two dual Saudi-U.S. citizens detained in a crackdown on civil society there, and reduced a sentence for a third, Dr. Walid Fitaihi, convicted of "disobedience" to the government.

The weeks-old Biden administration has made clear that shifting its stance toward the Yemen war, and toward Saudi Arabia over the Yemen offensive and other rights abuses, was a priority. Other measures have included a review of the Trump administration's categorization of the Houthis as a terror group. Critics say the designation hinders delivery of humanitarian aid to Yemenis.

Biden also announced the choice of Timothy Lenderking as special envoy to Yemen.

Lenderking has been a deputy assistant secretary of state in the department's Middle East section. A career foreign service member, he has served in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

—
Associated Press writers Edith Lederer at the United Nations and Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, contributed.

Dem-led House, drawing a line, kicks Greene off committees

By ALAN FRAM and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A fiercely divided House tossed Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene off both her committees Thursday, an unprecedented punishment that Democrats said she'd earned by spreading hateful and violent conspiracy theories.

Underscoring the political vise her inflammatory commentary has clamped her party into, nearly all Republicans voted against the Democratic move but none defended her lengthy history of outrageous social media posts.

Yet in a riveting moment, the freshman Republican from a deep-red corner of Georgia took to the House floor on her own behalf. She offered a mixture of backpedaling and finger-pointing as she wore a dark mask emblazoned with the words "FREE SPEECH."

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The chamber's near party-line 230-199 vote was the latest instance of conspiracy theories becoming pitched political battlefields, an increasingly familiar occurrence during Donald Trump's presidency. He faces a Senate trial next week for his House impeachment for inciting insurrection after a mob he fueled with his false narrative of a stolen election attacked the Capitol.

Thursday's fight also underscored the uproar and political complexities that Greene — a master of provoking Democrats, promoting herself and raising campaign money — has prompted since becoming a House candidate last year.

Eleven Republicans joined 219 Democrats in backing Greene's ejection from her committees, while 199 GOP lawmakers voted "no."

Addressing her colleagues, Greene tried to dissociate herself from her "words of the past." Contradicting past social media posts, she said she believes the 9/11 attacks and mass school shootings were real and no longer believes QAnon conspiracy theories, which include lies about Democratic-run pedophile rings.

But she didn't explicitly apologize for supportive online remarks she's made on other subjects, as when she mulled about House Speaker Nancy Pelosi being assassinated or the possibility of Jewish-controlled space rays causing wildfires. And she portrayed herself as the victim of unscrupulous "big media companies."

News organizations "can take teeny, tiny pieces of words that I've said, that you have said, any of us, and can portray us as someone that we're not," she said. She added that "we're in a real big problem" if the House punished her but tolerated "members that condone riots that have hurt American people" — a clear reference to last summer's social justice protests that in some instances became violent.

Greene was on the Education and Labor committee and the Budget committee. Democrats were especially aghast about her assignment to the education panel, considering the past doubt she cast on school shootings in Florida and Connecticut.

The political imperative for Democrats was clear: Greene's support for violence and fictions were dangerous and merited punishment. Democrats and researchers said there was no apparent precedent for the full House removing a lawmaker from a committee, a step usually taken by their party leaders.

The calculation was more complicated for Republicans.

Though Trump left the White House two weeks ago, his devoted followers are numerous among the party's voters, and he and Greene are allies. Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., hopes GOP victories in the 2022 elections will make him speaker. Republicans could undermine that scenario by alienating Trump's and Greene's passionate supporters, and McCarthy took no action to punish her.

"If any of our members threatened the safety of other members, we'd be the first ones to take them off a committee," Pelosi angrily told reporters. She said she was "profoundly concerned" about GOP leaders' acceptance of an "extreme conspiracy theorist."

At one point, No. 2 Democratic leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland strode to the GOP side of the chamber carrying a poster of a Greene Facebook post from last year. "Squad's Worst Nightmare," Greene had written in the post, which showed her holding an AR-15 firearm next to pictures of three of the four Democratic lawmakers, all young women of color, who've been nicknamed "The Squad."

"They are people. They are our colleagues," Hoyer said. He mimicked Greene's pose holding the weapon and said, "I have never, ever seen that before."

Republicans tread carefully but found rallying points.

McCarthy said Greene's past opinions "do not represent the views of my party." But without naming the offenders, he said Pelosi hadn't stripped committee memberships from Democrats who became embroiled in controversy. Among those he implicated was Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., who made anti-Israel insults for which she later apologized.

"If that's the new standard," he said of Democrats' move against Greene, "we have a long list."

Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., said Democrats were setting a precedent by punishing lawmakers for statements made before they were even candidates for Congress. Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, warned, "You engage in wrong-speak, you're in the Thunderdome," a term for an enclosed wrestling arena.

Committee assignments are crucial for lawmakers for shaping legislation affecting their districts, creating a national reputation and raising campaign contributions. Even social media stars like Greene could find

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it harder to define themselves without the spotlights that committees provide.

Not all Republicans were in forgiving moods, especially in the Senate. There, fringe GOP candidates have lost winnable races in recent years and leaders worry a continued linkage with Trump and conspiracists will inflict more damage.

That chamber's minority leader, Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., this week called Greene's words a "cancer" on the GOP and country. On Thursday, No. 2 Senate GOP leader John Thune of South Dakota amplified that thinking.

Thune said House Republicans needed to issue a "really strong" rebuke of Greene's conspiratorial formulations. Republicans must "get away from members dabbling in conspiracy theories," Thune said. "I don't think that's a productive course of action or one that's going to lead to much prosperity politically in the future."

The fight came a day after Republicans resolved another battle and voted to keep Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., in their leadership. Pro-Trump conservatives tried removing her because she supported Trump's impeachment.

The House resolution punishing Greene was barely over a page. It said House rules require lawmakers' behavior to "reflect credibly" on the chamber and said Greene should be removed "in light of conduct she has exhibited."

News organizations have unearthed countless social media videos and "likes" in which Greene embraced absurd theories like suspicions that Hillary Clinton was behind the 1999 death of John F. Kennedy Jr. Greene responded, "Stage is being set," when someone posted a question about hanging Clinton and former President Barack Obama.

Biden strikes tough tone on Russia in diplomatic push

By AAMER MADHANI, MATTHEW LEE and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday said the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Russian President Vladimir Putin are gone as he called for the immediate release of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

During his first visit to the State Department as president, Biden issued his strongest condemnation of Putin as large protests have broken out throughout Russia following the jailing of Navalny. Thousands of protesters have been arrested.

The new American president was also seeking to make clear to the world that he's making a dramatic turn away from Putin following the presidency of Republican Donald Trump, who avoided direct confrontation and often sought to downplay the Russian leader's malign actions.

Navalny, an anti-corruption campaigner and Putin's most determined political foe, was arrested Jan. 17 upon returning from a five-month convalescence in Germany from a nerve agent poisoning, which he has blamed on the Kremlin.

"I made it clear to President Putin, in a manner very different from my predecessor, that the days of the United States rolling over in the face of Russia's aggressive actions — interfering with our election, cyber attacks, poisoning its citizens— are over," said Biden, who last week spoke to Putin in what White House officials called a tense first exchange. "We will not hesitate to raise the cost on Russia and defend our vital interests and our people."

Biden's comments on Russia came as he asserted a broad reset of American foreign policy, including reversing Trump's order to withdraw U.S. troops stationed in Germany, ending support for Saudi Arabia's military offensive in Yemen and promising to support LGBTQ rights as a cornerstone of diplomacy.

Using the visit to outline how his foreign policy would differ from that of his predecessor, Biden called for a return to the "grounding wire of our global power." He sought to buck up the diplomatic corps, many of whom were discouraged by Trump's policies and tone.

"America is back. Diplomacy is back," Biden told State Department staff before delivering his foreign policy speech. "You are the center of all that I intend to do. You are the heart of it. We're going to rebuild

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our alliances”

With Biden’s most public diplomatic effort of his young presidency, White House officials said he was hoping to send an unambiguous signal to the world that the United States is ready to resume its role as a global leader after four years in which Trump pressed an “America First” agenda.

He offered a list of issues where he said he would reverse Trump’s policies or forge different priorities, including scrapping the former president’s plan to withdraw about 9,500 of the roughly 34,500 U.S. troops stationed in Germany. The European nation hosts key American military facilities like the Ramstein Air Base and the headquarters for U.S. European Command and U.S. Africa Command.

Trump announced the pullback after repeatedly accusing Germany of not paying enough for its own defense, calling the longtime NATO ally “delinquent” for failing to spend 2% of its GDP on defense, the alliance benchmark.

No reductions or changes have been made to U.S. troop levels since Trump’s announcement. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin hinted at a likely reconsideration of the order in a conversation with his German counterpart last week, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said.

Biden also signed a presidential memorandum Thursday that addresses protections for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals worldwide. The memorandum, which builds off guidance the Obama administration issued in 2011, directs State Department officials and other federal officials working abroad to ensure that U.S. diplomatic and foreign assistance efforts promote and protect LGBTQ rights.

Biden also announced plans to increase the cap on the number of refugees allowed into the United States to more than eight times the level at which the Trump administration left it. Trump drastically reduced the cap to only 15,000.

Biden’s plan would raise it to 125,000, surpassing the ceiling set by President Barack Obama before he left office by 15,000. Biden, through executive order, also called for rescinding Trump-era rules that resulted in excessive vetting of applicants, expanding capacity for adjudicating applications for refugee applications, and other steps.

Mark Hetfield, president of the Maryland-based refugee resettlement agency HIAS, said the announcement won’t lead to overnight changes but applauded Biden’s order as a “head to bottom review of the program so that America can once again lead by example on protecting refugees.”

Biden, by contrast, chose longtime confidant Antony Blinken to be his secretary of state, aiming to reinvigorate an American diplomatic corps that had been depleted and demoralized under four years of the Trump administration.

He was greeted by employees eager to hear that diplomacy has returned to the top of the presidential agenda and that the expertise of long-serving foreign service officers will be valued.

“I promise I will have your back,” Biden told the department staff. “And I expect you to have the back of the American people.”

Although Biden’s first nominations and appointments to senior positions at State have trended heavily toward political appointees, the president and Blinken have pledged to promote career staffers.

To that end, the Biden announced he was appointing a longtime U.S. diplomat for the Middle East, Tim Lenderking, as his special envoy in Yemen. The move comes as Biden is searching for a diplomatic end to the Saudi Arabia-led military campaign that has deepened humanitarian suffering in the Arabian peninsula’s poorest country.

Lenderking, a career foreign service member, has served in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and other countries in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The State Department visit comes after Biden moved on Wednesday to extend the last remaining treaty limiting Russian and American stockpiles of nuclear weapons, acting just two days before the pact was set to expire. It also follows days after a coup in Myanmar that has emerged as an early proving ground of Biden’s approach to multilateralism.

A Moscow court on Tuesday ordered Navalny to prison for more than two and a half years, finding that he violated the terms of his probation while recuperating in Germany. Biden again called for Navalny’s release.

“Mr. Navalny, like all Russian citizens, is entitled to his rights under the Russian constitution,” Biden said.

"He's been targeted, targeted for exposing corruption. He should be released immediately and without condition."

Associated Press writers Ellen Knickmeyer and Lolita C. Baldor contributed reporting to this article.

Voting company sues Fox, Giuliani over election fraud claims

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writer

MIAMI (AP) — A voting technology company is suing Fox News, three of its hosts and two former lawyers for former President Donald Trump — Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell — for \$2.7 billion, charging that the defendants conspired to spread false claims that the company helped "steal" the U.S. presidential election.

The 285-page complaint filed Thursday in New York state court by Florida-based Smartmatic USA is one of the largest libel suits ever undertaken. On Jan. 25, a rival election-technology company — Dominion Voting Systems, which was also ensnared in Trump's baseless effort to overturn the election — sued Giuliani and Powell for \$1.3 billion.

Unlike Dominion, whose technology was used in 24 states, Smartmatic's participation in the 2020 election was restricted to Los Angeles County, which votes heavily Democratic.

Smartmatic's limited role notwithstanding, Fox aired at least 13 reports falsely stating or implying the company had stolen the 2020 vote in cahoots with Venezuela's socialist government, according to the complaint. This alleged "disinformation campaign" continued even after then-Attorney General William Barr said the Department of Justice could find no evidence of widespread voter fraud.

For instance, a Dec. 10 segment by Lou Dobbs accused Smartmatic and its CEO, Antonio Mugica, of working to flip votes through a non-existent backdoor in its voting software to carry out a "massive cyber Pearl Harbor," the complaint alleged.

"Defendants' story was a lie," the complaint stated. "But, it was a story that sold."

The complaint also alleges that Fox hosts Dobbs, Maria Bartiromo and Jeanine Pirro also directly benefited from their involvement in the conspiracy. The lawsuit alleges that Fox went along with the "well-orchestrated dance" due to pressure from newcomer outlets such as Newsmax and One America News, which were stealing away conservative, pro-Trump viewers.

Roy Guterman, a media law professor at Syracuse University, said the lawsuit is compelling and based on specific examples and facts, not frivolous claims.

"This is a perfect example of why we have the law of defamation in first place," said Guterman, a former reporter.

Fox News Media, in a statement on behalf of the network and its hosts, rejected the accusations. It said it is proud of its election coverage and would defend itself against the "meritless" lawsuit in court.

Fox "is committed to providing the full context of every story with in-depth reporting and clear opinion," the company said in a written statement.

Giuliani and Powell did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

For Smartmatic, the effects of the negative publicity were swift and devastating, the complaint alleges. Death threats, including against an executive's 14-year-old son, poured in as Internet searches for the company surged, Smartmatic claims.

With several client contracts in jeopardy, the company estimates that it will lose as much as \$690 million in profits over the next five years. It also expects it will have to boost spending by \$4.7 million to fend off what it called a "meteoric rise" in cyberattacks.

"For us, this is an existential crisis," Mugica said in an interview. He said the false statements against Smartmatic have already led one foreign bank to close its accounts and deterred Taiwan, a prospective client, from adopting e-voting technology.

Like many conspiracy theories, the alleged campaign against Smartmatic was built on a grain of truth. Mugica is Venezuelan and Smartmatic's initial success is partly attributable to major contracts from Hugo Chávez's government, an early devotee of electronic voting.

No evidence has emerged that the company rigged votes in favor of the anti-American firebrand, and

for a while the Carter Center and other observers held out Venezuela as a model of electronic voting. Meanwhile, the company has expanded globally.

Smartmatic is represented by J. Erik Connolly, who previously won what's believed to be the largest settlement in American media defamation, at least \$177 million, for a report on ABC News describing a company's beef product as "pink slime."

"Very rarely do you see a news organization go day after day after day against the same targets," Connolly said in an interview. "We couldn't possibly have rigged this election because we just weren't even in the contested states to do the rigging."

Fox, after receiving a demand for retraction from Smartmatic's lawyers in December, aired what it called a "fact-checking segment" with an election technology expert. In the segment, the expert said there was no evidence of tampering — something the defendants knew from the start and reported elsewhere on the network, the complaint alleges.

Far from making the company whole, Mugica said he saw the segment — in which an unidentified voice asks questions referenced in the retraction letter — as an admission of guilt.

Guterman said that any after-the-fact correction can be a mitigating factor but doesn't get off the defendants entirely off the hook if they are found to have previously been propagating false claims. With the line between fact and opinion increasingly blurred in the current media landscape, he said he expects the lawsuit to force news outlets trying to capitalize on support for Trump to reconsider how far to stretch the limits.

"This is certainly a wake-up call that, just because you're dealing in opinion and not straight news, you can't openly put anything on the air," he said. "Facts are still facts."

Follow Goodman on Twitter: @APJoshGoodman

US rushes to catch up in the race to detect mutant viruses

By MIKE STOBBE and MARION RENAULT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Despite its world-class medical system and its vaunted Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. fell behind in the race to detect dangerous coronavirus mutations. And it's only now beginning to catch up.

The problem has not been a shortage of technology or expertise. Rather, scientists say, it's an absence of national leadership and coordination, plus a lack of funding and supplies for overburdened laboratories trying to juggle diagnostic testing with the hunt for genetic changes.

"We have the brains. We have the tools. We have the instruments," said Ilhem Messaoudi, director of a virus research center at University of California, Irvine. "It's just a matter of supporting that effort."

Viruses mutate constantly. To stay ahead of the threat, scientists analyze samples, watching closely for mutations that might make the coronavirus more infectious or more deadly.

But such testing has been scattershot.

Less than 1% of positive specimens in the U.S. are being sequenced to determine whether they have worrisome mutations. Other countries do better — Britain sequences about 10% — meaning they can more quickly see threats coming at them. That gives them greater opportunity to slow or stop the problem, whether through more targeted contact tracing, possible adjustments to the vaccine, or public warnings.

CDC officials say variants have not driven recent surges in overall U.S. cases. But experts worry that what's happening with variants is not clear and say the nation should have been more aggressive about sequencing earlier in the epidemic that has now killed over 450,000 Americans.

"If we had evidence it was changing," said Ohio State molecular biologist Dan Jones, "maybe people would've acted differently."

U.S. scientists have detected more than 500 cases of a variant first identified in Britain and expect it to become the cause of most of this country's new infections in a matter of weeks. Another troubling variant tied to Brazil and a third discovered in South Africa were detected last week in the U.S. and also are

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expected to spread.

The British variant is more contagious and is believed to be more deadly than the original, while the South Africa one may render the vaccines somewhat less effective. The ultimate fear is that a variant resistant to existing vaccines and treatments could eventually emerge.

Potentially worrisome versions may form inside the U.S., too. "This virus is mutating, and it doesn't care of it's in Idaho or South Africa," Messaoudi said.

But the true dimensions of the problem in the U.S. are not clear because of the relatively low level of sequencing.

"You only see what's under the lamppost," said Kenny Beckman, director of the University of Minnesota Genomics Center, which started analyzing the virus's genetics last spring.

After the slow start, public health labs in at least 33 states are now doing genetic analysis to identify emerging coronavirus variants. Other states have formed partnerships with university or private labs to do the work. North Dakota, which began sequencing last week, was the most recent to start that work, according to the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

The CDC believes a minimum of 5,000 to 10,000 samples should be analyzed weekly in the U.S. to adequately monitor variants, said Gregory Armstrong, who oversees the agency's advanced molecular detection work. And it's only now that the nation is hitting that level, he acknowledged.

Still, it is a jumble of approaches: Some public health labs sequence every positive virus specimen. Some focus on samples from certain outbreaks or certain patients. Others randomly select samples to analyze.

On top of that, labs continue to have trouble getting needed supplies — like pipette tips and chemicals — used in both gene sequencing and diagnostic testing.

President Joe Biden, who inherited the setup from the Trump administration, is proposing a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package that calls for boosting federal spending on sequencing of the virus, though the amount has not been detailed and other specifics have yet to be worked out.

"We're 43rd in the world in genomic sequencing. Totally unacceptable," White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said.

For more than five years, U.S. public health labs have been building up their ability to do genomic sequencing, thanks largely to a federal push to zero in on the sources of food poisoning outbreaks.

At the pandemic's outset, some labs began sequencing the coronavirus right away. The Minnesota Department of Health, for example, started doing so within weeks of its first COVID-19 cases in March, said Sara Vetter, an assistant lab director. "That put us a step ahead," she said.

The CDC likewise worked with certain states to sequence close to 500 samples in April, and over a thousand samples in May and June.

But many labs didn't do the same — especially those overburdened with ramping up coronavirus diagnostic testing. The CDC's Armstrong said that at the time, he couldn't justify telling labs to do more sequencing when they already had their hands full and there wasn't any evidence such analysis was needed.

"Up until a month ago, it wasn't on the list of things that are urgently necessary. It was nice to have," said Trevor Bedford, a scientist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle. "There was definitely lack of federal resources assigned to doing exactly this."

At the same time, because of stay-at-home orders imposed during the outbreak, researchers at some labs were told not to go in to work, Messaoudi said.

"Instead of having a call to arms," she said, "they sent everyone home."

Over the summer, though, a group of scientists sounded the alarm about the state of genomic surveillance in the U.S. and began pushing for something more systematic.

In November, the CDC began to roll out a national program to more methodically pull and check specimens to better determine what strains are circulating. Then in December, the U.S. got a wake-up call when British researchers announced they had identified a variant that seems to spread more easily.

The CDC reacted by announcing its surveillance program would scale up to process 750 samples nationally per week. The agency also contracted with three companies — LabCorp, Quest Diagnostics and

Illumina — to sequence thousands more each week. State labs are doing thousands of their own.

Meanwhile, the outbreak is almost certainly seeding more COVID-19 mutations.

“Where it has free rein of the place, there’s going to be significant variants that evolve,” Scripps Research Institute scientist Dr. Eric Topol said. “The more genomic sequencing, the more we can stay ahead of the virus.”

This story has been updated to correct the spelling of Illumina, which had been misspelled “Ilumina.”

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.

J&J asks US regulators to OK its one-shot COVID-19 vaccine

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

Johnson & Johnson asked U.S. regulators Thursday to clear the world’s first single-dose COVID-19 vaccine, an easier-to-use option that could boost scarce supplies.

J&J’s vaccine was safe and offered strong protection against moderate to severe COVID-19, according to preliminary results from a massive international study.

It didn’t appear quite as strong as two-dose competitors made by Pfizer and Moderna -- a finding that may be more perception than reality, given differences in how each was tested.

But the Food and Drug Administration is asking its independent advisers to publicly debate all the data behind the single-dose shot -- just like its competitors were put under the microscope -- before it decides whether to green light a third vaccine option in the U.S. The panel will meet Feb. 26.

Dr. Peter Marks, FDA’s vaccine chief, has cautioned against making comparisons before the evidence is all in.

“With so much need to get this pandemic under control, I think we can’t ignore any tool in the tool chest,” he told the American Medical Association last week. “We will have to do our best to try to make sure that we find the populations that benefit the most from each of these vaccines and deploy them in a very thoughtful manner.”

WHAT THE NUMBERS SHOW

Overall, the single-dose vaccine was 66% effective at preventing moderate to severe COVID-19, according to early findings from a study of 44,000 people in the U.S., Latin America and South Africa.

But it was 85% protective against the most serious symptoms — and starting 28 days after their shot, researchers found no one who got the vaccine needed hospitalization or died.

WEAKER BUT STILL FIGHTS MUTATING VIRUS

The one-dose option worked better in the U.S. — 72% effective against moderate to severe COVID-19 — compared with 66% in Latin America and 57% in South Africa, where a more contagious mutant virus is spreading.

Scientists have been looking for real-world evidence about how vaccines work as the world races to stay ahead of the rapidly mutating virus, and welcomed the news that the J&J option — while weaker — did still offer protection.

OTHER OPTIONS

In large U.S. studies, two doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines proved 95% protective against any symptomatic COVID-19.

But those studies were finished before the record virus surges of recent months and the appearance of the worrisome mutants, meaning such testing might not turn out the same if repeated today.

J&J also is studying a two-dose version of its vaccine, but results won’t be available for several more months.

THE SUPPLY

J&J said it would have some vaccine ready to ship if the FDA allows emergency use of the shot, but it

didn't reveal how much. The pharmaceutical giant said it expects to supply 100 million doses to the U.S. by the end of June.

It expects to file a similar application with European regulators soon.

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.

US virus deaths surpass 450K; daily toll is stubbornly high

By MICHELLE R. SMITH and AMY TAXIN Associated Press

Coronavirus deaths in the United States surpassed 450,000 on Thursday, and daily deaths remain stubbornly high at more than 3,000 a day, despite falling infections and the arrival of multiple vaccines.

Infectious disease specialists expect deaths to start dropping soon, after new cases hit a peak right around the beginning of the year. New COVID-19 deaths could ebb as early as next week, said the new director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But there's also the risk that improving trends in infections and hospitalizations could be offset by people relaxing and coming together — including this Sunday, to watch football, she added.

"I'm worried about Super Bowl Sunday, quite honestly," Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Thursday in an interview with The Associated Press.

Walensky said one reason cases and hospitalizations are not rising as dramatically as they were weeks ago is because the effect of holiday gatherings has faded.

The effect on deaths is delayed. The daily toll amounts to 50,000 new fatalities in the last two weeks alone.

"We're still in quite a bad place," she said.

The nation reported 3,912 COVID-19 deaths Wednesday, down from the pandemic peak of 4,466 deaths on Jan. 12.

The biggest driver to the U.S. death toll over the past month has been California, which has averaged more than 500 deaths per day in recent weeks.

Dora Padilla was among the thousands of Californians who died in the last month.

The 86-year-old daughter of Mexican immigrants served two decades as a schools trustee for Southern California's Alhambra Unified School District after helping out as a parent volunteer and band booster for her own children. She was one of few Latinos to hold elected office at the time.

She tested positive in December at the facility where she lived, then developed a fever and saw her oxygen level drop. The facility was going to call an ambulance but decided to treat her there amid a surge in infections that filled local hospitals with virus patients, said her daughter Lisa Jones.

"They were just about ready to call an ambulance, but they realized there is nowhere for her to go. She is going to end up in a hallway somewhere," Jones said.

Padilla was stable for days and seemed to be improving, but suddenly grew ill again before she died.

"I am still just kind of numb," her daughter said.

California's experience has mirrored many of the inequalities that have been exposed since the pandemic began nearly a year ago, with people of color being hit especially hard.

For example, Latinos make up 46% of California's overall death toll, despite being 39% of the state's population. The situation has worsened in recent months. In November, the daily number of Latino deaths was 3.5 per 100,000 residents, but that rate shot up to 40 deaths per 100,000 last week.

Alabama is another hot spot. The seven-day rolling average of deaths there has risen over the past two weeks, from 74 to 147 deaths per day. Kentucky, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina and Tennessee also saw surges in deaths.

The hardest hit demographic groups continue to be the oldest and frailest, said Dr. Thomas Holland of Duke University.

When coronavirus first swept through the country, it was concentrated in nursing homes, prisons and other congregate care settings. It later spread more broadly.

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"But deaths have still been concentrated among older patients and patients" with other health problems, Holland said. "Even as the pandemic has spread more broadly in the population, the demographics of who dies from COVID has not really changed."

In Florida, for instance, 83 percent of deaths attributed to the virus have been in people 65 and older. Still, that hasn't been enough to inspire some people to wear masks. A recent viral video from Oakes Farms Seed to Table, a local grocery store in Naples, Florida, showed both maskless customers and employees, chatting and laughing, without any social distancing.

Alfie Oakes, the store's owner, told NBC's "Today" show he knows masks do not work, and he does not believe the coronavirus has killed hundreds of thousands of people in the United States.

"That's total hogwash," Oakes said, adding: "Why don't we shut the world down because of the heart attacks? Why don't we lock down cities because of heart attacks?"

He did not return a call from the AP on Thursday.

Public health experts are watching Florida closely this week, because the Super Bowl will be played in Tampa. City leaders and the NFL are trying to ensure social distancing by capping attendance at a third of the stadium's capacity — 22,000 people. Still, there will be parties, events at bars and clubs, and other activities that draw people together.

While most people who become infected will recover, others face a much longer road. It can take a week or two to get sick enough to end up in the hospital. Then, those who are severely ill may end up in an ICU for many weeks, and some will die.

"The patients who don't do well are often in for these long and very stormy courses, and the patients who die, that's typically weeks into their hospital stay," Holland said.

Treatments have evolved for COVID over time, but there have not been any "game-changing miracle treatments" on par with the development of the vaccine, Holland said.

"We've had things on the margin that are helpful," Holland said.

Among those, the use of steroids for patients who require oxygen, different ventilator strategies and preventing and managing blood clots. There's also the use of monoclonal antibodies for outpatients early in their illness who do not need to be on oxygen, but who might be at higher risk of complications.

In addition, changes in testing have helped.

"Clearly, if people know they're infected, they're going to be more likely to do the things they need to do, like staying at home and quarantining or isolating," he said.

Looking forward, the big concern is how the virus is changing, shifting into new strains that are potentially more infectious and better able to evade antibody products or to make vaccines less effective.

"We've always been in a race," Holland said. "But it's a lot more obvious now that we're in a race to vaccinate people fast enough to slow down transmission, so that the virus has fewer opportunities to mutate and change and create these strain problems for us."

Associated Press writers Mike Stobbe in New York City and Tamara Lush in St. Petersburg, Florida, contributed to this report.

Wisconsin governor issues new mask mandate after GOP repeal

By SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers issued a new statewide mask order on Thursday, an hour after the Republican-controlled Legislature voted to repeal his previous mandate saying he didn't have authority to make such a decree.

Evers and the Legislature have been at odds throughout the pandemic but the latest moves created an unprecedented level of whiplash. Republican lawmakers last year persuaded the state Supreme Court to scrap Evers' stay-at-home order and a state appeals court halted the limits he placed on indoor gatherings.

As the Legislature moved to repeal the order, many cities and counties rushed to enact or extend local mask ordinances. Milwaukee and Dane County, where Madison is located, are among those with orders

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in place.

The Democratic governor said in a video message that his priority is keeping people safe and that wearing a mask is the most basic way to do that.

"If the Legislature keeps playing politics and we don't keep wearing masks, we're going to see more preventable deaths, and it's going to take even longer to get our state and our economy back on track," Evers said.

Republican state Sen. Steve Nass, who led the push to repeal the order, accused Evers of being a "lawless governor." Nass said he was drafting another resolution to repeal the new order and was considering asking the Wisconsin Supreme Court to take emergency action.

The Supreme Court could end the legislative back and forth with a ruling in a pending case that says Evers must secure lawmakers' approval every 60 days. The court could also say he doesn't need approval, thus forcing the Legislature to repeal every order Evers issues if it wants to stop him.

The attorney who argued in the case to undo Evers' order, Rick Esenberg, said "it is now incumbent upon the courts to rein in this abuse of power."

The Republican position is in stark contrast to a diverse coalition of doctors, nurses, hospitals, health departments, schools, chambers of commerce, pharmacists, churches, firefighters and others who urged keeping the mask order in place.

Dr. Bud Chumbley, head of the Wisconsin Medical Society, blasted the Assembly's vote to repeal, saying it "sends the wrong message at the wrong time."

"Instead, we need all of our policy leaders to unify behind the same message: wear a mask to protect yourself and others, prevent additional deaths and restore our economy," he said in a statement.

Health experts say masks may be the most effective way to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which has killed nearly 6,000 Wisconsinites, and that a repeal risks creating confusion and sending the wrong message about the importance of masks.

"We should be wearing masks," said Democratic state Rep. Robyn Vining. "Masks save lives."

Republicans say the issue isn't about masks, but whether Evers can legally issue multiple emergency health orders during the pandemic. The Legislature argues he can't, and must secure their approval every 60 days. Evers contends the changing nature of the pandemic allowed him to issue multiple orders and mask mandates.

"I know you want to make it about masks. It's not," said Republican Majority Leader Jim Steineke. "It's about the rule of law."

The Assembly voted 52-42 to repeal the mandate, with seven Republicans joining all Democrats in opposition.

The vote came a week after the Senate voted to kill the mandate. Republicans, who control both chambers, argued that Evers exceeded his authority by repeatedly extending the mask mandate without legislative approval. The repeal hadn't even taken effect before Evers issued a new one.

The coronavirus has ebbed in Wisconsin and elsewhere in the U.S., but health experts have warned of a continuing danger, including the emergence of new and more contagious variants. All of Wisconsin's neighboring states have some form of mask mandate, according to the National Academy for State Health Policy.

Prior to Thursday's vote, Assembly Republicans sent Evers a letter saying they would support a more limited mask mandate that applies to places "susceptible to transmission of the virus." Republicans said that includes health care facilities, nursing homes, mass transit, state government buildings, assisted living facilities, public schools, universities and prisons.

The Assembly also passed a bill that contains a provision designed to ensure the state doesn't lose about \$50 million a month that pays for food stamp benefits for roughly 243,000 low-income people in the state. Federal law requires there to be an emergency health order in place to receive the money. The Senate planned to meet Friday to approve the bill, sending it to Evers.

Evers has not said whether he will sign the bill.

Follow Scott Bauer on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/sbauerAP>

Goodell: Many lessons NFL learned in 2020 will carry forward

By ROB MAADDI and BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writers

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — The many lessons learned from 2020 will be needed as the NFL moves forward, Commissioner Roger Goodell noted Thursday in his annual state of the league news conference ahead of the Super Bowl.

Held before both in-person and virtual audiences and staged outside of the arena that is home to the NHL's Tampa Bay Lightning, Goodell said developments ranging from dealing with the coronavirus pandemic to minority coaching hires to scheduling to the NFL's working relationship with the players' union all will carry forward as major topics.

"I don't know when normal will occur again or if normal will occur again," he said. "I know we have learned to work in a very difficult environment, and we will do it again. That is one of the things we learned ... hearing clubs and the NFLPA saying our relationship has never been stronger. I interpret that as a trust that has been built here that will take us forward and will be the long-lasting legacy of this season."

That legacy, on the positive side, includes something the other major sports leagues and organizations couldn't manage: playing a full season, uninterrupted, with the championship game on time despite COVID-19 issues.

"This was an extraordinary collective effort," Goodell said. "There's so many people that had to work together to get this done. There were doubters, people that didn't believe we could do it, we had a lot of unknowns ourselves. We believed that staying on schedule and working to try to get 256 games done as we try to say, 'avoid the asterisk,' I think we were able to do that."

But the negative part of the legacy, one that has plagued a league made up of 70% minority players, has been the head coach hiring cycle. Goodell said the league is not satisfied with only two minorities hired for seven head coach openings: The New York Jets hired Robert Saleh, the first NFL coach who is known to be Muslim and the son of Lebanese immigrants, and Houston hired David Culley, making him only the league's third Black current head coach.

"We had two minority coaches hired and it was not what we expected," the commissioner said, "and not what we expect going forward."

Goodell noted three African-American general managers were hired in 2020 and early 2021, with more diversity also seen among coordinators, something the NFL can build on. Asked if a hiring freeze on head coaches until after the Super Bowl would be discussed, Goodell said everything that could enhance diversity would be explored.

The offseason structure for the league is so uncertain that Goodell preferred not to be specific about training camps and preseason games, though he did say the NFL plans to hold international games next season. There's no timeline for when the league has to decide whether to go ahead with international games in 2021, however.

"We hope to get to be there," he said. "We're planning for it. We'll make that decision whenever we have enough information to do so."

NFL Players Association President JC Tretter of the Cleveland Browns has suggested there is no need for required minicamps and other workouts at team facilities, given how the NFL got through 2020 without them.

But Goodell mentioned the opportunities younger players have to improve or just to make teams through preseason matches and offseason availabilities. He added the NFL will look into what changes from the pandemic season are worth keeping in a post-COVID-19 world.

"The virtuals are going to be a part of our life for a long time," he said, because coaches and players were able to remotely work through the playbooks in 2020.

Also:

— Goodell said it's far too early to talk about whether unvaccinated players will be playing next season or if fans will need to be vaccinated to attend games in 2021. The NFL hopes most of society is vaccinated by summer because it's in the best interest of the country. If the NFL's protocols must be altered, Goodell said the league will do so.

The NFL is endorsing the use of vaccines for the coronavirus pandemic by hosting 7,500 vaccinated healthcare workers at the Super Bowl on Sunday.

— An investigation into allegations of sexual harassment in the Washington Football Team's organization will be finished soon. Beth Wilkinson was hired following a report in the Washington Post that 15 female employees team alleged sexual harassment and a poor working culture in the organization. Goodell said team owner Daniel Snyder has begun to make changes and is welcoming the probe.

"They asked for this type of review and recommendations on this," he said.

— Goodell acknowledged that former 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick deserves recognition and appreciation for bringing up issues of social justice and racism. Kaepernick highlighted those issues in the 2016 season when he kneeled during the national anthem to protest racism and police brutality.

Goodell publicly apologized to Kaepernick last year for the league not listening to him enough and taking his concerns more seriously. Kaepernick has been unable to get a contract with any other team after being let go by San Francisco following the 2016 season.

Goodell says the owners and league have worked with players to identify issues in their communities and says he is pleased with the commitment from the players and support from the owners.

Wilner reported from New York. AP Pro Football Writers Teresa M. Walker, Simmi Buttar, Josh Dubow and Arnie Stapleton contributed.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

3 male guards accused in violent attack at NJ women's prison

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — A female inmate was punched 28 times and pepper-sprayed when guards attacked her and at least five other women, New Jersey officials said Thursday, bringing misconduct charges against three male prison guards.

New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal detailed the attack during a video news conference in which he said the guards at the Edna Mahan Correctional Facility for Women covered up the January attack by filing false reports. The charges come weeks after the attack made headlines when victims came forward to say they were beaten and sexually assaulted and dozens of guards were placed on paid leave.

Grewal said it's still early in the investigation, but he was announcing initial charges and revealing some details to "send a deterrent message."

"All of our residents have a right to be treated with basic decency and all of our officers have an obligation to avoid force except when absolutely necessary," he said. "Those principles don't just apply to our streets and our schools but also in our prisons."

Two supervisors, Sgt. Amir Bethea and Sgt. Anthony Valvano, are charged with misconduct and tampering with records. Officer Luis Garcia is charged with those counts, plus aggravated assault.

A message was left with Garcia's attorney. It's unclear who is representing Valvano and Bethea.

No one answered phone numbers listed for all three men.

The Clinton facility — New Jersey's lone women's prison — has a "long, ugly history," Grewal said.

"That's why we must do more than simply figure out what went wrong on Jan. 11. We must hold the responsible parties accountable, and we must fix the systemic failures that made this incident possible," he said.

Late on Jan. 11 and into the early hours of Jan. 12, about two dozen guards entered part of the prison and began to remove inmates, according to Grewal. A motive wasn't given, but Grewal said more information would be coming out.

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One woman, Ajila Nelson, told NJ.com she believed the attack was in retaliation for complaints inmates had made.

One victim was pepper sprayed before the team of guards entered her cell, according to Grewal. Garcia then punched her about 28 times in and near her face, even though she had her arms up and was trying to protect herself, Grewal added.

Garcia then submitted a false report, saying that the victim was punching his torso, Grewal said. Video evidence, which Grewal said would eventually be released, shows Garcia punching the victim while she was facing a wall and does not show her punching the guard, according to the attorney general.

Bethea and Valvano did not stop other officers from striking another inmate, despite her complying with their orders to submit to being handcuffed, according to Grewal.

One victim was left with broken bones near her eye.

Bethea and Valvano also filed false reports, Grewal said. Bethea, for instance, failed to disclose that one victim had visible injuries to her mouth and lip, he said. Valvano falsely reported, according to Grewal, that a victim was banging her head into the cell door, which had to be breached to stop further injury. But video shows she never appeared to be hitting her head, and the victim denied she banged her head against anything, Grewal said.

Nelson told NJ.com that officers handcuffed her and others, before punching, kicking, stripping and dragging her to a shower, after which she says an unidentified male officer got on top of her and groped and sexually assaulted her.

The charges Grewal unveiled Thursday did not include sexual assault.

A transgender woman incarcerated at the facility was beaten by a group of officers and three officers stomped on her head, her mother, Trimeka Rollins, told NJ.com. Her daughter's knee was so badly damaged that she's now using a wheelchair, Rollins said.

Last week, Gov. Phil Murphy named former state comptroller Matt Boxer as an independent investigator into the allegations.

In a statement Thursday, the governor said he was grateful Grewal took "swift action" after the "horrible incident."

It's not the first time similar allegations have been raised at the prison, which has 395 inmates. In April, a U.S. Justice Department report found that the state corrections department and officials at prison violated inmates' constitutional rights by failing to protect them.

Several corrections officers at the prison have pleaded guilty or been convicted of sexual abuse and misconduct in recent years.

The union for correctional officers called the allegations "disturbing," but said it "fully supports a thorough investigation being conducted regarding the incidents at issue before any judgments are made."

Sitting on billions, Catholic dioceses amassed taxpayer aid

By REESE DUNKLIN and MICHAEL REZENDES Associated Press

When the coronavirus forced churches to close their doors and give up Sunday collections, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte turned to the federal government's signature small business relief program for more than \$8 million.

The diocese's headquarters, churches and schools landed the help even though they had roughly \$100 million of their own cash and short-term investments available last spring, financial records show. When the cash catastrophe church leaders feared didn't materialize, those assets topped \$110 million by the summer.

"I am gratified to report the overall good financial health of the diocese despite the many difficulties presented by the Covid-19 pandemic," Bishop Peter Jugis wrote in the diocese's audited financial report released last fall.

As the pandemic began to unfold, scores of Catholic dioceses across the U.S. received aid through the Paycheck Protection Program while sitting on well over \$10 billion in cash, short-term investments or other available funds, an Associated Press investigation has found. And despite the broad economic downturn,

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these assets have grown in many dioceses.

Yet even with that financial safety net, the 112 dioceses that shared their financial statements, along with the churches and schools they oversee, collected at least \$1.5 billion in taxpayer-backed aid. A majority of these dioceses reported enough money on hand to cover at least six months of operating expenses, even without any new income.

The financial resources of several dioceses rivaled or exceeded those available to publicly traded companies like Shake Shack and Ruth's Chris Steak House, whose early participation in the program triggered outrage. Federal officials responded by emphasizing the money was intended for those who lacked the cushion that cash and other liquidity provide. Shake Shack and Ruth's Chris joined many corporations in returning the funds.

Overall, the nation's nearly 200 dioceses, where bishops and cardinals govern, and other Catholic institutions received at least \$3 billion. That makes the Roman Catholic Church perhaps the biggest beneficiary of the paycheck program, according to AP's analysis of data the U.S. Small Business Administration released following a public-records lawsuit by news organizations. The agency for months had shared only partial information, making a more precise analysis impossible.

Already one of the largest federal aid efforts ever, the SBA reopened the Paycheck Protection Program last month with a new infusion of nearly \$300 billion. In making the announcement, the agency's administrator at the time, Jovita Carranza, hailed the program for serving "as an economic lifeline to millions of small businesses."

Church officials have said their employees were as worthy of help as workers at Main Street businesses, and that without it they would have had to slash jobs and curtail their charitable mission as demand for food pantries and social services spiked. They point out the program's rules didn't require them to exhaust their stores of cash and other funds before applying.

But new financial statements several dozen dioceses have posted for 2020 show that their available resources remained robust or improved during the pandemic's hard, early months. The pattern held whether a diocese was big or small, urban or rural, East or West, North or South.

In Kentucky, funds available to the Archdiocese of Louisville, its parishes and other organizations grew from at least \$153 million to at least \$157 million during the fiscal year that ended in June, AP found. Those same offices and organizations received at least \$17 million in paycheck money. "The Archdiocese's operations have not been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak," according to its financial statement.

In Illinois, the Archdiocese of Chicago had more than \$1 billion in cash and investments in its headquarters and cemetery division as of May, while the faithful continued to donate "more than expected," according to a review by the independent ratings agency Moody's Investors Service. Chicago's parishes, schools and ministries accumulated at least \$77 million in paycheck protection funds.

Up the interstate from Charlotte in North Carolina, the Raleigh Diocese collected at least \$11 million in aid. Yet during the fiscal year that ended in June, overall offerings were down just 5% and the assets available to the diocese, its parishes and schools increased by about \$21 million to more than \$170 million, AP found. In another measure of fiscal health, the diocese didn't make an emergency draw on its \$10 million line of credit.

Catholic leaders in dioceses including Charlotte, Chicago, Louisville and Raleigh said their parishes and schools, like many other businesses and nonprofits, suffered financially when they closed to slow the spread of the deadly coronavirus.

Some dioceses reported that their hardest-hit churches saw income drop by 40% or more before donations began to rebound months later, and schools took hits when fundraisers were canceled and families had trouble paying tuition. As revenues fell, dioceses said, wage cuts and a few dozen layoffs were necessary in some offices.

Catholic researchers at Georgetown University who surveyed the nation's bishops last summer found such measures weren't frequent. In comparison, a survey by the investment bank Goldman Sachs found 42% of small business owners had cut staff or salaries, and that 33% had spent their personal savings to stay open.

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Church leaders have questioned why AP focused on their faith following a story last July, when New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan wrote that reporters “invented a story when none existed and sought to bash the Church.”

By using a special exemption that the church lobbied to include in the paycheck program, Catholic entities amassed at least \$3 billion — roughly the same as the combined total of recipients from the other faiths that rounded out the top five, AP found. Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist and Jewish faith-based recipients also totaled at least \$3 billion. Catholics account for about 20% of the U.S. religious population, while members of those four faiths represent about 25%, according to the Pew Research Center.

Catholic institutions also received many times more than other major nonprofits with charitable missions and national reach, such as the United Way, Goodwill Industries and Boys & Girls Clubs of America. Overall, Catholic recipients got roughly twice as much as 40 of the largest, most well-known charities in America combined, AP found.

The complete picture is certainly even more lopsided. So many Catholic entities received help that reporters could not identify them all, even after spending hundreds of hours hand-checking tens of thousands of records in federal data.

The Vatican referred questions about the paycheck program to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, which said it does not speak on behalf of dioceses.

Presented with AP’s findings, bishops conference spokeswoman Chieko Noguchi responded with a broad statement that the Paycheck Protection Program was “designed to protect the jobs of Americans from all walks of life, regardless of whether they work for for-profit or nonprofit employers, faith-based or secular.”

INTERNAL SKEPTICISM

The AP’s assessment of church finances is among the most comprehensive to date. It draws largely from audited financial statements posted online by the central offices of 112 of the country’s nearly 200 dioceses.

The church isn’t required to share its financials. As a result, the analysis doesn’t include cash, short-term assets and lines of credit held by some of the largest dioceses, including those serving New York City and other major metropolitan areas.

The analysis focused on available assets because federal officials cited those metrics when clarifying eligibility for the paycheck program. Therefore, the \$10 billion AP identified doesn’t count important financial pillars of the U.S. church. Among those are its thousands of real estate properties and most of the funds that parishes and schools hold. Also excluded is the money — estimated at \$9.5 billion in a 2019 study by the Delaware-based wealth management firm Wilmington Trust — held by charitable foundations created to help dioceses oversee donations.

In addition, dioceses can rely on a well-funded support system that includes help from wealthier dioceses, the bishops conference and other Catholic organizations. Canon law, the legal code the Vatican uses to govern the global church, notes that richer dioceses may assist poorer ones, and the AP found instances where they did.

In their financial statements, the 112 dioceses acknowledged having at least \$4.5 billion in liquid or otherwise available assets. To reach its \$10 billion total, AP also included funding that dioceses had opted to designate for special projects instead of general expenses; excess cash that parishes and their affiliates deposit with their diocese’s savings and loan; and lines of credit dioceses typically have with outside banks.

Some church officials said AP was misreading their financial books and therefore overstating available assets. They insisted that money their bishop or his advisers had set aside for special projects couldn’t be repurposed during an emergency, although financial statements posted by multiple dioceses stated the opposite.

For its analysis, AP consulted experts in church finance and church law. One was the Rev. James Connell, an accountant for 15 years before joining the priesthood and becoming an administrator in the Milwaukee Archdiocese. Connell, also a canon lawyer who is now retired from his position with the archdiocese, said AP’s findings convinced him that Catholic entities did not need government aid — especially when thousands of small businesses were permanently closing.

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"Was it want or need?" Connell asked. "Need must be present, not simply the want. Justice and love of neighbor must include the common good."

Connell was not alone among the faithful concerned by the church's pursuit of taxpayer money. Parishioners in several cities have questioned church leaders who received government money for Catholic schools they then closed.

Elsewhere, a pastor in a Western state told AP that he refused to apply even after diocesan officials repeatedly pressed him. He spoke on condition of anonymity because of his diocese's policy against talking to reporters and concerns about possible retaliation.

The pastor had been saving, much like leaders of other parishes. When the pandemic hit, he used that money, trimmed expenses and told his diocese's central finance office that he had no plans to seek the aid. Administrators followed up several times, the pastor said, with one high-ranking official questioning why he was "leaving free money on the table."

The pastor said he felt a "sound moral conviction" that the money was meant more for shops and restaurants that, without it, might close forever.

As the weeks passed last spring, the pastor said his church managed just fine. Parishioners were so happy with new online Masses and his other outreach initiatives, he said, they boosted their contributions beyond 2019 levels.

"We didn't need it," the pastor said, "and intentionally," wanted to leave the money for those small business owners who did."

WEATHERING A DOWNTURN

Months after the pandemic first walloped the economy, the 112 dioceses that release financial statements began sharing updates. Among the 47 dioceses that have thus far, the pandemic's impact was far from crippling.

The 47 dioceses that have posted financials for the fiscal year that ended in June had a median 6% increase in the amount of cash, short-term investments and other funds that they and their affiliates could use for unanticipated or general expenses, AP found. In all, 38 dioceses grew those resources, while nine reported declines.

Finances in Raleigh and 10 other dioceses that took government assistance were stable enough that they did not have to dip into millions they had available through outside lines of credit.

"This crisis has tested us," Russell Elmayan, Raleigh's chief financial officer, told the diocese's magazine website in July, "but we are hopeful that the business acumen of our staff and lay counselors, together with the strategic financial reserves built over time, will help our parishes and schools continue to weather this unprecedented event." Raleigh officials did not answer direct questions from AP.

The 47 dioceses acknowledged a smaller amount of readily available assets than AP counted, though by their own accounting that grew as well.

The improving financial outlook is due primarily to parishioners who found ways to continue donating and U.S. stock markets that were rebounding to new highs. But when the markets were first plunging, officials in several dioceses said, they had to stretch available assets because few experts were forecasting a rapid recovery.

In Louisville, Charlotte and other dioceses, church leaders said they offered loans or grants to needy parishes and schools, or offset the monthly charges they assess their parishes. In Raleigh, for example, the headquarters used \$3 million it had set aside for liability insurance and also tapped its internal deposit and loan fund.

Church officials added that the pandemic's full toll will probably be seen in a year or two, because some key sources of revenue are calculated based on income that parishes and schools generate.

"We believe that we will not know all of the long-term negative impacts on parish, school and archdiocesan finances for some time," Louisville Archdiocese spokeswoman Cecelia Price wrote in response to questions.

At the nine dioceses that recorded declines in liquid or other short-term assets, the drops typically were less than 10%, and not always clearly tied to the pandemic.

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The financial wherewithal of some larger dioceses is underscored by the fact that, like publicly traded companies, they can raise capital by selling bonds to investors.

One was Chicago, where analysts with the Moody's ratings agency calculated that the \$1 billion in cash and investments held by the archdiocese headquarters and cemeteries division could cover about 631 days of operating expenses.

Church officials in Chicago asserted that those dollars were needed to cover substantial expenses while parishioner donations slumped. Without paycheck support, "parishes and schools would have been forced to cut many jobs, as the archdiocese, given its liabilities, could not have closed such a funding gap," spokeswoman Paula Waters wrote.

Moody's noted in its May report that while giving was down, federal aid had compensated for that and helped leave the archdiocese "well positioned to weather this revenue loss over the next several months." Among the reasons for the optimism: "a unique credit strength" that under church law allows the archbishop to tax parish revenue virtually at will.

In a separate Moody's report on New Orleans, which filed for bankruptcy in May while facing multiple clergy abuse lawsuits, the ratings agency wrote in July that the archdiocese did so while having "significant financial reserves, with spendable cash and investments of over \$160 million."

Moody's said the archdiocese's "very good" liquid assets would let it operate 336 days without additional income. Those assets prompted clergy abuse victims to ask a federal judge to dismiss the bankruptcy filing, arguing the archdiocese's primary reason for seeking the legal protection was to minimize payouts to them.

The archdiocese, along with its parishes and schools, collected more than \$26 million in paycheck money. New Orleans Archdiocesan officials didn't respond to written questions.

PURSUING AID

Without special treatment, the Catholic Church would not have received nearly so much under the Paycheck Protection Program.

After Congress let nonprofits and religious organizations participate in the first place, Catholic officials lobbied the Trump Administration for a second break. Religious organizations were freed from the so-called affiliation rule that typically disqualifies applicants with more than 500 workers.

Without that break, many dioceses would have missed out because — between their head offices, parishes, schools and other affiliates — their employee count would exceed the limit.

Among those lobbying, federal records show, was the Los Angeles Archdiocese. Parishes, schools and ministries there collected at least \$80 million in paycheck aid, at a time when the headquarters reported \$658 million in available funds heading into the fiscal year when the coronavirus arrived.

Catholic officials in the U.S. needed the special exception for at least two reasons.

Church law says dioceses, parishes and schools are affiliated, something the Los Angeles Archdiocese acknowledged "proved to be an obstacle" to receiving funds because its parishes operate "under the authority of the diocesan bishop." Dioceses, parishes, schools and other Catholic entities also routinely assert to the Internal Revenue Service that they are affiliated so they can maintain their federal income tax exemption.

While some Catholic officials insisted their affiliates are separate and financially independent, AP found many instances of borrowing and spending among them when dioceses were faced with prior cash crunches. In Philadelphia, for example, the archdiocese received at least \$18 million from three affiliates, including a seminary, to fund a compensation program for clergy sex abuse survivors, according to 2019 financial statements.

Cardinals and bishops have broad authority over parishes and the pastors who run them. Church law requires parishes to submit annual financial reports and bishops may require parishes to deposit surplus money with internal banks administered by the diocese.

"The parishioners cannot hire or fire the pastor; that is for the bishop to do," said Connell, the priest, former accountant and canon lawyer. "Each parish functions as a wholly owned subsidiary or division of

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a larger corporation, the diocese.”

Bishops acknowledged a concerted effort to tap paycheck funds in a survey by Catholic researchers at Georgetown University. When asked what they had done to address the pandemic’s financial fallout, 95% said their central offices helped parishes apply for paycheck and other aid — the leading response. That topped encouraging parishioners to donate electronically.

After Congress approved the paycheck program, three high-ranking officials in New Hampshire’s Manchester Diocese sent an urgent memo to parishes, schools and affiliated organizations urging them to refrain from layoffs or furloughs until completing their applications. “We are all in this together,” the memo read, adding that diocesan officials were working expeditiously to provide “step by step instructions.”

Paycheck Protection Program funds came through low-interest bank loans, worth up to \$10 million each, that the federal government would forgive so long as recipients used the money to cover about two months of wages and operating expenses.

After an initial \$659 billion last spring, Congress added another \$284 billion in December. With the renewal came new requirements intended to ensure that funds go to businesses that lost money due to the pandemic. Lawmakers also downsized the headcount for applicants to 300 or fewer employees.

A QUESTION OF NEED

In other federal small business loan programs, government help is treated as a last resort.

Applicants must show they couldn’t get credit elsewhere. And those with enough available funds must pay more of their own way to reduce taxpayer subsidies.

Congress didn’t include these tests in the Paycheck Protection Program. To speed approvals, lenders weren’t required to do their usual screening and instead relied on applicants’ self-certifications of need.

The looser standards helped create a run on the first \$349 billion in paycheck funding. Small business owners complained that they were shut out, yet dozens of companies healthy enough to be traded on stock exchanges scored quick approval.

As blowback built in April, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin warned at a news briefing that there would be “severe consequences” for applicants who improperly tapped the program.

“We want to make sure this money is available to small businesses that need it, people who have invested their entire life savings,” Mnuchin said. Program guidelines evolved to stress that participants with access to significant cash probably could not get the assistance “in good faith.”

Mnuchin’s Treasury Department said it would audit loans exceeding \$2 million, although federal officials have not said whether they would hold religious organizations and other nonprofits to the same standard of need as businesses.

The headquarters and major departments for more than 40 dioceses received more than \$2 million. Every diocese that responded to questions said it would seek to have the government cover the loans, rather than repay the funds.

One diocese receiving a loan over \$2 million was Boston. According to the archdiocese’s website, its central ministries office received about \$3 million, while its parishes and schools collected about \$32 million more.

The archdiocese — along with its parishes, schools and cemeteries — had roughly \$200 million in available funds in June 2019, according to its audited financial report. When that fiscal year ended several months into the pandemic, available funds had increased to roughly \$233 million.

Nevertheless, spokesman Terrence Donilon cited “ongoing economic pressure” in saying the archdiocese will seek forgiveness for last year’s loans and will apply for additional, new funds during the current round.

Beyond its growing available funds, the archdiocese and its affiliates benefit from other sources of funding. The archdiocese’s “Inspiring Hope” campaign, announced in January, has raised at least \$150 million.

And one of its supporting charities — the Catholic Schools Foundation, where Cardinal Sean O’Malley is board chairman — counted more than \$33 million in cash and other funds that could be “used for general operations” as of the beginning of the 2020 fiscal year, according to its financial statement.

Despite these resources, the archdiocese closed a half-dozen schools in May and June, often citing rev-

enue losses due to the pandemic. Paycheck protection data show four of those schools collectively were approved for more than \$700,000.

The shuttered schools included St. Francis of Assisi in Braintree, a middle-class enclave 10 miles south of Boston, which received \$210,000. Parents said they felt blindsided by the closure, announced in June as classes ended.

"It's like a punch to the gut because that was such a home for so many people for so long," said Kate Nedelman Herbst, the mother of two children who attended the elementary school.

Along with more than 2,000 other school supporters, Herbst signed a written protest to O'Malley that noted the archdiocese's robust finances. After O'Malley didn't reply, parents appealed to the Vatican, this time underscoring the collection of Paycheck Protection Program money.

"It is very hard to reconcile the large sums of money raised by the archdiocese in recent years with this wholesale destruction of the church's educational infrastructure," parents wrote.

In December, the Vatican turned down their request to overrule O'Malley. Spokesman Donilon said the decision to close the school "is not being reconsidered."

Today, the three children of Michael Waterman and his wife, Jeanine, are learning at home. And they still can't understand why the archdiocese didn't shift money to help save a school beloved by the faithful.

"What angers us," Michael Waterman said, "is that we feel like, given the amount of money that the Catholic Church has, they absolutely could have remained open."

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

Contact the reporters at <https://twitter.com/reesedunklin> and <https://twitter.com/mikerezendes>.

Contributing to this report were Justin Myers, Randy Herschaft, Rodrique Ngowi, Holbrook Mohr, Jason Dearen and James LaPorta.

Immigrants in sanctuary in churches hope Biden offers relief

By PHILIP MARCELO, SOPHIA TAREEN and JIM SALTER Associated Press

BEDFORD, Mass. (AP) — For over three years, Maria Macario has been too afraid to leave the white steepled First Parish church just outside Boston.

The 55-year-old Guatemala native moved in to avoid deportation, living in a converted Sunday school classroom with a kitchenette.

Her isolation has only been compounded by the coronavirus pandemic. Gone are the regular church gatherings and volunteers stationed around the clock in case immigration officials come. To keep her spirits up, singers gather outside to serenade her.

She hopes things change with Joe Biden in the White House. He set out to pause most deportations for 100 days and pitched a path to citizenship for an estimated 11 million people without legal status — an ambitious and dramatic reversal from former President Donald Trump's hardline immigration policies.

"It's a relief," Macario said. "It feels like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders."

She's among dozens of people from Colorado to North Carolina who have taken sanctuary as a last resort to stay in the country. Their actions have been extreme, particularly those who have declared their whereabouts. Many immigrants without legal status, who were increasingly fearful and anxious during the Trump years, upended their daily routines to evade detection, including avoiding driving.

Newly hopeful, they're trying to capitalize on the moment, even with setbacks like a ruling blocking the Biden administration from enforcing its deportation moratorium and uncertainty over whether Congress will tackle immigration reform.

Those who have taken sanctuary have enlisted lawmakers to ask Biden for relief, pushing to cancel deportation orders and reviving the use of private bills — measures to protect a person or group. Sanctuary activists also have sued the federal government.

"These past four years have been a collective holding of our breath and just waiting for the next horrible

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thing to happen," said Myrna Orozco-Gallos with Church World Service, a cooperative ministry that helps prepare churches to house immigrants.

The organization estimates at least 38 immigrants are taking sanctuary. At one point under Trump, the group estimated there were more than 70.

The modern sanctuary movement began in the 1980s as Central Americans fleeing war and poverty came to the U.S. and churches stepped in to offer protection. It was revived in 2006 when Elvira Arellano, a Mexican immigrant, moved into a Chicago church, where her portrait still hangs near the altar.

It was long an unwritten rule that churches, playgrounds and schools were off-limits to immigration agents. The Obama administration put it to paper in 2011, largely prohibiting arrests and searches there.

The Trump administration was more hardline, taking an Indonesian immigrant into custody on church grounds last year. The administration also fined several people taking sanctuary up to \$500,000, citing violations for failing to depart the U.S.

Emboldened by Trump's departure, four sanctuary activists in Texas, Ohio, Utah and Virginia sued the Department of Homeland Security over the fines, alleging they were "selectively targeted" because of their activism. The fines were reduced to about \$60,000 each, but the women say they can't pay.

Several others in sanctuary appeared with Democratic U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro of Texas at a recent event urging Biden to lift their deportation orders and bolster the use of private bills, a last-ditch effort for legal status.

Alex Garcia, a native of Honduras who's lived at a suburban St. Louis church for over three years, was one of the few with a private bill before it died in the last Congress. Growing up in violence and poverty, he crossed illegally before being detained in 2015 while accompanying his sister to an immigration office so she could seek asylum.

"We all need protection to be able to stay here with our families without the threat of deportation," Garcia said.

Francisca Lino thought that threat was over when Biden's deportation moratorium took effect Jan. 22.

After spending more than three years in sanctuary at a storefront Chicago church, the Mexican mother of five U.S. citizen children packed up and left for her family's suburban home the next day.

Lino was there just three nights when a judge temporarily blocked the moratorium. She cried. She had already missed the birth of her grandson, graduations and her son's surgery while living above Adalberto Memorial United Methodist Church.

She went back into sanctuary.

"My kids deserve their mom in the house," Lino said in Spanish. "I'm not a criminal. I didn't do anything wrong. I just want to find a better life for my family."

While the ruling was a setback for her and others, Biden has ordered a review of deportation criteria and told authorities in the meantime to focus on people with serious criminal records or who are national security or public safety threats.

So people in sanctuary are biding their time.

At First Parish outside Boston, Macario takes English lessons from church volunteers on Zoom nearly every morning. She's started to learn the piano and has become a proficient knitter. Beside her armchair is a large bag filled with winter hats and other accessories she's made for charity.

"It's hard," said Macario, who crossed the border illegally in the 1990s with a wave of migrants during Guatemala's yearslong civil war. "It's different than a jail, but in some ways, it's also very similar."

She often wonders whether she failed her three U.S.-born sons by going into hiding.

Her youngest, Saul, says he doesn't resent her choice. The 19-year-old dropped out of high school during the family's upheaval, which included the deportation of his father and oldest brother after their family's asylum case was denied.

He moved into the church during the pandemic to keep his mother company and get his life back on track. He's since earned his GED and found a job at Whole Foods.

"She's my rock," Saul Macario says of his mom. "That's what I needed, her by my side."

Maria Macario hopes her family will be reunited — including her deported husband and son. Her lawyer has filed paperwork to have her asylum case reopened.

But she says she knows better than to put too much hope in a new president. After all, her family was ordered to leave when Biden was vice president.

"My lawyer says I could leave the church today, but I just don't trust things," Macario said. "It feels too fresh. I don't want to take the risk."

Tareen reported from Chicago, and Salter from St. Louis.

Election officials say combating lies will be big challenge

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

After an election season dominated by conspiracy theories and false claims about voting, top election officials across the country say they already are bracing for what comes next.

They are grappling with ways they can counter waves of misinformation in the 2022 midterms and beyond related to voting procedures and the accuracy of election results.

A major topic in virtual gatherings this week of the National Association of Secretaries of State and National Association of State Election Directors is how to deal with voters who have lost faith in elections because of the misinformation surrounding the 2020 presidential election.

"There are some folks who are never going to believe anything I say, and I'm not trying to convince those people otherwise," Arizona Secretary of State Katie Hobbs said. "It's unfortunate that is the case that we have now."

Jared Dearing, executive director for the State Board of Elections in Kentucky, said people still contact his office believing the presidential election was rigged. Voter fraud is exceedingly rare and virtually impossible to be used to sway a federal election, given that elections are overseen by the states and run by counties or other local jurisdictions.

"One of the things we're talking about inside our own circles is that we continue to have these phone calls with people just calling about all these conspiracy theories," he said, adding that most of the callers cannot be convinced otherwise.

State and local election officials have said repeatedly the 2020 election was fair and secure despite claims by former President Donald Trump and his allies that the election was stolen. Courts have soundly rejected allegations made in numerous lawsuits, while election officials of both parties conducted audits verifying the vote. Trump's own attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of widespread fraud that would have changed the results.

The sheer number of false claims in 2020 and how they spread quickly across social media created major headaches for election officials, who had to counter the falsehoods at the same time they were trying to ensure a smooth presidential election during a deadly pandemic.

"They got all combined into one narrative ... into one large lie to try to undermine confidence in the election," Matt Masterson, a former top official at the U.S. Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, told election officials on Thursday.

Masterson encouraged election officials to continue efforts to counter the disinformation campaigns and not be discouraged by what happened last year.

"I know in the midst of this it felt like we did all this and no one listened to it," he said. "But it's really hard to track and understand how many people took it in and were dismissive of the claims from that point forward."

One question is how much this will fall on state and local election officials and what role the federal government will play in identifying and correcting election misinformation.

The U.S. Cybersecurity Infrastructure Security Agency, which is charged with helping protect election systems, launched a "Rumor Control" website last year to address the falsehoods in real time. One rumor it dispelled was a claim in Arizona that poll workers gave Sharpies to certain voters so their ballots would

be rejected.

Whether that effort will continue for future elections is not clear. Agency officials said countering lies and misinformation is most effective at the state and local level, and they urged election officials to find trusted sources to help them spread their message.

A "heavy handed" approach can sometimes backfire and force people to recoil further into their personal information bubbles, said Bob Kolasky, assistant director of CISA's National Risk Management Center.

"We don't want to just be lecturing people that the things they believe are absolutely wrong without being somewhat empathetic to what they want to believe," he said.

This week's meetings also included a discussion with representatives from the major social media companies. Election officials asked them to do a better job highlighting their work to counter misinformation.

The officials also spoke of the challenges in overseeing an election in which they were targeted for harassment by those who believed Trump's false claim that the election was stolen. Some said the threats and harassment are continuing, three months after Election Day.

Georgia's state election director, Chris Harvey, noted that he, his boss, Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, and other officials in the office had all received threats.

As Trump was challenging the integrity of the vote in Georgia last year, a top official in the secretary of state's office pleaded for the misinformation to stop and warned that someone would get hurt.

"In Georgia, we would have welcomed foreign interference — we had plenty of other interference and interest," Harvey said.

Cassidy reported from Atlanta.

Navalny urges Russians from jail to overcome their fear

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — In a note from jail, opposition leader Alexei Navalny urged Russians Thursday to overcome their fear and "free" the country from a "bunch of thieves," while the Kremlin cast the arrests of thousands of protesters as a due response to the unsanctioned rallies.

Navalny, who was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison earlier this week, said in a statement posted on his Instagram account that "iron doors slammed behind my back with a deafening sound, but I feel like a free man. Because I feel confident I'm right. Thanks to your support. Thanks to my family's support."

Navalny, 44, an anti-corruption campaigner who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's most determined political foe, was arrested Jan. 17 upon returning from his five-month convalescence in Germany from a nerve agent poisoning, which he has blamed on the Kremlin. Russian authorities deny any involvement and claim they have no proof that he was poisoned despite tests by several European labs.

A Moscow court on Tuesday sent Navalny to prison, finding that he violated the terms of his probation while recuperating in Germany. The sentence stems from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that Navalny has rejected as fabricated and the European Court of Human Rights has ruled unlawful.

He said his imprisonment was "Putin's personal revenge" for surviving and exposing the assassination plot. "But even more than that, it's a message from Putin and his friends to the entire country: 'Did you see what we can do? We spit on laws and steamroll anyone who dares to challenge us. We are the law.'"

Protests against Navalny's arrest and jailing have spread across Russia's 11 time zones over the past two weekends, drawing tens of thousands in the largest show of discontent with Putin's rule in years.

In a no-holds-barred response to the protest, police arrested over 10,000 protest participants across Russia and beat scores, according to arrest-monitoring group OVD-Info. Many detainees spent hours packed into police buses after detention facilities in Moscow and St. Petersburg quickly ran out of space. After a long wait, they were crammed into overcrowded jail cells with no precautions to prevent them from being infected with the coronavirus.

Some of the detainees said their cells lacked beds and they had to sleep on the floor, while others com-

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plained there weren't enough beds and inmates took turns to get a nap.

Speaking in a live YouTube broadcast, Leonid Volkov, Navalny's chief strategist who is currently residing abroad, said the protests should pause until the spring after reaching a peak. He said that protesters won a "huge moral victory" and argued that trying to maintain rallies each weekend would only lead to thousands more arrests and wear participants out.

Instead, he urged supporters to focus on challenging Kremlin candidates in September's parliamentary elections and securing new Western sanctions against Russia to press for Navalny's release. He said Navalny's team would try to make sure that "every world leader would discuss nothing but Navalny's release with Putin."

Hours later, President Joe Biden made his first public comment on the matter, saying "Mr. Navalny, like all Russian citizens, is entitled to his rights under the Russian constitution. He's been targeted, targeted for exposing corruption. He should be released immediately and without condition."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had a phone call Thursday with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who raised the issue of Navalny, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. It said that Lavrov emphasized the need to respect Russian law.

Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia won't listen to Western criticism of Navalny's sentencing and the police action against protesters. "We aren't going to take into account such statements regarding the enforcement of our laws on those who violate them and Russian court verdicts," Peskov said.

He shrugged off questions about detainees waiting for many hours on police buses and being squeezed into cramped cells by saying they had themselves to blame. "The situation wasn't provoked by law enforcement. It was provoked by participants in unsanctioned actions," Peskov said during a call with reporters.

One detainee, 30-year-old architect Almir Shamasov, who spent 10 days in a detention facility in Sakharovo outside Moscow, said he spent 20 hours in a police van that either was flooded with fumes or shivering cold when the engine was cut off.

"When you sit inside a police van with engine and heat on, the smell of gas or diesel fuel is unbearable. When it's off, the steam comes out of your mouth," he said after being freed late Wednesday.

Another detainee, Eva Sokolova said after walking out of detention in Sakharovo that she slept two nights on the floor of a police precinct before the court jailed her for three days.

About 150 relatives of the detainees waited outside in the snow for many hours Wednesday to hand over food and necessities. One of them, Tatiana Yastrebova, said she waited six hours for officials to accept some items she brought for her son.

Following Navalny's arrest, authorities also moved swiftly to silence and isolate his allies. Last week, a Moscow court put his brother, Oleg, top associate Lyubov Sobol, and several others under house arrest — without access to the internet — for two months as part of a criminal probe into alleged violations of coronavirus restrictions during protests. Sobol was formally charged Thursday with inciting the violation of sanitary regulations by organizing protests.

Navalny has another court hearing scheduled for Friday in Moscow on separate charges of slandering a World War II veteran. He has rejected the case as the Kremlin enacting political revenge.

Navalny argued that the crackdown on protests was a show of weakness, saying that the government's power is illusory and urging Russians not to fear it.

"They can only hold on to power and use it to enrich themselves relying on our fear," he said. "If we overcome that fear, we will be able to free our Motherland from a bunch of occupants-thieves. And we shall do it. We must do it for ourselves and the future generations."

Kostya Manenkov contributed to this report.

Fake accounts gain traction as they praise China, mock US

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

A pro-China network of fake and impostor accounts found a global audience on YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to mock the U.S. response to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the deadly riot in Washington that left five dead, new research published Thursday found.

Messages posted by the network, which also praised China, reached the social media feeds of government officials, including some in China and Venezuela who retweeted posts from the fake accounts to millions of their followers.

The international reach marked new territory for a pro-China social media network that has been operating for years, said Ben Nimmo, head of investigations for Graphika, the social media analysis firm that monitored the activity.

"For the very first time, it started to get a little bit of audience interaction," Nimmo said.

The network's messaging aligns closely with posts and comments made by Chinese state officials. But it is unclear who is behind the fake accounts, which posted more than 1,400 videos in English, Mandarin or Cantonese, Nimmo said. One of the Twitter accounts, which had a following of roughly 2,000 users mostly from Latin American, also tweeted the messaging in Spanish.

The posts appear to target social media users outside of the United States, gaining traction in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Venezuela — places where Chinese and U.S. diplomatic or financial interests have increasingly come into conflict.

"The overall message is: America is doing very badly. China is doing very well," Nimmo said. "Who do you want to be like?"

The network used photos of Chinese celebrities on the accounts and, in one case, hijacked the verified Twitter account of a Latin American soap opera show to post messages, according to Graphika's report.

The fake accounts seized on the Jan. 6 insurrection in Washington as Congress met to certify the U.S. election results at the Capitol.

One video described the U.S. as a "failed state" and another said that America was "running naked in front of the world" in the wake of the Capitol siege. Three videos Graphika identified described the riots as a "beautiful sight to behold," mimicking the language used in Chinese state media reports around the news, the report found.

Relations between Washington and Beijing worsened under former President Donald Trump, who launched an aggressive diplomatic and economic offensive against China. That tension has played out on social media, where Chinese state officials have aired pointed criticisms of Trump in recent years. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian has been one of the most vocal critics of the U.S. on social media, tweeting a conspiracy theory last year that the coronavirus began in the U.S., despite evidence that the virus originated in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

But even after Trump's exit from office on Jan. 20, the fake network has continued to push anti-U.S. posts.

Some of the accounts have now pivoted to attacking the Democratic Party by accusing leaders of having a "one-party mentality" in videos posted to YouTube, the report found.

Other fake accounts have questioned the safety of American-approved vaccines for COVID-19, despite studies on tens of thousands of people that found no serious side effects.

"The safety of the ... vaccine was in doubt, but it was quickly approved," one of the pro-China videos posted on Jan. 21 claimed in a headline. Other posts praised China's response to the pandemic, while criticizing America's ability to contain the deadly virus.

"There's this cherry-picking of narratives and events that make the U.S. look really bad," Nimmo said.

Last month, YouTube announced that it had removed more than 3,000 YouTube channels in December that were identified as part of Graphika's investigation into influence campaigns linked to China. Other Facebook and Twitter accounts identified in Graphika's report were also removed.

Under the sea, humans have changed ocean sounds

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Not only are humans changing the surface and temperature of the planet, but also its sounds — and those shifts are detectable even in the open ocean, according to research published Thursday.

Changes in the ocean soundscape affect wide swaths of marine life, from tiny snapping shrimp to huge right whales, the researchers found.

“Sounds travel very far underwater. For fish, sound is probably a better way to sense their environment than light,” said Francis Juanes, an ecologist at the University of Victoria in Canada and a co-author of the paper in the journal *Science*.

While light tends to scatter in water, he said, sounds travel much faster through water than through air.

Many fish and marine animals use sound to communicate with each other, to locate promising locations to breed or feed, and possibly to detect predators. For example, snapping shrimp make a sound resembling popping corn that stuns their prey. Humpback whale songs can resemble a violinist’s melodies.

But increased noise from shipping traffic, motorized fishing vessels, underwater oil and gas exploration, offshore construction and other human activity is making it harder for fish to hear each other.

The researchers sifted through thousands of data sets and research articles documenting changes in noise volume and frequency to assemble a comprehensive picture of how the ocean soundscape is changing — and how marine life is impacted.

Using underwater microphones, scientists can record fish sounds — which tend to hover around the same low frequencies as shipping traffic noise.

“For many marine species, their attempts to communicate are being masked by sounds that humans have introduced,” said Carlos Duarte, a marine ecologist at the Red Sea Research Center in Saudi Arabia and co-author of the paper.

The Red Sea is one of the world’s key shipping corridors, full of large vessels traveling to Asia, Europe and Africa. Some fish and invertebrates now avoid the noisiest areas, as the sound effectively fragments their Red Sea habitat, he said.

Meanwhile the overall number of marine animals has declined by about half since 1970. In some parts of the ocean, scientists now record “fewer animals singing and calling than in the past — those voices are gone,” said Duarte.

Climate change also influences physical processes that shape ocean sounds, such as winds, waves and melting ice, the researchers found.

“Imagine having to raise your kids in a place that’s noisy all the time. It’s no wonder many marine animals are showing elevated and detectable levels of stress due to noise,” said Joe Roman, a University of Vermont marine ecologist, who was not involved in the paper.

“When people think of threats facing the ocean, we often think of climate change, plastics and overfishing. But noise pollution is another essential thing we need to be monitoring,” said Neil Hammerschlag, a University of Miami marine ecologist, who was not involved with the paper.

“If you make something for the ocean, think about how to make it quieter,” he said.

Sound pollution may be simpler to address than other ocean threats, said the University of Victoria’s Juanes. “In theory, you can reduce or turn off sound immediately — it’s not like plastics or climate change, which are much harder to undo.”

Follow Christina Larson on twitter: @larsonchristina

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'Ma Rainey,' 'Minari' and Boseman lead SAG nominations

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Chadwick Boseman received two posthumous nominations from the 27th Screen Actors Guild Awards on Thursday, while the Korean American family drama "Minari" and Spike Lee's Vietnam veteran drama "Da 5 Bloods" were among the nominees for best ensemble.

The nominees, announced on Instagram Live, differed notably from the Golden Globe nominations announced the day before. While the Hollywood Foreign Press Association spurned films with largely non-white casts in its top awards, the actors guild nominated a strikingly more diverse slate of nominees for its top award, best ensemble.

Up for best ensemble are Regina King's "One Night in Miami," about a 1964 meeting of four Black icons; the August Wilson adaptation "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"; Lee Isaac Chung's "Minari"; Lee's "Da 5 Bloods" and Aaron Sorkin's 1960s courtroom drama "The Trial of the Chicago 7."

All of those films, except Sorkin's, were overlooked Wednesday by the Globes in its top award, best dramatic film. "Minari," set in Arkansas but with largely Korean dialogue, was even ruled ineligible for the category by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association.

But the SAG Awards, presented by SAG-AFTRA, are considered a far better barometer for the Academy Awards, where actors account for the largest percentage of the academy. Usually, the eventual Oscar best picture winner is first nominated for best ensemble by the SAG Awards, though "Green Book" and "The Shape of Water" were two recent exceptions. Last year, Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" won the SAG's top honor (and became the first non-English film to do so) before triumphing at the Oscars.

The Screen Actors Guild's field of ensemble nominees left out a pair of frontrunners in David Fincher's golden-age Hollywood drama "Mank" (which led the Globes with six nominations) and Chloe Zhao's Western road movie "Nomadland." The stars of each — Gary Oldman in "Mank," Frances McDormand in "Nomadland" — were both nominated by the actors guild.

Boseman, who died last August at age 43, was nominated not just for his lead performance in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," but also his supporting role in "Da 5 Bloods." With two individual nominations and two ensemble nods, Boseman's four SAG nominations in a single year tie a record — and set a new one for solely film categories.

In 2019, he memorably accepted the SAG ensemble award for "Black Panther." "We all know what it's like to be told that there is not a place for you to be featured — yet you are young, gifted and Black," Boseman said then.

Aside from Boseman and Oldman, the nominees for best male actor in a lead role were Riz Ahmed ("Sound of Metal"), Anthony Hopkins ("The Father") and Steven Yeun ("Minari").

Viola Davis, Boseman's "Ma Rainey" co-star, was nominated for best female actor in a leading role alongside McDormand, Carey Mulligan ("Promising Young Woman"), Amy Adams ("Hillbilly Elegy") and Vanessa Kirby ("Pieces of a Woman").

Nominated for best female actor in a supporting role were Maria Bakalova ("Borat Subsequent Moviefilm"), Glenn Close ("Hillbilly Elegy"), Olivia Colman ("The Father"), Yuh-Jung Young ("Minari") and Helena Zengel ("News of the World").

The other supporting nominees for male actors were Daniel Kaluuya ("Judas and the Black Messiah"), Sacha Baron Cohen ("The Trial of the Chicago 7"), Jared Leto ("The Little Things") and Leslie Odom Jr. ("One Night in Miami").

In an already recurring theme for a movie year in which many theaters were often closed due to the pandemic, Netflix led all studios. It accounted for 30 nominees in all, about triple the closest competitor.

In the television categories, "The Crown," "Schitt's Creek" and "Ozark" dominated. All of the female leads in a drama series nominees came from either "The Crown" (Gillian Anderson, Colman, Emma Corrin) or "Ozark" (Laura Linney, Julia Garner).

Both series were nominated for best TV drama ensemble, along with "Better Call Saul," "Bridgerton" and "Lovecraft Country."

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Annie Murphy, Catherine O'Hara, Eugene Levy and Daniel Levy were all nominated for "Schitt's Creek." The other nominees for best comedy series ensemble were "Dead to Me," "The Flight Attendant," "The Great" and "Ted Lasso."

The actors guild also helped atone for one of the Globes' other glaring oversights, nominating Michaela Coel for her performance in the limited series "I May Destroy You."

The SAG Awards will be held almost three months later this year, on April 4. After postponing due to the pandemic to March 14, the SAGs again moved when the Grammy Awards also took that date. The Oscars won't be held until April 28. Academy Award nominees, to be announced March 15, are still more than five weeks away.

In a first, the nominations Thursday were streamed on Instagram, with Daveed Diggs and Lily Collins serving as hosts. At first, Diggs had trouble joining his screen with Collins.

"There are so many more comments than I thought there would be," he said.

It also meant Diggs was live when Collins announced his nomination for best male actor in a television movie or limited series, for the film version of "Hamilton." He responded that the awards were "clearly rigged."

"This 'Hamilton' gift, it keeps giving," said Diggs.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Media grapples with how to cover Trump after White House

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Two weeks into Donald Trump's post-presidency, it feels like he hasn't really gone away. He's stayed in the news, defying the tradition of former presidents abruptly falling off the radar upon their successor's inauguration and despite the shutdown of his favored means of communication on Twitter.

That makes sense, given that no other former president has faced an impeachment trial. There are still fresh stories to be told about the riot by his supporters at the U.S. Capitol and questions remaining about how tightly he can maintain control of the Republican Party.

A debate in media circles over how much attention he should receive when he is out of power has been put on hold, probably for several more weeks.

"It's virtually impossible to stop talking about Trump," said Kelly McBride, National Public Radio public editor. "There's still too many questions about what he did as president."

Some had seemed ready, even eager, to turn the page.

On Nov. 8, the day after most news organizations declared Joe Biden had won the election, Psychology Today posted a plea on its website: "People in the Media: Please Stop Talking About Donald Trump."

The day after he left office, McBride wrote a column headlined, "With a new president sworn in, should journalists now ignore Trump?" She concluded no, but offered specific recommendations for news organizations to avoid going overboard.

She's since been surprised at the continued volume of Trump stories.

On Monday, The New York Times led the paper with a riveting, nearly 10,000-word account of how Trump pressed the false claim that he had won the election, leading up to his Jan. 6 rally shortly before supporters stormed the Capitol. Trump's impeachment trial begins next week.

Headlines in the opinion section on The Washington Post's website mentioned "Trump" or Trumpism" 14 times over the weekend, compared with 11 for Biden. The top news story online for The Post on Monday was about the turnover in Trump's legal team for his impeachment trial.

Stories about Trump on websites monitored by the analytics and advertising company Taboola in January got nearly four times as much traffic as stories about Biden. Trump stories had at least double the amount of traffic almost every day of the month. That continued even after the inauguration, but at a lesser degree. The social media analytics company NewsWhip said stories about Biden have been interacted with 250 million times since Jan. 20, compared with 192 million for Trump.

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Certainly, television networks that have enjoyed unprecedented ratings over the past five years don't mind a delay in their expected day of reckoning, when executives worry about what will happen without Trump to talk about.

"He's the one who gets everyone's pulse rates racing and keeps people glued to the television," said Mark Whitaker, former Newsweek editor and executive at CNN and NBC News.

NPR's McBride can't recall one story since Trump has left office that she would consider superfluous. Many are investigative, revealing important details about his administration and how he tried to overturn the election.

The Washington Post's media columnist, Margaret Sullivan, in December offered her own advice to news organizations to detach themselves from a man who dominated their pages and airtime. "Don't allow him to become a self-styled president in exile, the golf-cart version of Napoleon on Elba," she wrote.

"I was not anticipating an insurrection and impeachment," Sullivan said.

She believes her central premise — don't cover him unnecessarily — still holds.

Politico magazine's top story Friday was "The Antipope of Mar-a-Lago," comparing Trump to Benedict XIII, a 15th century figure who claimed to be the rightful pontiff after being deposed twice.

By any definition, an impeachment trial of an ex-president, possible legal troubles and the question of his influence on the GOP's future are major stories, said Blake Hounshell, managing editor for Washington and politics for Politico.

"That makes him impossible to ignore, as much as some people would like us to ignore him," he said.

News organizations that try to push Trump news aside also run the risk of inflaming his voters, many of whom are quick to believe that journalists are biased against him.

Julie Pace, Washington bureau chief for The Associated Press, said that while it would be irresponsible not to cover impeachment and the riot's aftermath, Biden is getting the bulk of the AP's attention.

"We don't cover former presidents the same way we do the president," she said. After impeachment is over, the bulk of the AP's Trump coverage will likely be handled by people covering the Republican Party.

Trump has remained out of view at his Florida resort and not given interviews; traditionally favored outlets Fox News Channel and Newsmax would not discuss whether they have asked him to appear on their air. Twitter cut off the former president's account following the Jan. 6 Capitol riot.

"You just don't feel his presence in the same way," Whitaker said. "It's not only deprived him of a way of communicating with his supporters, but news organizations don't have a built-in excuse for giving attention to everything he says."

Much of the early debate over how Trump should be treated as an ex-president centered on his tweets. As president, it was his way of keeping journalists on alert.

Without power, how much would those tweets be worth?

How long he's capable of keeping quiet publicly is anybody's guess. History suggests it's not long. Meanwhile, he's dominating many news cycles without being in control of them.

Chris Ruddy, Newsmax CEO and occasional Trump confidant, said he hasn't spoken to him since he left office. He would advise Trump to stay above politics and talk about his administration's accomplishments.

He isn't interested in making his network "Trump TV" and senses many Newsmax viewers are ready to move on.

"I don't think we've ever had a former president that has been interested in controlling the narrative after they leave," Ruddy said. "But Trump has been so different than any other president and doesn't follow the same rules."

Bill Grueskin, a journalism professor at Columbia University, wrote after the election that if journalists give Trump agenda-setting power, they would risk allowing the Biden administration to skate by in its early days without the scrutiny it deserves.

He says now that he believes there's a decent chance Trump's influence will diminish as he fades from prominence after his impeachment trial.

"Then again, I was quoted in The New York Times back in 2012 that he could never get elected presi-

dent," Grueskin said. "So my track record is dubious."

Associated Press writer Josh Cornfield and researcher Rhonda Shafner contributed to this story.

Hunter Biden's memoir 'Beautiful Things' out in April

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Hunter Biden, son of President Joe Biden and an ongoing target for conservatives, has a memoir coming out April 6.

The book is called "Beautiful Things" and will center on the younger Biden's well publicized struggles with substance abuse, according to Gallery Books, an imprint of Simon & Schuster. Acquired in the fall of 2019, "Beautiful Things" was kept under wraps even as Biden's business dealings became a fixation of then-President Donald Trump and others during the election and his finances a matter of investigation by the Justice Department.

"Beautiful Things" was circulated among several authors and includes advance praise from Stephen King, Dave Eggers and Anne Lamott.

"In his harrowing and compulsively readable memoir, Hunter Biden proves again that anybody — even the son of a United States President — can take a ride on the pink horse down nightmare alley," King writes in his blurb. "Biden remembers it all and tells it all with a bravery that is both heartbreaking and quite gorgeous. He starts with a question: Where's Hunter? The answer is he's in this book, the good, the bad, and the beautiful."

In a snippet released by Gallery, Biden writes in his book, "I come from a family forged by tragedies and bound by a remarkable, unbreakable love."

The president and first lady released a statement Thursday saying, "We admire our son Hunter's strength and courage to talk openly about his addiction so that others might see themselves in his journey and find hope."

During one of last fall's presidential debates, Joe Biden defended his son from attacks by Trump.

"My son, like a lot of people, like a lot of people you know at home, had a drug problem," the Democratic candidate said. "He's overtaken it. He's fixed it. He's worked on it, and I'm proud of him. I'm proud of my son."

Hunter Biden, who turned 51 Thursday, is the oldest surviving child of the president, who lost his first wife and 1-year-old daughter, Naomi, in a 1972 car accident, and son Beau Biden to brain cancer in 2015. The title of Hunter's book refers to an expression he and his brother would use with each other after Beau's diagnosis, meant to emphasize what was important in life.

Hunter Biden is a lawyer and former lobbyist whose work helped lead to the first impeachment of Trump. Biden joined the board of the Ukrainian gas company Burisma in 2014, around the time his father, then U.S. vice president, was helping conduct the Obama administration's foreign policy in that region. Trump and others have insisted that Biden was exploiting his father's name, and they raised unsubstantiated charges of corruption. The House of Representatives voted to impeach Trump in 2019 after learning that he had pressured Ukraine's president to announce it was investigating the Bidens. Trump was acquitted by the Senate.

Last December, Hunter Biden confirmed that the Justice Department was looking into his tax affairs, and The Associated Press subsequently reported that he had received a subpoena asking about his interaction with numerous business entities. Though Trump made clear publicly that he wanted a special counsel to handle the investigation, then-Attorney General William Barr did not appoint one. Biden has denied any wrongdoing.

Financial terms for "Beautiful Things," which was written in collaboration with the author and journalist Drew Jubera, were not disclosed. Biden and his publisher likely will face criticism from Republicans for his memoir, although books by presidential family members are nothing new. During Trump's presidency, son Donald Trump Jr. released two books, "Triggered" and "Liberal Privilege."

President Biden has pledged that, unlike during the Trump administration, no family members would work in the White House. The book was in the works before he became the Democratic frontrunner in the presidential campaign.

New York publishers often take on authors with a wide range of political viewpoints, and Simon & Schuster has released books by Trump and Sean Hannity, along with such anti-Trump bestsellers as former National Security Advisor John Bolton's "The Room Where It Happened" and presidential niece Mary Trump's "Too Much and Never Enough."

The publisher signed up a book last fall by a leading Trump supporter in Washington, Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, but dropped it in the wake of Hawley's support for the Jan. 6 protest that led to the violent siege of the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters who wrongly believed that the president had been reelected.

Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire contributed reporting

US unemployment claims fall to 779,000 but job cuts grind on

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits declined to 779,000 last week, a still-historically high total that shows that a sizable number of people keep losing jobs to the viral pandemic.

Last week's total, the third straight, declined from 812,000 the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday. It left the weekly figure at its lowest point in two months but nevertheless elevated: Before the virus erupted in the United States in March, weekly applications for jobless aid had never topped 700,000, even during the Great Recession.

Thursday's report reflects a U.S. job market that is still suffering from the pandemic, with hiring having weakened for six straight months. It is a key reason why President Joe Biden is pushing Congress to enact a \$1.9 trillion economic rescue program, on top of a \$900 billion federal aid package that was approved late last year.

The decline in applications for unemployment aid over the past few weeks suggests that layoffs have eased slightly as several states have loosened restrictions on restaurants, bars and other service firms, causing these businesses to retain workers.

And the pace of new confirmed viral infections is slowing, a trend that has lowered hospitalizations across the country. Average daily reported cases have fallen 30% in the past week to about 140,000 — one-half the peak level of a month ago.

Even so, the persistence of elevated layoffs remains a cause for concern, economists say.

"Total initial claims fell, but the magnitude is still a huge problem," said AnnElizabeth Konkel, an economist for Indeed.com, the job postings website. "We continue to see the effect of the coronavirus on the labor market. At no point has it let up."

In January, applications for jobless benefits had accelerated, but that surge might have been driven up, at least in part, by laid-off workers re-applying for benefits after two federal extended programs expired late last year. Those programs were belatedly renewed on Dec. 27, after former President Donald Trump signed the \$900 billion stimulus package into law, one day after the programs had expired.

All told, 17.8 million people were receiving unemployment benefits in the week that ended Jan. 16, the latest period for which data are available. That's down from 18.3 million from the week before.

Others have tried but failed to renew their benefits. One is Alfrieda Hylton, who has struggled for months to regain her unemployment aid, which ran out in September. She lives in Capitol Heights, Maryland, but received jobless aid from the District of Columbia, where she worked for 17 years as an administrator at Howard University and three other years at a law firm.

She said she was told by the district to apply for benefits in Virginia, where she worked most recently in a six-month temporary job. But Virginia has referred her requests for aid back to D.C. Hylton, 64, can't get anyone on the phone in Virginia; its automated phone system typically hangs up after she goes through

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all its prompts.

"It's been very frustrating," she said. "I've exhausted my retirement money. If nothing happens soon, I'm going to be homeless."

Amid the hardships for people like Hylton and the generally dim picture of the economy, some hopeful signs have emerged this week. Auto sales rose solidly in January, and a gauge of business growth in the service sector picked up. So did spending on home construction.

That doesn't mean a rebound is near in the job market, which typically lags behind recoveries in the broader economy. Employers have been hesitant to hire at a time when consumer spending has faltered.

The government's jobs report for January, to be released Friday, is expected to show a modest hiring gain of perhaps 100,000, according to data provider FactSet. The unemployment rate is forecast to remain stuck at 6.7% for a third straight month.

An increase in hiring would represent a welcome improvement over December, when employers cut jobs for the first time since April. Yet with the economy still down nearly 10 million jobs from its level before March, a gain of that modest size would provide little benefit for most of the unemployed.

Once vaccinations become more widely distributed and administered in the coming months, economists expect growth and hiring to accelerate at a sustained clip, particularly if Congress provides significantly more aid to households, small businesses and states and cities. Some analysts predict that under those circumstances, economic growth could surpass 6% for 2021.

Consumer spending did pick up in January, according to debit and credit card spending tracked by Bank of America, after \$600 checks were distributed to most adults from last year's aid package. Michelle Meyer, U.S. economist at Bank of America, estimates that those checks are being spent faster than the \$1,200 payments that were distributed last spring.

Still, Americans are saving the bulk of the payments, Meyer said in a research note. That growing pool of savings could help fuel increased consumer spending once the pandemic is brought under control.

At the same time, small businesses struggled through most of January and likely held back overall hiring last month, according to Homebase, a provider of work scheduling systems to small firms. Homebase said the proportion of its clients that were closed, mostly because of government restrictions, rose from December to January, and the number of employees working declined.

Although last year's financial support package extended federal unemployment programs and provided \$300 in extra weekly jobless aid, many states have yet to distribute the money, according to a report this week from the Century Foundation. The report found that just 38 states were paying benefits under a federal extended aid program as of Jan. 30. Just 40 states were issuing checks under a separate jobless aid program for freelancers and the self-employed.

Biden, at prayer breakfast, calls out 'political extremism'

By ELANA SCHOR and WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday called for a confrontation of the "political extremism" that inspired the U.S. Capitol riot and appealed for collective strength during such turbulent times in remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, a Washington tradition that asks political combatants to set aside their differences for one morning.

The breakfast has sparked controversy in the past, particularly when President Donald Trump used last year's installment to slam his political opponents and question their faith. Some liberals have viewed the event warily because of the conservative faith-based group that is behind it.

Still, Biden campaigned for the White House as someone who could unify Americans, and the breakfast gave the nation's second Catholic president a chance to talk about his vision of faith as a force for good.

"For so many in our nation, this is a dark, dark time," Biden told those watching the event. "So where do we turn? Faith."

Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., said the event is "an inclusive and positive" one that "recognizes the teachings of Jesus but is not limited to Christianity."

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The breakfast is moving forward at a time when the nation's capital is facing a series of historic crises. Biden is struggling to win significant support from congressional Republicans for a coronavirus response package, raising the likelihood that he will rely only on Democrats to pass the legislation.

Many in Washington are still navigating the aftermath of the deadly insurrection at the U.S. Capitol last month, which Biden alluded to in his remarks Thursday, referencing the "political extremism" that propelled the siege. Trump faces an unprecedented second impeachment trial in the Senate next week over his role in inciting the riot.

Biden's message on Thursday marked his latest call to return Washington to more traditional footing after four years of Trump's aggressive style. During the 2020 breakfast, Trump singled out Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Republican Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, who had voted to convict the president during his first impeachment trial. Trump even held up a newspaper with a headline reading "ACQUITTED" over his own picture.

Every president has attended the breakfast since Dwight D. Eisenhower made his first appearance in 1953. The event went entirely virtual this year because of the coronavirus pandemic, with Biden and all other speakers appearing via taped remarks. Four living former presidents sent messages to the breakfast, with three speaking on tape while Coons read a message from former President Jimmy Carter — making Trump's absence conspicuous.

South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, a GOP co-chair of this year's breakfast, pointed to regular faith-based gatherings on Capitol Hill that draw senators from both ends of the ideological spectrum as a model for the event. "We don't see eye to eye philosophically, politically, but we do embrace each other as brothers of faith," Scott, who also offered virtual remarks at the breakfast, said in an interview.

The breakfast has drawn pushback from gay and civil rights activists since President Barack Obama's administration, with much of the opposition focused on the Fellowship Foundation, the conservative faith-based organization that has long supported the event. Religious liberals mounted a protest outside Trump's first appearance in 2017, criticizing his limits on refugee admissions to the U.S., and a Russian gun rights activist convicted of acting as an unregistered foreign agent attended the breakfast twice during his administration.

Norman Solomon, co-founder and national director of the progressive activist group RootsAction, warned Biden not to "reach across any aisle to bigotry."

"We don't need any unity with bigotry," Solomon said. "I fear a subtext of this engagement is, 'Can't we all get along.' But that's not appropriate in this case given the well-known right-wing and anti-gay background of the event's sponsors."

Solomon said Democratic presidents have continued a tradition of attending an event where their Republican counterparts often felt more comfortable because they feared being labeled as "anti-religious or nonreligious." He said that Biden, a devout Catholic who attends Mass every week, could better send a unifying message by skipping the event and instead attending one that is truly bipartisan.

"God knows there are many religious leaders and gatherings that are devout and affirm human equality," he said. "This isn't one of them."

Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, agreed that "there are far better ways" than the breakfast for Biden to connect with people on the basis of shared spiritual beliefs.

"We would love to work with the administration to figure out a way to change the sponsorship of an event like this and to make it a place for Americans of all different religious beliefs," Laser said.

Yet Democratic leaders, aware of Biden's devout Catholic faith and calls for healing, have largely refrained from public comment on the event this year. Pelosi, D-Calif., taped her own message to the event on Thursday morning.

Both Laser and Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, a fellow in the faith initiative at the liberal Center for American Progress think tank, pointed to the Christian symbolism seen during last month's Capitol riot as an opening for Biden to offer pluralistic, open language about faith going forward.

"I hope President Biden recognizes we're in a new moment," Graves-Fitzsimmons said, "and that the

Christian nationalism threat is a threat to both the sacred religious pluralism of the U.S. and to Christianity.”

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Pledge drive urges funding racially diverse climate efforts

By KAT STAFFORD Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Ashindi Maxton was distraught as she toured neighborhoods in Detroit’s 48217 ZIP code and met residents who live in one of the most polluted communities in Michigan.

They live against the backdrop of heavy industrial sites that have long been a major concern in the nation’s largest Black-majority city, which has some of the country’s highest asthma rates among children and a lengthy history of environmental concerns.

Residents shared stories of loved ones who grew sick after living in close proximity to the industrial sites, and also noted it’s often hard to breathe because of a thick, chemical stench that is most profound in the summer.

It was a defining moment for Maxton, co-founder of the Donors of Color Network, a philanthropic group dedicated to racial equity and funding environmental projects and other racial justice movements nationwide.

“Most of the people I know have more than one illness,” said 68-year-old Emma Lockridge, who has lived near an oil refinery for more than three decades and suffers from a rare blood cancer. Her brother, sister, mother and father all died from cancers or disease they blame on environmental toxins.

“It just makes me want to cry. The environmental impact on our lives, no one should be living like this. We’ve got to figure out a better way,” Lockridge told The Associated Press.

It’s because of tragedies like this that the Donors of Color Network launched a Climate Funders Justice Pledge Thursday, challenging the nation’s climate philanthropists to shift 30% of their donations toward environmental efforts led by Black, Indigenous, Latino and other people of color.

“People say we have 10 years to solve the climate crisis but people of color are living it right now,” Maxton said. “Organizations led by people of color are chronically underfunded and there is a ... vibrant set of leaders and organizations that people can fund.”

While the fight against climate change and for environmental justice has benefited in recent years from a growing push by politicians and activists, research shows funding isn’t spread equitably to communities of color, which are often hit hardest.

A study last year by the Tishman Environment and Design Center at The New School found that between 2016 and 2017, 12 national environmental grant makers awarded \$1.34 billion to organizations in the Gulf and Midwest regions, but of that, just \$18 million — 1.3% — was awarded to groups dedicated to environmental justice.

“What we’re asking for is everyone to collectively acknowledge that 1.3% is a systemic failure,” Maxton said. “We haven’t met anyone ... who thinks that is a sign of a healthy or winning climate movement.”

By setting a 30% goal, “you have a metric to strive for,” Maxton added. “We felt it was really important for people to set a baseline of what racial equity should look like when it lands in a budget. It should show that you are investing in the communities that are most impacted by the climate crisis.”

But there are barriers. New School professor Ana Baptista, who led the Tishman study, said several foundations told her they were concerned smaller organizations led by people of color didn’t have the infrastructure to handle a large donation.

But Baptista also found that other groups openly acknowledged longstanding structural racism and bias within the philanthropy sector that has led to environmental groups led by people of color being under-resourced and underrepresented in decision-making, with most funding going toward white-led efforts.

“I think there’s definitely a great opportunity right now, with the increased awareness and re-centering of racial equity and racial justice within philanthropy, and an important moment of reckoning that we should

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use to hold these foundations accountable," Baptista said.

"Now is where the rubber meets the road and it's a moment to put your money where your mouth is."

The centerpiece of the pledge drive is to increase the share of funding to 30% over the next two years to groups with boards and senior staff that are at least half people of color, and whose work is focused on the most environmentally impacted communities.

As a starting point, funders who take the pledge commit to disclosing within one month the percentage of their climate giving that is currently directed to such groups.

The pledge drive is being supported by some of the nation's top environmental groups led by people of color and six top funders, including The Kresge Foundation, which has already committed to the 30% goal.

Kresge's pledge comes after a \$30 million grant announced last year to support nearly 60 racial justice and community-led efforts across the nation. Separately, they've increased funding to climate justice groups led by people of color from about 5%-7% in 2012 to more than 30% in 2019 and 2020.

"Equity is obviously a central concern for us because of how structural racism is a barrier of opportunity," said Lois DeBacker, managing director of The Kresge Foundation's Environment Program. "If we're going to win on climate change in this country, the climate movement needs to look like all of the country. It does, but it hasn't been equally funded."

The pledge drive comes at an opportune time. President Joe Biden signed sweeping executive orders last month to transform the nation's heavily fossil fuel-powered economy into a clean-burning one, while also pledging to make environmental justice central to the White House's efforts to fight climate change. He signed an order to establish an environmental justice council and directed the government to spend 40% of clean energy efforts in disadvantaged communities that bear the brunt of pollution.

It also comes on the heels of proposed legislation by Democratic lawmakers Rep. Cori Bush and Sens. Edward Markey and Tammy Duckworth that would create a federal system to comprehensively identify the demographic factors, environmental burdens, socioeconomic conditions and public health concerns that are related to environmental justice.

Dallas Goldtooth, an organizer with Keep It in the Ground, a campaign dedicated to keeping the world's remaining fossil fuels underground, and a member of the Indigenous Environmental Network, said the pledge drive is crucial.

"It is no surprise and it has been no surprise for generations that the communities that are dealing with the highest instances of disease and sickness associated with toxic pollution are communities of color," Goldtooth said.

"It's not about a short-term investment to address immediate concerns, it's about shifting the entire landscape to address the generations of destruction and address the ways in which Black, brown and Indigenous communities have carried America's addiction to fossil fuels and toxic pollution," he said.

The NAACP launched its own Environmental and Climate Justice Network in 2009 after it became clear Black communities were being impacted hard, and is supporting the climate pledge drive.

"It's horrific the number of ways that we are disproportionately impacted," said the program's director, Jacqui Patterson, noting in particular Hurricane Katrina, which killed more than 1,800 people in and around New Orleans. "We are supporting it because we are on the front lines of these challenges."

For Mark Magaña, founding president and CEO of GreenLatinos, the fight is personal. His organization has worked for years to spread awareness and shed light on how Latino communities have been hurt by climate change and environmental issues.

Magaña said many Latino Americans live in areas devastated by natural disasters made more extreme because of climate change, from wildfires in California, to hurricanes in Texas and Puerto Rico, and flooding in Florida.

"The front-line communities need to be able to be heard," Magaña said. "When you're working on pennies on the dollar relative to what mainstream environmental leaders get ... it is unbelievable and unacceptable."

"That's why this pledge is important," he said. "It puts the number where it needs to be as a floor to start with so we can really move toward equity and justice."

Stafford is an investigative reporter on The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity team. Follow her on Twitter at https://twitter.com/kat__stafford.

Chiefs under pressure to ditch the tomahawk chop celebration

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Pressure is mounting for the Super Bowl-bound Kansas City Chiefs to abandon a popular tradition in which fans break into a "war chant" while making a chopping hand motion designed to mimic the Native American tomahawk.

Local groups have long argued that the team's chop tradition and even its name itself are derogatory to American Indians, yet the national attention focused for years on the Washington football team's use of the name Redskins and the cartoonish Chief Wahoo logo, long the emblem for the Cleveland Indians baseball team. But in the past year, those teams have decided to ditch their Native American-themed monikers, and the defending champion Chiefs are generating more attention due to a second consecutive appearance on the sport's biggest stage.

A coalition of Native American groups has put up billboards in the Kansas City area to protest the tomahawk chop and Chiefs' name. A protest is planned outside Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, site of Sunday's game against the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, and the coalition has hired a plane to fly around the area. A few thousand people have signed onto two online petitions, one of them started by a fourth-grader.

The Chiefs made some changes in the fall, barring headdresses and war paint and making a subtle alteration to the chop, with cheerleaders using a closed fist instead of an open palm to signal the beating of a drum.

But Gaylene Crouser, executive director of the Kansas City Indian Center, found the tweak to be laughable.

"They think that that somehow helps, and they are still playing that ridiculous Hollywood Indian song, which is such a stereotypical Indian song from like old Cowboy movies or something. I don't know how they feel that that made any difference at all," she said. "And it's not like their fans are doing it any different either."

Chiefs president Mark Donovan said barring face paint and headdresses from its stadium was a "big step."

"You are going to have opinions on all sides on what we should and shouldn't do," he added. "We're going to continue to have those discussions. We're going to continue to make changes going forward, and hopefully changes that do what we hope, which is respect and honor Native American heritage while celebrating the fan experience."

But the changes aren't nearly enough for the St. Petersburg-based Florida Indigenous Rights and Environmental Equality, which plans to protest near the stadium Sunday ahead of the kickoff, singing and holding signs.

Group co-founder Alicia Norris described the chop as "extremely disrespectful," saying it "conjures up images of Native Americans, indigenous people as savages."

"Now the team wants to backtrack and say we are being culturally appropriate and we are being respectful of indigenous people by saying no headdresses," she said. "And that is a good start, but the fans are still operating as if it is an indigenous-type atmosphere because you are still called the Chiefs. And you can still do this movement that looks like a tomahawk chop, but we are going to call it a drum beat instead. It is kind of silly. Just change it."

Fans of the Chiefs long ago adopted the chanting and arm movement symbolizing the brandishing of a tomahawk that began at Florida State University in the 1980s.

"When we are down it is a rally cry," said Kile Chaney, a 42-year-old stone mason from Harrisonville, Missouri. "Just to hear all the fans doing the tomahawk chop and hear it echo through the corridors, it is a beautiful noise that we make here."

Aaron Bien, a 61-year-old automotive repair and body shop owner from Hillsdale, Kansas, described it

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as no different than any cheer.

"It is the soul. It is the lifeblood," said Bien, who had been a Chiefs season ticket holder for 15 years before the pandemic limited seating capacity in the stadium this season.

He said the chop has "nothing to do with Native Americans," noting that the origin of the Chiefs nickname may have more to do with the mayor who helped lure the franchise from Dallas in 1963.

Mayor H. Roe Bartle was a large man known as "The Chief" for his many years of leadership in the Boy Scouts. Team owner Lamar Hunt reportedly named the team the Chiefs in honor of Bartle.

Vincent Schilling, associate editor of Indian Country Today, said that doesn't make it any better. He noted that, though Bartle was white, he started a Scouting society called the "Mic-O-Say Tribe," which remains active and continues to use Native American attire and language. Young participants are "braves," and the top leader is the "chief."

"He was called Chief because he played Indian and falsely taught Boy Scouts how to dress up as Native Americans," said Schilling, a member of the St. Regis Mohawk Tribe. "Everyone dressed up like Indians going to those games, perpetuating a horrible cultural stereotype for decades."

He called the changes the team has made to the chop "insulting" and "a preposterous gesture with a lack of cultural responsibility."

AP Pro Football Writer Dave Skretta contributed.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Feb. 5, the 36th day of 2021. There are 329 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 5, 2020, the Senate voted to acquit President Donald Trump, bringing to a close the third presidential trial in American history, though a majority of senators expressed unease with Trump's pressure campaign on Ukraine that resulted in the two articles of impeachment. Just one Republican, Mitt Romney of Utah, broke with the GOP and voted to convict.

On this date:

In 1631, the founder of Rhode Island, Roger Williams, and his wife, Mary, arrived in Boston from England.

In 1811, George, the Prince of Wales, was named Prince Regent due to the mental illness of his father, Britain's King George III.

In 1917, Mexico's present constitution was adopted by the Constitutional Convention in Santiago de Queretaro. The U.S. Congress passed, over President Woodrow Wilson's veto, an act severely curtailing Asian immigration.

In 1918, during World War I, the Cunard liner SS Tuscania, which was transporting about 2,000 American troops to Europe, was torpedoed by a German U-boat in the Irish Sea with the loss of more than 200 people.

In 1922, the first edition of Reader's Digest was published.

In 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt proposed increasing the number of U.S. Supreme Court justices; the proposal, which failed in Congress, drew accusations that Roosevelt was attempting to "pack" the nation's highest court.

In 1971, Apollo 14 astronauts Alan Shepard and Edgar Mitchell stepped onto the surface of the moon in the first of two lunar excursions.

In 1983, former Nazi Gestapo official Klaus Barbie, expelled from Bolivia, was brought to Lyon (lee-OHN'), France, to stand trial. (He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison -- he died in 1991.)

In 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act, granting workers up to 12 weeks unpaid leave for family emergencies.

In 1994, white separatist Byron De La Beckwith was convicted in Jackson, Mississippi, of murdering civil

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rights leader Medgar Evers in 1963, and was immediately sentenced to life in prison. (Beckwith died Jan. 21, 2001 at age 80.)

In 2001, four disciples of Osama bin Laden went on trial in New York in the 1998 bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa. (The four were convicted and sentenced to life in prison without parole.)

In 2008, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, a guru to the Beatles who introduced the West to transcendental meditation, died at his home in the Dutch town of Vlodrop; he was believed to be about 90.

Ten years ago: The leadership of Egypt's ruling party stepped down as the military figures spearheading the transition tried to placate protesters without giving them the one resignation they were demanding, that of President Hosni Mubarak. Marshall Faulk and Deion Sanders led a class of seven voted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame; joining them were Shannon Sharpe, Richard Dent, Ed Sabol, Les Richter and Chris Hanburger.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama used a new jobs report to continue his victory lap on the economy, declaring the U.S. had "the strongest, most durable economy in the world." (The president spoke shortly after the Labor Department announced that U.S. employers added 151,000 jobs in January, pushing the unemployment rate to 4.9 percent from 5 percent.)

One year ago: With white sheets covering them, people infected with the new coronavirus were led off of a Japanese cruise ship in the port city of Yokohama, while the rest of the 3,700 people on board faced a two-week quarantine in their cabins. Actor Kirk Douglas, star of "Spartacus" and dozens of other films, died at the age of 103.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Stuart Damon is 84. Tony-winning playwright John Guare (gwayr) is 83. Financial writer Jane Bryant Quinn is 82. Actor David Selby is 80. Singer-songwriter Barrett Strong is 80. Football Hall of Famer Roger Staubach is 79. Movie director Michael Mann is 78. Rock singer Al Kooper is 77. Actor Charlotte Rampling is 75. Racing Hall of Famer Darrell Waltrip is 74. Actor Barbara Hershey is 73. Actor Christopher Guest is 73. Actor Tom Wilkinson is 73. Actor-comedian Tim Meadows is 60. Actor Jennifer Jason Leigh is 59. Actor Laura Linney is 57. Rock musician Duff McKagan (Velvet Revolver) is 57. World Golf Hall of Famer Jose Maria Olazabal is 55. Actor-comedian Chris Parnell is 54. Rock singer Chris Barron (Spin Doctors) is 53. Singer Bobby Brown is 52. Actor Michael Sheen is 52. Actor David Chisum is 51. Country singer Sara Evans is 50. Country singer Tyler Farr is 37. Neo-soul musician Mark Shusterman (Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats) is 36. Actor-singer Darren Criss is 34. Actor Alex Brightman is 34. Actor Henry Golding is 34. Rock musician Kyle Simmons (Bastille) is 33. Actor Jeremy Sumpter is 32. Drummer Graham Sierota (Echosmith) is 22.

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