

Groton Daily Independent

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Upcoming Schedule

Thursday, Feb. 25: GBB Region

Thursday-Saturday: State Wrestling Tournament in Rapid City.

Friday, Feb. 26

Boys Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV (Gordon & Dorene Nelson) 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

Thank You!

A special Thank you to all who remember our 60th Anniversary with cards, letters, gifts and calls. It was greatly appreciated!
Over and Darlene Finnesand



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Helping Counties And Relieving Property Tax Pressure



**Rep. Drew
Dennert**

County government is required by state law to provide for critical local government needs, including law enforcement, courthouses, jails, and infrastructure like roads & bridges.

Today, however, they have only one funding source with which to meet these obligations: Property taxes. On top of this, property taxes are also required to cover a large portion of their local school district's budget.

With the increasing costs for schools, roads, and law enforcement, it is easy to see why property owners feel squeezed from every direction. I have introduced HB 1230 as one potential solution. This bill would dedicate a small portion of the state sales tax revenue from each county to a fund that could be utilized by counties solely for infrastructure projects, and reduce the need for them to add additional levies on property owners to repair roads, buildings, or build a jail.

Not all the expenses incurred by county government are related to the residents actually living in the county, especially when it comes to law enforcement and roads. My proposal seeks to recognize that by taking a very small portion of the sales tax revenue and dedicating it to a fund that can be used by the counties to meet their infrastructure and law enforcement obligations.

It would divert 0.05% of state sales tax revenue to the fund, and grow to 0.25% over a five-year period. This would reduce the state government's overall tax revenue slightly, instead dedicating it to infrastructure projects at a local level. The county would then have the option, by a majority vote of the commission, to access these funds for an infrastructure project. That decision would be referable by the voters in the county if they did not feel the project was appropriate. If a county did not currently have a need for projects, they could leave the money in the fund for it to be invested and grow until a future date.

Revenues are a little higher than expected this year, so I felt this was a good year to consider an out-of-the-box solution that would reduce pressure on property tax payers and help counties meet their obligations. Ultimately the Legislature will have to consider all the competing uses of sales tax revenues and decide their priorities. The bill had a hearing last week in the Taxation Committee, and sent by unanimous vote to the Appropriations Committee to be considered alongside other revenue and spending bills.

I would like to hear your thoughts on this bill or any other solutions you have for local property tax. Please contact me on my website, www.drewdennert.com

Rep. Drew Dennert

Drew.Dennert@sdlegislature.gov

Governor Noem Signs Flexibility for Healthcare Professionals to Live and Work into Law

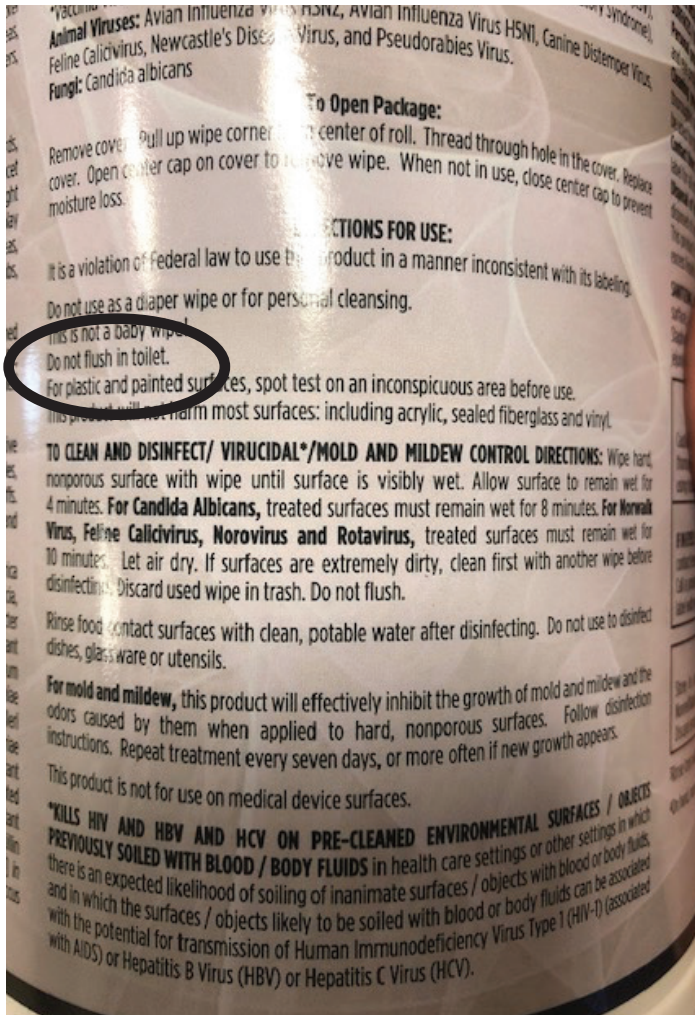
PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem signed [House Bill 1077](#) into law, which makes it easier for healthcare professionals to live and work in South Dakota.

“South Dakota is Open for Business, and freedom-loving Americans from around the country are moving to here to share in our way of life,” said Governor Noem. “We’re recognizing the good work that these folks did in other states and welcome them to continue their work by serving South Dakotans. By addressing healthcare workforce shortages, we can increase options and give more flexibility to the people of our state.”

Governor Noem has signed seventy-six bills into law this legislative session.

Are you guilty of using the toilet as a trashcan?

By Nick Jackson, South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems



As you can see on the container of wipes, it specifically states to not flush in the toilet.

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

are found to be the cause of the problem. People don't think about this until one day they have a huge clog or septic tank problem and must spend lots of money to fix it.

What Not to Flush

To help you save embarrassment, thousands of dollars in repairs, and avoid polluting the environment, pay attention to this list of things that you must never, EVER, flush down the toilet:

"Flushable" Wipes • Baby Wipes • Cleaning Wipes • Paper Towels • Tissues

These so-called "flushable wipes" are becoming increasingly popular nowadays. They are also frequently causing clogs and backups in sewage collection pipes and wastewater treatment equipment. Although some of these brands might say they are flushable on the box, DO NOT FLUSH them down your toilet. If

While traveling across the state making visits, I had stopped into several towns and facilities asking this same question: What are the most troublesome issues you have experience within your wastewater collection or treatment system? Surprisingly the answer wasn't what I thought – you know, aging infrastructure or treatment facilities. No, it was what goes down the toilet and into the wastewater collection system.

Although the things that you may flush down the toilet may escape your home's plumbing, the sewage blockages that occur in the larger pipes affect many more people than just your family. If what you do flush down the toilet does not make it out of your home's plumbing, the damage it can cause can be costly.

Backed-up drains and sewers often mean that the sanitary systems require rodding or jetting. What's usually the culprit? Everything that isn't supposed to go down the toilet! These backups can also affect other sanitary equipment such as lift stations, bar screens, grinders, pumps, etc. which can become worn out prematurely because of what goes down the toilet.

We know it is tempting to flush nearly anything down the toilet. It's like a black hole; just dump, flush, and it's gone – out of sight out of mind. To do this, however, is to risk damaging septic tanks, wastewater collection system, and wastewater treatment centers, as well as causing toxic environmental pollution and the embarrassment that comes if you

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you use these products, dispose of them in a trash can.

The other paper products (paper towels and tissues) are designed to stay together when wet and absorb moisture and don't dissolve quickly in water.

Disposable Diapers • Feminine Hygiene Products

Just because there is human waste inside does not mean that they are ok to flush. Baby and adult diapers, as well as feminine hygiene products, are made to absorb and expand when they come in contact with liquids – not break apart in it. Dispose of all these items in the trash, not the toilet.

Fats • Oils • Cooking Grease

Grease should never be poured down any drain, period. It may look like a liquid that can easily be dumped down a drain, but when it cools, it will solidify and clog up your pipes and cause blockages within the collection system. Collect your grease in a container and throw it in the trash.

Hair • Dental Floss • Rubber Bands • String

Most of these items are not biodegradable and can cause severe clogs and environmental damage. Hair, for one, will never dissolve in water – it floats and easily gets caught on its way out into the collection system, snagging whatever comes its way.

Medications

Unused drugs, pills or pharmaceuticals, medical salves, and ointments, should never be flushed! Although some believe this to be a safe way to dispose of these things, it is not. Toilet water cannot destroy the active ingredients in medicines. The wastewater treatment facilities are not designed to remove various chemicals found in drugs, and that means they are not removed and get pumped back into creeks, rivers or groundwater aquifers. These chemicals are dangerous to people, animals, aquatic life and the environment.

Food

When disposing of leftover food, never flush it down the toilet. Some may argue that food is biodegradable, and it is, but it can lodge in plumbing and create one powerful clog.

Cleansers • Stains • Solvents • Thinners • Pesticides • Fertilizers • Automotive Products

If it is not meant to clean the toilet, don't flush it down. Combinations of these can be acidic, caustic, poisonous fumes or even cause explosions.

Animal Excrement • Cat Litter

Some product say their cat litter is flushable, but with newer water saving toilets, there is just not enough water to keep the litter moving within the collection system which can cause blockage. Dried animal feces gets dehydrated and becomes hard as a rock and may not dissolve – which can get caught somewhere in the collection system.

The list can go on and on, and it's time to take responsibility for using toilets as they were originally intended. What does that leave? Not much! Human excrement and regular toilet paper are the only things you should flush down your toilet.

Even the very thick and plush toilet paper can sometimes be tough to break down. A courtesy flush is occasionally necessary to avoid clogging the drain. We love Charmin Ultra too, but be conservative with your toilet paper use.

Please think twice about flushing these everyday items down the toilet, not only will it save you from causing blockages, but will also keep your community's wastewater system in good working order.

#366 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Some spikes today; could just be Tuesday stuff after a lowish weekend. I won't worry yet. We had 72,500 new case reports today, which brings our total to 28,276,300, which is 0.3% more than yesterday. Hospitalizations are still going the right direction, today down to 55,403. And we have lost 502,341 lives, which is 0.5% more than yesterday's total. There were 2330 deaths reported today.

First, the bad news: We have a new variant, and none of us is going to like it. It's probably been around a while, but our abysmal genomic surveillance has been missing it until fairly recently. This one has been designated B.1.427/B.1.429 and is sure to become known as the California variant. It appears to have arisen in—big surprise, given the name—California. Looks like it probably emerged mid-year last year, although it hit the radar screen only at the beginning of the year when it turned up by accident during a search for cases of B.1.1.7 (UK). It probably began really moving through the community around September 1 and seems to have increased to where it is involved in around half of cases in the state. That number is expected to rise to 90% of the state's cases by the end of March. That's a pretty quick take-over, which is worrisome. On the other hand, while it has also shown up in 45 other states and several countries, California appears to be the only place where it's really taken off; I'm not sure what to make of that. Some experts think it may have become so prevalent in California due to superspreading events and so perhaps it's not as big a concern as B.1.1.7. There is a lot we don't know yet, but some folks are studying it.

A collaborative research effort among the University of California San Francisco, San Francisco County, and the state of California was reported today. There should be a paper available in preprint later in the week, at which point I can update on anything further of interest; but we do have some summary information now—and it may not be great. This variant has three mutations in the spike protein, the virus's primary attachment point for human cells; one of them, L452R, affects the receptor binding domain (RBD), something we've discussed before. It appears L452R helps the virus bind more tightly to cells, which will make it more successful at entering them. This mutation is something new; we haven't seen it in other variants of interest. The mutation doesn't only make the virus more successful at infecting cells; it may also make it more damaging—more than 40% better at infecting lung cells and more than three times more infectious from preliminary findings. Viral loads are approximately doubled, which may mean each infected person is likely to infect more other people. What's more, it is also more resistant to antibodies, whether those resulting from natural infection or those produced in response to vaccination. We need to know a whole lot more about it, but we can hope the variant does not hit the trifecta for viral variants—better at transmitting, better at damaging cells, and better at evading antibodies.

So where does that leave us? This is concerning, but all is not lost. The thinking seems to be that this one isn't as resistant to antibodies as B.1.351 (South Africa). In the study, a look at a relatively small sample of just 324 patients at UCSF, patients infected with this variant were more likely to be admitted to the ICU and many times more likely to die; the trick is we can't tell whether this higher mortality is because the variant is more lethal or hospitals were simply so overwhelmed at the time because of its higher transmissibility. It looks as though these researchers are going to attribute some of the state's last big surge to the characteristics of this variant; it would help to explain why California was so hard-hit over the past few months despite fairly rigorous mitigation measures. So there is much we don't know. What we do know is that we didn't need a widespread home-grown variant; this could mean we have less time than we thought to get folks vaccinated without another surge.

What do we do about this? What we've been doing, only more and better. It grows ever more critical to slow these things down—reduce transmissions to give the vaccination effort time to bear fruit. We are running out of time to get ahead of these variants; we simply must not let up or relax our vigilance. There is a great deal at stake here, and we have the power to help ourselves if only we will do it.

We discussed a few days ago Pfizer/BioNTech's request for a modified emergency use authorization (EUA) for their vaccine to permit storage at regular freezer temperatures instead of at the ultra-low temperatures on the current EUA. It appears that change is going to be approved, which makes the logistics of getting

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this vaccine distributed far easier. Every little bit helps.

A matter for some concern going forward would be the possibility that this variant and B.1.1.7 (UK), which we've been worried about sweeping across the country, each with its separate mutations, would infect the same host and engage in genetic recombination—swapping of genetic material. That happens, there's a chance we get something new with the worst qualities of each. This is how we could see some new and really scary variant. No one wants that; trust me on this.

So it seems, while we were busy looking at B.1.1.7, this guy was infiltrating our population more or less unnoticed. Dr. Charles Chiu, who led the team from USCF in the analysis, told the Los Angeles Times, "The devil is already here. I wish it were different. But the science is the science."

Something weird turned up back in September, a newborn baby in the District of Columbia with a severe case of Covid-19. Children generally have only minor symptoms, if any, and even those who are hospitalized tend not to be very seriously ill. This kid was different: He was really sick. Also, when he was tested for virus, the lab discovered his viral load (number of viruses in his respiratory tract) was more than 51,000 times higher than the median viral load in other children. That was so surprising a second test was done on a different machine—same result. So another test was run on a different testing platform which confirmed the first two. The child also had a variant they hadn't seen before, one with a mutation called N679S. The baby recovered, but we're still not sure what this case represents. Could be some quirk, a one-off—a newborn with an immature immune system simply allowing the virus to replicate wildly. We suspect that, for the infection to be noticed at all in children, the viral loads need to be really high, so maybe this was just a case where the load finally reached the point that severe symptoms occurred. On the other hand, this could be something of greater concern. The infectious disease physician who treated this baby told the Washington Post, "It could be a complete coincidence, but the association is pretty strong. If you see a patient who has exponentially more virus and it's a completely different variant, it is probably related."

We do know that cases in children have been rising in the UK out of proportion to the population; something similar has been reported in one part of Italy. Israel's seen that too. In the US the surge in children paralleled what we were seeing in adults, but in some places there have been more ICU-requiring cases of that more serious condition seen in children, multi-inflammatory syndrome of children (MIS-C). There also appears to have been, at least in some locations, an increase in MIS-C patients with active, as opposed to past, infections. All of this could be a bunch of coincidences: This disease has shown itself to be highly variable from case to case and region to region. But that mutation, N679S, is in a critical region of the spike protein that binds to host cells in causing infection, and there is now evidence the mutation is turning up in a few other patients in the region as well. There appears to be some evidence these cases all had a common or related origin, so they could all be a part of a common population of virus. A handful of other cases have turned up in other countries.

All of this points up the continuing need to do a great deal more genomic surveillance—not that you've heard me say that before. The ramping up of federal support for and coordination of those efforts can't come soon enough. Oh, and yes, better mitigation, less transmission, more precautions: That would be good too.

Chelsea Timmons is a delivery driver; she lives in Houston, Texas, but travels to Austin frequently to work because she can make a little more money there. She was working in Austin last Sunday, Valentine's Day, and was on her last delivery of the day with time to get home before it got too late. We talked last night about the difficulties drivers in mild-winter regions can have with snow and ice on the roads; managing in those conditions is a learned skill you don't get much opportunity to learn when you live in Texas. So when her car began to skid down the driveway of her last customer of the night, she was praying she didn't skid right into their house. She told CNN she figured that would mess up her tip for sure.

She didn't hit the house, but she did fetch up in the customers' flower bed, stuck tight. She texted the homeowners to let them know she'd arrived with their groceries and that she was stuck. Doug Condon and Nina Richardson came outside and tried to help with her car, but they didn't have any luck with that, so they invited her to come inside the house to wait for the tow truck. Timmons tried to refuse, but they were insistent. She said, after months of contactless deliveries with hand sanitizer and masks, she felt

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"very awkward coming into a stranger's home. But they were super kind." After sitting in their kitchen in a mask for a couple of hours, calling for tow truck updates, she went back out to her car to wait. It was a few hours later that the towing service told her they weren't going to be able to come."

Condon and Richardson were not OK with her sitting in her car all night. They'd both received a first dose of vaccine, and so they brought her in and cooked their Valentine's Day dinner for three—steaks Timmons had just delivered. The weather worsened over the next couple of days. They went out every day and tried to shovel and sweep the driveway; but despite Timmons' repeated suggestion she find a hotel room, before you know it, they were being interviewed for the news on Day Five—because you have to admit this is a story.

Meanwhile, Timmons learned her Houston apartment was out of power; she'd have been a whole lot worse-off there. She pitched in with the cooking, making them a coconut cake as a thank-you. And the couple's dogs had made friends, lounging on the bed with her and snuggling up.

How does it feel to offer a stranger a place to stay warm while the tow truck comes and end up stuck with an unexpected house guest for days in the middle of a storm? Surprisingly good. Condon told the Post, "It was quite an enjoyable experience. . . . We were definitely the beneficiaries of her baking." Richardson added, "She just became kind of part of the family pretty quickly." And they also said they hope others would have done the same. "I don't think we ever thought twice about it."

Timmons finally made it home on Friday. They plan to stay in touch. Nice.

Take care. I'll be back tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	453	431	852	15	Minimal	0.0%
Beadle	2693	2575	5744	39	Substantial	18.3%
Bennett	381	367	1167	9	Minimal	2.6%
Bon Homme	1502	1474	2034	25	Minimal	0.0%
Brookings	3566	3464	11648	36	Substantial	2.6%
Brown	5095	4953	12467	85	Moderate	3.8%
Brule	689	674	1847	9	Moderate	9.1%
Buffalo	420	406	889	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	973	936	3165	20	Moderate	7.7%
Campbell	129	125	255	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1275	1207	3854	20	Substantial	9.4%
Clark	365	351	937	5	Moderate	12.5%
Clay	1783	1752	5121	15	Moderate	2.1%
Codington	3948	3764	9505	77	Substantial	13.5%
Corson	467	449	994	12	Minimal	21.1%
Custer	745	723	2657	12	Moderate	9.5%
Davison	2940	2850	6382	60	Moderate	9.8%
Day	660	604	1735	28	Substantial	17.6%
Deuel	471	455	1116	8	Moderate	10.3%
Dewey	1404	1371	3758	23	Moderate	13.5%
Douglas	428	408	886	9	Moderate	16.7%
Edmunds	480	455	1021	12	Moderate	8.3%
Fall River	521	497	2554	15	Moderate	6.0%
Faulk	356	331	681	13	Moderate	4.5%
Grant	959	898	2177	37	Substantial	9.5%
Gregory	533	489	1236	27	Moderate	12.5%
Haakon	247	237	527	9	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	699	639	1740	38	Substantial	23.3%
Hand	332	316	788	6	Minimal	4.8%
Hanson	355	342	697	4	Moderate	22.2%
Harding	91	90	180	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2292	2202	6443	34	Substantial	1.9%
Hutchinson	784	742	2306	24	Moderate	19.6%

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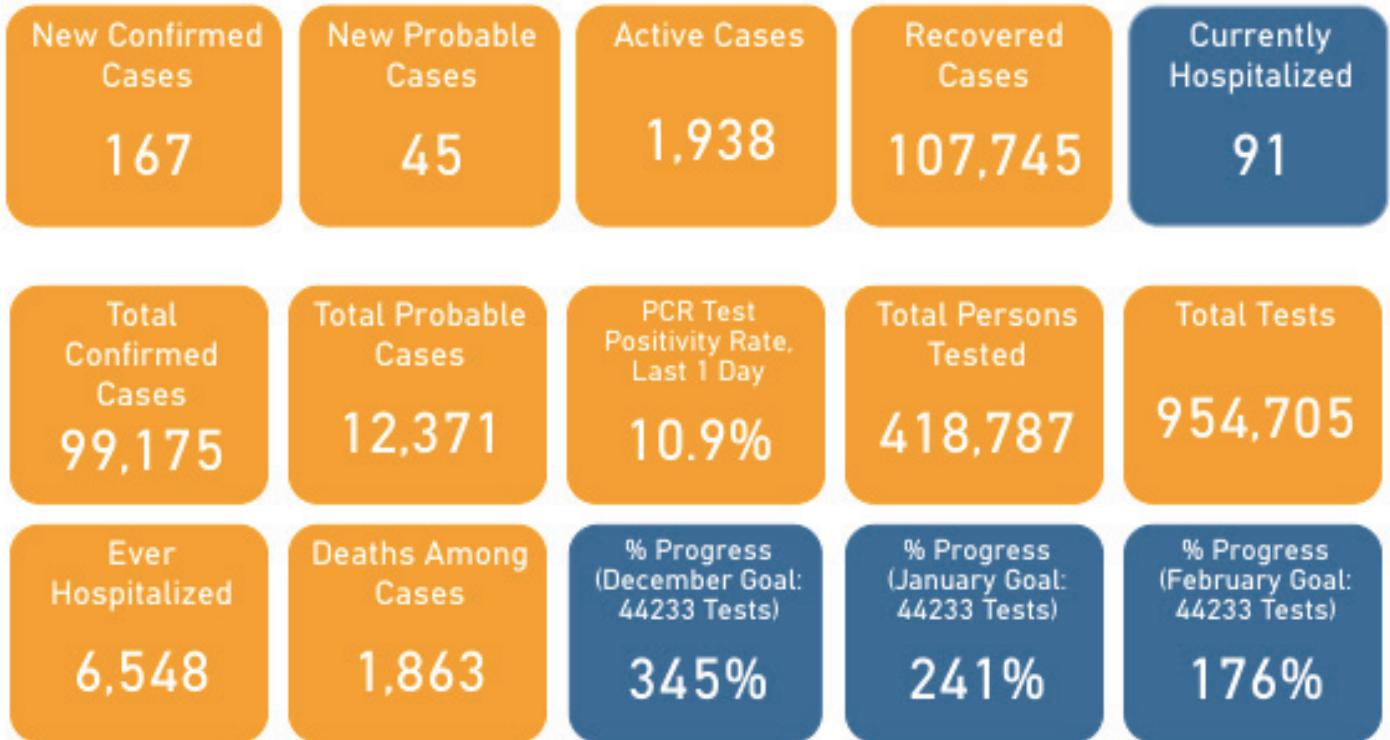
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Hyde	136	134	400	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	279	260	901	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	269	249	546	16	None	0.0%
Jones	85	83	214	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	635	601	1626	14	Substantial	11.9%
Lake	1176	1135	3221	17	Moderate	4.2%
Lawrence	2810	2736	8359	44	Moderate	5.2%
Lincoln	7686	7481	19853	77	Substantial	9.4%
Lyman	597	582	1849	10	Minimal	0.0%
Marshall	305	289	1161	5	Moderate	2.8%
McCook	738	704	1587	24	Moderate	12.5%
McPherson	237	231	544	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2563	2484	7525	31	Substantial	12.0%
Mellette	245	239	718	2	Minimal	16.7%
Miner	271	251	562	9	Minimal	16.7%
Minnehaha	27785	27010	76464	329	Substantial	6.9%
Moody	612	589	1729	16	Moderate	9.5%
Oglala Lakota	2051	1972	6573	49	Moderate	6.3%
Pennington	12787	12367	38495	185	Substantial	9.6%
Perkins	344	319	793	13	Minimal	11.8%
Potter	371	354	816	3	Moderate	0.0%
Roberts	1161	1092	4054	35	Substantial	12.7%
Sanborn	326	320	669	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	796	760	2083	25	Moderate	11.1%
Stanley	328	320	908	2	Minimal	0.0%
Sully	136	132	302	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1218	1183	4086	28	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	692	656	1452	16	Substantial	21.3%
Turner	1063	992	2661	53	Moderate	3.4%
Union	1962	1897	6104	39	Substantial	9.6%
Walworth	718	692	1800	15	Moderate	3.6%
Yankton	2792	2729	9157	28	Moderate	6.6%
Ziebach	336	325	856	9	Minimal	8.3%
Unassigned	0	0	1810	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	4453	0
10-19 years	12509	0
20-29 years	19872	5
30-39 years	18337	17
40-49 years	15930	35
50-59 years	15727	109
60-69 years	12784	245
70-79 years	6833	422
80+ years	5101	1030

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	58141	879
Male	53405	984

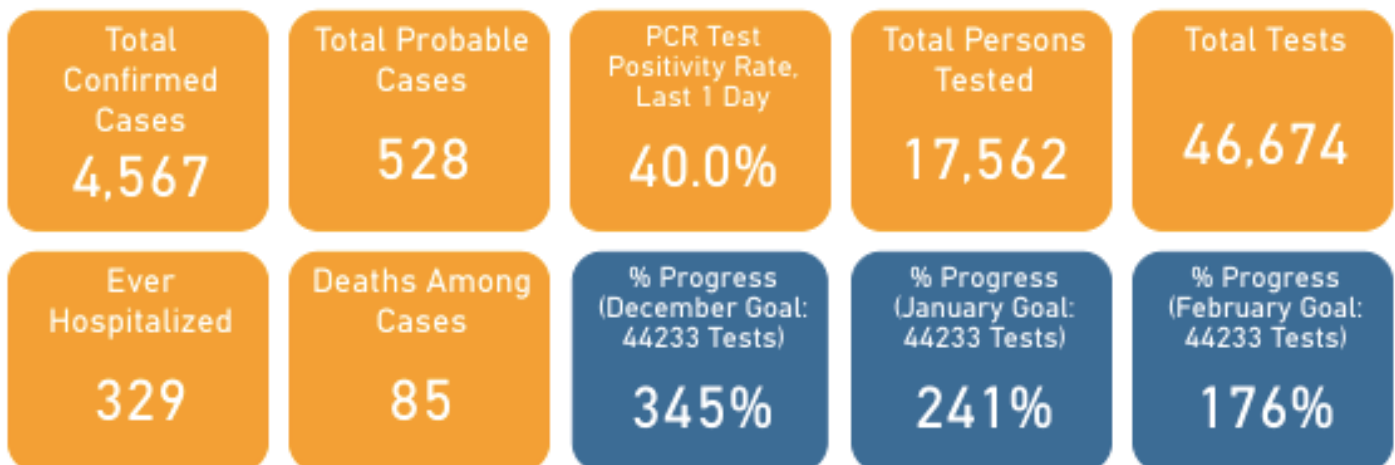
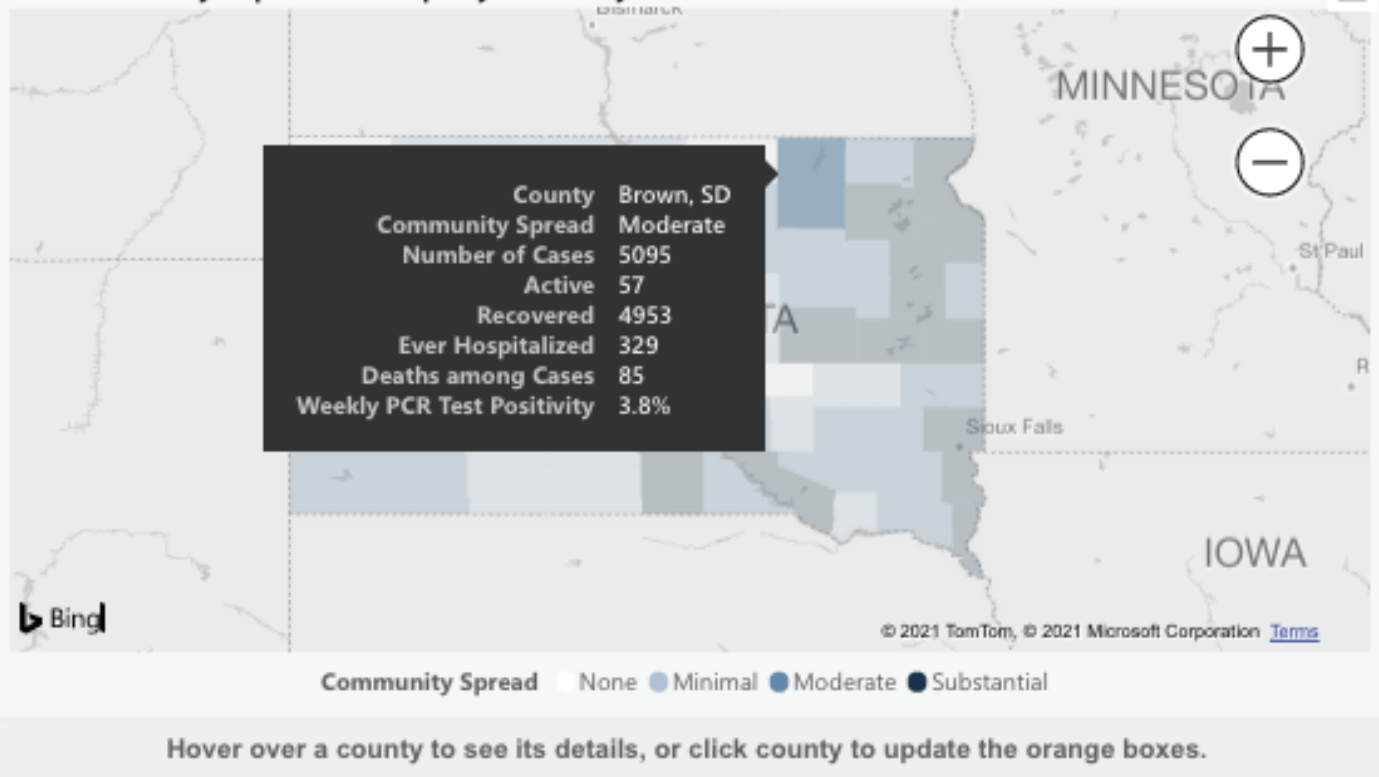
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Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



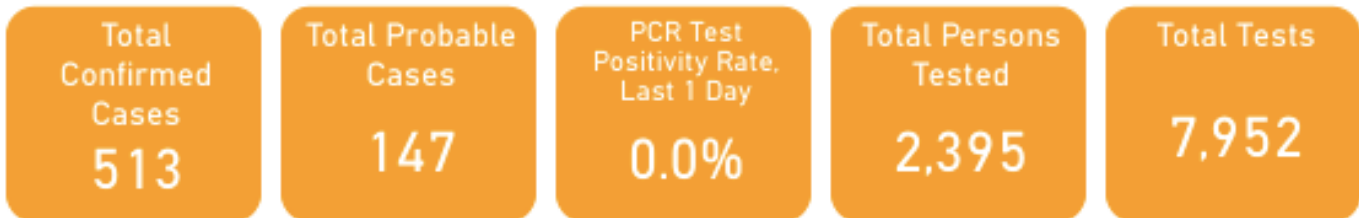
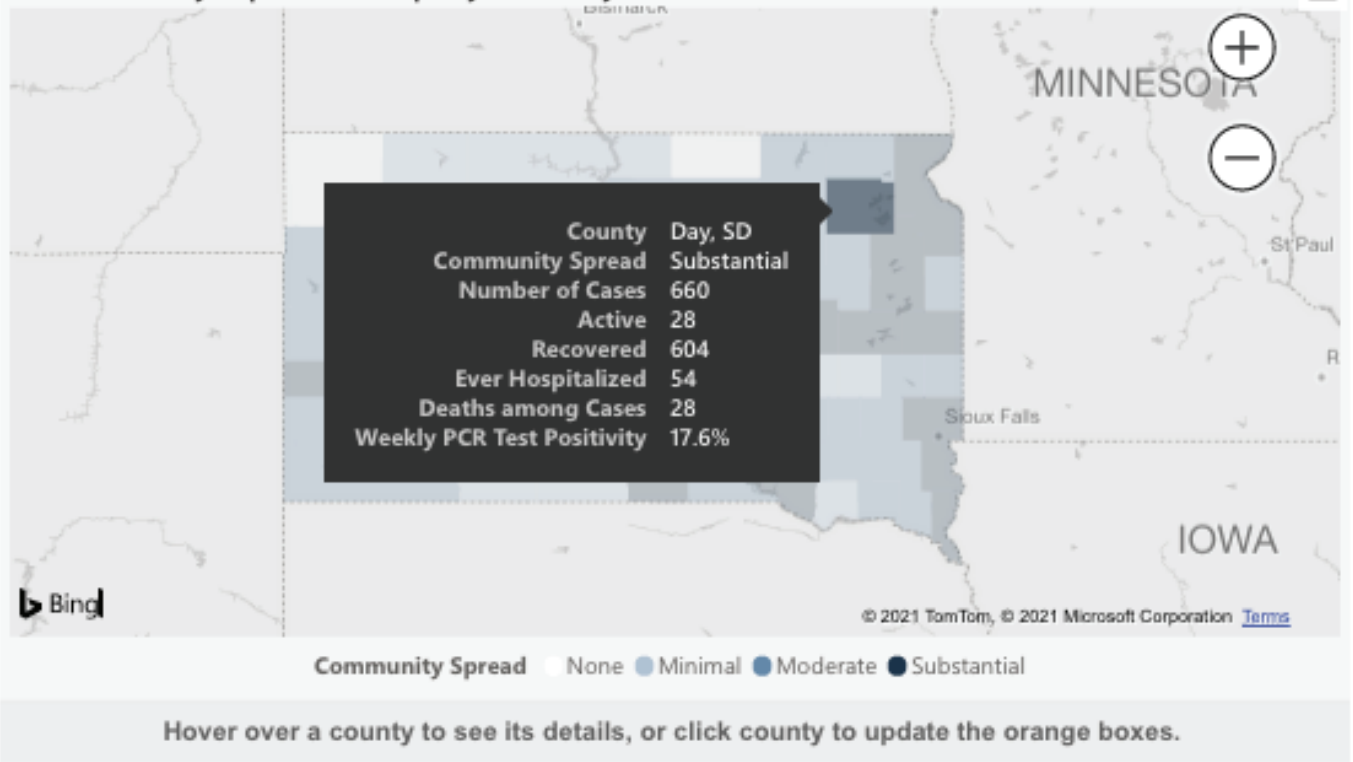
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

186,329

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

123,451

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

18%

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Moderna	97,945
Pfizer	88,384

Doses	# of Recipients
Moderna - Series Complete	32,777
Moderna - 1 dose	32,391
Pfizer - Series Complete	30,101
Pfizer - 1 dose	28,182

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	17.89%
Series Complete	9.11%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16 years and older

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	465	241	112	353
Beadle	3617	1,699	959	2,658
Bennett*	346	84	131	215
Bon Homme*	2048	1,120	464	1,584
Brookings	4865	1,661	1,602	3,263
Brown	8744	2,748	2,998	5,746
Brule*	1136	450	343	793
Buffalo*	99	75	12	87
Butte	1080	508	286	794
Campbell	738	286	226	512
Charles Mix*	1809	833	488	1,321
Clark	711	259	226	485
Clay	2930	1,032	949	1,981
Codington*	5907	2,121	1,893	4,014
Corson*	168	72	48	120
Custer*	1592	622	485	1,107
Davison	4633	1,625	1,504	3,129
Day*	1511	579	466	1,045
Deuel	863	353	255	608
Dewey*	294	56	119	175
Douglas*	755	261	247	508
Edmunds	757	283	237	520
Fall River*	1571	633	469	1,102
Faulk	617	217	200	417
Grant*	1357	495	431	926
Gregory*	1012	380	316	696
Haakon*	345	113	116	229

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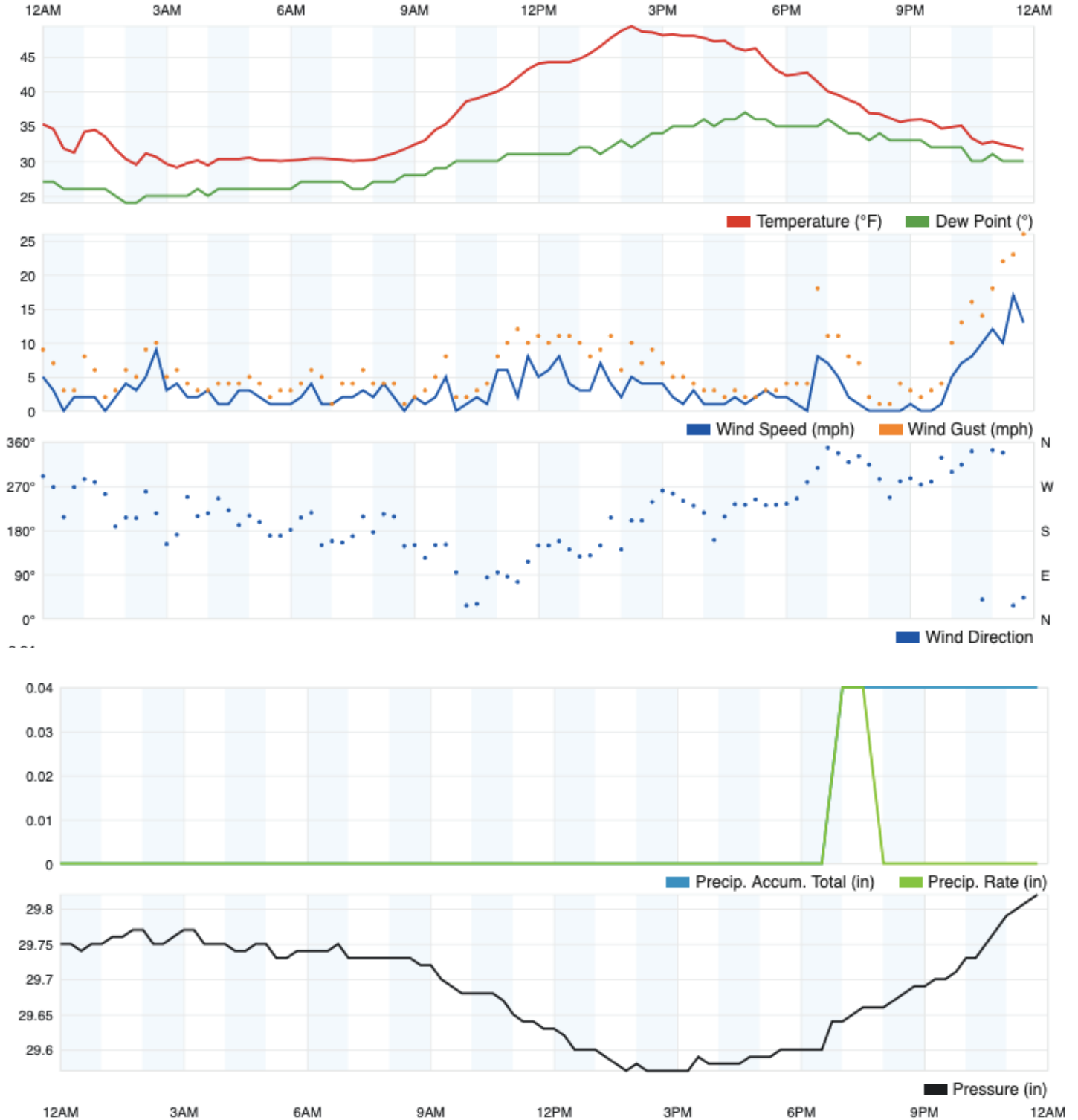
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Hamlin	1011	419	296	715
Hand	775	351	212	563
Hanson	266	124	71	195
Harding	39	27	6	33
Hughes*	4957	1,605	1,676	3,281
Hutchinson*	2148	774	687	1,461
Hyde*	331	117	107	224
Jackson*	255	95	80	175
Jerauld	450	256	97	353
Jones*	377	141	118	259
Kingsbury	1264	548	358	906
Lake	2109	791	659	1,450
Lawrence	4367	1,961	1,203	3,164
Lincoln	16252	4,118	6,067	10,185
Lyman*	439	217	111	328
Marshall*	970	418	276	694
McCook	1249	461	394	855
McPherson	143	69	37	106
Meade*	3454	1,424	1,015	2,439
Mellette*	30	12	9	21
Miner	501	187	157	344
Minnehaha*	48448	13,664	17,392	31,056
Moody*	924	348	288	636
Oglala Lakota*	101	41	30	71
Pennington*	22134	6,436	7,849	14,285
Perkins*	326	164	81	245
Potter	460	200	130	330
Roberts*	2646	1,178	734	1,912
Sanborn	583	229	177	406
Spink	1875	669	603	1,272
Stanley*	742	270	236	506
Sully	216	90	63	153
Todd*	101	37	32	69
Tripp*	1339	477	431	908
Turner	2138	598	770	1,368
Union	1507	709	399	1,108
Walworth*	1299	375	462	837
Yankton	6154	1,378	2,388	3,766
Ziebach*	43	13	15	28
Other	3936	776	1,580	2,356

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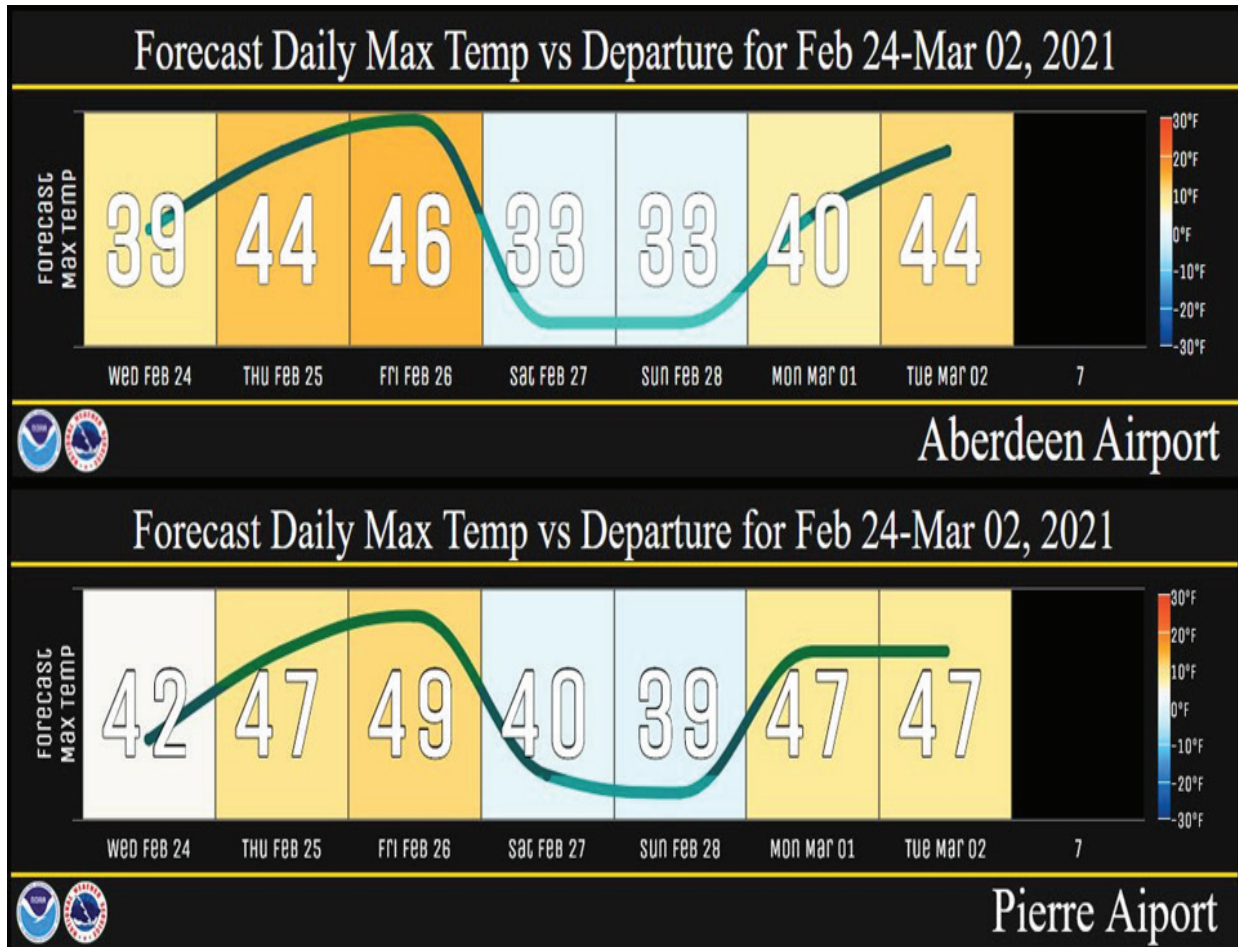
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Chance Rain/Snow then Clear	Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy and Breezy	Partly Sunny
High: 39 °F	Low: 20 °F	High: 44 °F	Low: 29 °F	High: 47 °F



The seven day forecast will consist of temperatures warmer than normal to start, with a brief cool down over the weekend, only to be followed up by more above normal conditions next week. And, most of the seven day is dry!

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Today in Weather History

February 24, 2001: Heavy snow of 6 to 14 inches fell across central and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. Along with the heavy snow came blizzard conditions across north-eastern South Dakota and west-central Minnesota during the morning hours of the 25th as northwest winds increased to 25 to 45 mph. As a result of the heavy snow and blizzard conditions, travel became difficult, if not impossible, resulting in some accidents and stranded motorists. Some snowfall amounts included, 6 inches at Waubay, Onida, Murdo, and Artas, 7 inches at Aberdeen, Faulkton, Ipswich, Kennebec, and Clark, 8 inches at Miller, Castlewood, 23 N Highmore, and Pierre. Nine inches of snow fell at Browns Valley, Wheaton, Clinton, Graceville, Dumont, Roy Lake, Mellette, Blunt, and Watertown. Other snowfall amounts included, 10 inches near Summit, 11 inches at Webster, Ortonville, and Artichoke Lake, and 14 inches at Milbank.

1969: The famous "100-Hour Storm" began in Boston, MA. Snow fell much of the time between early on the 25th through noon on the 28th. The 26.3 inches at Logan Airport is the 2nd greatest snowstorm in Boston's history. 77 inches fell at Pinkham Notch Base Station in New Hampshire, bringing their February total to 130 inches. Their snow cover on the 27th was 164 inches. Mt. Washington, NH, received 172.8 inches of snow in the month.

2001: Over a dozen tornadoes spawned in central and eastern Arkansas. The strongest tornado (F3) was in Desha County, with parts of a farm shop found six miles away from where it was blown apart. An 18-month-old was killed in Fulton County by an F2 tornado.

1819 - A small but intense hurricane passed over Bay Saint Louis, MS. The hurricane was considered the worst in fifty years. Few houses were left standing either at Bay Saint Louis or at Pass Christian, and much of the Mississippi coast was desolate following the storm. A U.S. cutter was lost along with its thirty-nine crew members. The storm struck the same area that was hit 150 years later by Hurricane Camille. (David Ludlum)

1930 - The temperature at Greensburg, KY, soared to 114 degrees to set a state record. (The Weather Channel)

1934 - The temperature at Grofino, ID, climbed to 118 degrees to establish a record for Idaho. (The Weather Channel)

1952 - A severe storm with hail up to an inch and a half in diameter broke windows, ruined roofs, and stripped trees of leaves near Benson, AZ. The temperature dropped to 37 degrees, as hail was three to four inches deep, with drifts 46 inches high. (The Weather Channel)

1986 - Severe thunderstorms moving out of South Dakota across Iowa produce high winds which derailed eighteen piggyback trailer cars of a westbound freight train near Boone, IA. Sixteen of the cars fell 187 feet into the Des Moines River. The thunderstorms also spawned a number of tornadoes, including one which caused twenty-five to fifty million dollars damage at Sloan, near Sioux City, IA. (Storm Data)

1987 - Thunderstorms in Nevada produced wind gusts to 70 mph at Searchlight, reducing visibilities to near zero in blowing dust and sand. Thunderstorms in Montana drenched Lonesome Lake with 3.78 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Thunderstorms drenched Wilmington, NC, with 3.33 inches of rain, bringing their monthly total 14.46 inches. Seven cities in Michigan and Minnesota reported record high temperatures for the date. Marquette, MI, hit 99 degrees, and the record high of 94 degrees at Flint MI was their tenth of the month. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Afternoon thunderstorms produced large hail and damaging winds in Massachusetts. Early evening thunderstorms over Florida produced wind gusts to 68 mph at Fort Myers, and evening thunderstorms in South Dakota produced nearly two inches of rain in twenty minutes at Pierpoint. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

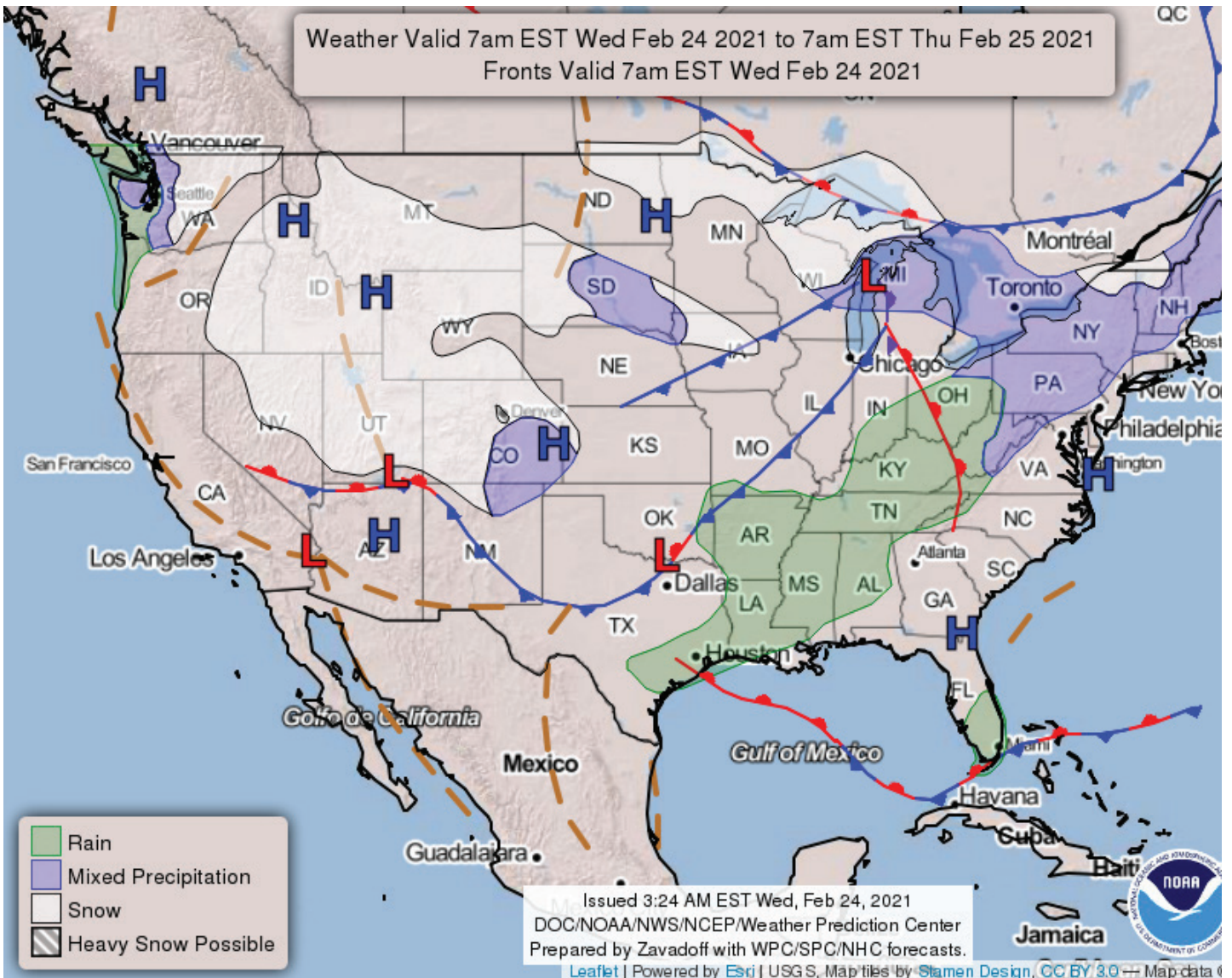
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 50 °F at 2:07 PM
Low Temp: 29 °F at 3:10 AM
Wind: 29 mph at 11:48 PM
Precip: .04

Record High: 62° in 1976
Record Low: -26° in 1940
Average High: 31°F
Average Low: 11°F
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.42
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.18
Average Precip to date: 0.89
Precip Year to Date: 0.18
Sunset Tonight: 6:14 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:18 a.m.



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A STORY OF HANDS

Hanging above my office chair is a drawing entitled, "Hands." It was drawn by an artist in Rochester, MI. The "hands" in the drawing are of many different sizes and shapes; some are little, representing small children; some are LARGE, representing adults; some scarred representing hard work or accidents; some appear as though they have never been soiled. The hands in the drawing tell the story about how all hands are different, how important they are, and what they might be used for.

The hands of Jesus tell a story, too. He used His hands to hold the tools of a carpenter and turn pieces of wood into dwellings or useful objects. He used His hands to offer hungry people a piece of bread and fish. He used His hands to hold small children and bless them. He used His hands to touch the eyes of the blind and restore their sight. He used His hands to open the ears of the deaf. He used His hands to quiet the raging seas. He used His hands to point people in the direction of the Kingdom of His Father.

He never used His hands to make a fist so He could harm someone. He never used His hands to grasp things from others. He never used His hands to point people in the wrong direction. He never used His hands to do anything that was evil. He never used His hands to strike others. He never used His hands to push people away from Him.

One fateful day those giving, healing, helping hands were painfully pierced and nailed to a cross. Pierced but not clenched in an angry fist but open, appealing, and accepting. His hands were on the ends of arms that were reaching out in love to a lost and dying world, saying, "Come to me. I love you and want to give you eternal life."

The Psalmist wrote, "They pierce my hands." Now, we know why.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for loving and reaching out to us with hands that were pierced because of our sins. May we gratefully accept Your invitation. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: They have pierced my hands and feet. Psalm 22:16b

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Father/Daughter Dance (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (Halloween)
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

05-07-09-20-57, Mega Ball: 15, Megaplier: 3

(five, seven, nine, twenty, fifty-seven; Mega Ball: fifteen; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$22 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$90 million

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press and Dakotan. February 22, 2021.

Editorial: AG's Fatal Accident And Unresolved Justice

There is a perception that something seemed frustratingly preordained last week when the charges to be filed against South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg in connection with a fatal car accident last September were announced.

Granted, part of this was due to state law, which spells out the criteria for what could and couldn't be filed given the circumstances of the Sept. 12 incident in which a car driven by Ravnsborg struck and killed Joe Boever, a Highmore man who was walking along U.S. Highway 14 in Hyde County late that night. It was announced that the incident would result in three misdemeanor charges: using a mobile electronic device while driving, failing to drive in a traffic lane and moving from a lane unsafely, and careless driving. Technically, one could sift through those charges and conclude that the attorney general is being charged solely for how he operated his vehicle, not for causing a death.

"I am disappointed but I'm not surprised," said Nick Nemec, Boever's cousin, after the charges were revealed. "I knew this was going to happen because I have researched state law. ... In short, if no one is looking and you aren't drunk, you can run over a pedestrian in this state and escape with only minor charges."

Nevertheless, what's also frustrating is the fact that the investigation took five long months to reach this conclusion. In that time, little insight was offered and the public was kept mostly in the dark. Fairly or unfairly, it created a feeling of inevitability that the end result would produce the mildest of results and the faintest accountability.

We can't speak to any details or circumstances that have not been revealed, but one general perception has been that, if this accident had not involved a high-profile public official (let alone the top law enforcement officer in the state), the inquiry would likely have reached its conclusion long ago. There simply didn't appear to be a lot of moving parts in this tragic scenario, relatively speaking.

There were certainly numerous questions when the incident occurred, as well as a few inconsistencies that needed to be ironed out.

This long investigation has not made those questions go away.

The results are unsatisfying: three misdemeanor charges that could lead to a maximum of three months in jail and \$1,500 in fines. Meanwhile, there remains the matter of a man's death, an incident in which the satisfaction of justice has so far been denied.

This issue appears far from over. Besides the actual trial regarding the misdemeanor charges, it now appears that Boever's widow will file a wrongful death lawsuit in civil court. Meanwhile, the Argus Leader reported Sunday that some state lawmakers may be mulling impeachment charges against Ravnsborg. And on Monday, The Associated Press reported that Rep. Tim Goodwin (R-Rapid City), a GOP whip, is calling

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on Ravensborg to resign as attorney general. These scenarios will bear watching.

Until we get more answers, the closure that this incident demands will remain elusive for all concerned — especially the family and friends of the victim, as well as for the state.

END

Tuesday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Clark/Willow Lake 52, Tiospa Zina Tribal 47

Douglas 63, Sturgis Brown 56

Harrisburg 75, Huron 54

Lower Brule 100, Dupree 58

Pierre 62, Brookings 41

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 75, Sioux Falls Lincoln 58

Sioux Falls Washington 57, Mitchell 49

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Harrisburg 68, Huron 51

Pierre 56, Brookings 38

Sioux Falls Washington 68, Mitchell 58

Sturgis Brown 53, Spearfish 49

Class A Region 1=

First Round=

Redfield 55, Tiospa Zina Tribal 24

Class A Region 3=

First Round=

Tri-Valley 54, Baltic 36

Class A Region 4=

First Round=

Elk Point-Jefferson 46, Vermillion 42

Lennox 53, Canton 49

Tea Area 70, Beresford 42

Class A Region 5=

First Round=

Wagner 57, Madison 35

Class A Regions 7&8=

First Round=

Custer 53, Lead-Deadwood 25

Class B Region 1=

Quarterfinal=

Aberdeen Christian 49, Britton-Hecla 21

Waubay/Summit 63, Leola/Frederick 37

Waverly-South Shore 53, Langford 18

Class B Region 2=

Quarterfinal=

Faulkton 56, Sully Buttes 47

Highmore-Harrold 59, North Central Co-Op 23

Lower Brule 54, Ipswich 47

Class B Region 3=

Quarterfinal=

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Castlewood 62, Estelline/Hendricks 32
James Valley Christian 48, Hitchcock-Tulare 46
Class B Region 4=
Quarterfinal=
Dell Rapids St. Mary 49, Howard 47
Ethan 79, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 14
Class B Region 5=
Quarterfinal=
Menno 46, Centerville 42
Scotland 59, Alcester-Hudson 53
Viborg-Hurley 51, Freeman 43
Class B Region 6=
Quarterfinal=
Kimball/White Lake 56, Avon 48
Tripp-Delmont/Armour 50, Burke 31
Class B Region 7=
Quarterfinal=
New Underwood 45, Edgemont 30
White River 93, Lyman 43
Class B Region 8=
Quarterfinal=
Lemmon 52, Dupree 49
Newell 57, McIntosh 17
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Garretson vs. Dell Rapids, ppd. to Feb 24th.

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

South Dakota House moves to impeach AG after fatal crash

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota House lawmakers on Tuesday began impeachment proceedings against the state's attorney general, who is facing misdemeanor charges for striking and killing a man with his car and is already under pressure to resign.

A bipartisan group of lawmakers filed a resolution in the House to impeach the state's top law enforcement officer, Jason Ravensborg, after he indicated Monday he would not heed calls for his resignation.

The Republican attorney general faces three misdemeanor charges but no felonies in the September death of 55-year-old Joseph Boever.

Lawmakers argued in the impeachment resolution that Ravensborg should be removed from office for "his crimes or misdemeanors in office causing the death" of Boever.

The resolution also stated that Ravensborg's conduct following the crash was "unbecoming" and his "statements and actions failed to meet the standard" of his office.

"When we started looking through and thinking about the duties that the attorney general owes to the people of South Dakota, and I think he owes a special duty to protect the people and uphold the laws. And I think that the actions in these incidents fell short of that duty," said Rep. Will Mortensen, who represents the area where the crash occurred and who sponsored the impeachment resolution.

Shortly before the impeachment resolution was filed, Gov. Kristi Noem called for him to step down. The governor's spokesman Ian Fury said she also supports the impeachment resolution.

"Now that the investigation has closed and charges have been filed, I believe the Attorney General should resign," Noem said in a statement.

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But Ravensborg's will not be stepping down, according to spokesman Mike Deaver.

"As an attorney and a Lt. Colonel in the Army Reserves, AG Ravensborg has fought for the rule of law and personal liberties and would hope that he is afforded the same right and courtesy," Deaver said in a statement.

While Ravensborg has not been convicted of any crimes, Mortensen said he felt it was the "right time" to begin impeachment after looking through the publicly available evidence and prosecutors announced their charging decision.

It would take a simple majority in the House to advance the impeachment charges to the Senate. There, it would require two-thirds of senators to convict and remove him from office. State law requires senators to wait 20 days from when the attorney general receives a copy of the impeachment charges before beginning the trial. Noem would get to appoint a replacement if Ravensborg leaves or is removed from office.

The attorney general, who was elected to his first term in 2018, was driving home to Pierre from a Republican fundraiser late on Sept. 12 when he struck and killed Boever, who was walking on the shoulder of the highway. Ravensborg initially told authorities that he thought he had struck a deer or another large animal and said he searched the unlit area with a cellphone flashlight. He said he didn't realize he had killed a man until the next day when he returned to the accident scene.

After an investigation that stretched over five months, prosecutors said they still had questions about the crash but were unable to file more serious criminal charges against Ravensborg. They charged him with careless driving, driving out of his lane and operating a motor vehicle while on his phone.

Prosecutors found he was not using his phone at the time of the crash, but had been using it while driving about one minute before. The attorney general could face up to 30 days in jail and up to a \$500 fine on each charge, if convicted.

Michael Moore, the Beadle County State's Attorney who is assisting in the case, said Monday that when Ravensborg was interviewed by law enforcement following the crash, he was not clear about what had caused him to swerve on to the shoulder of the highway and gave "varying examples of possibly what could have happened."

Noem released videos of Ravensborg's two interviews with law enforcement late Tuesday. In the videos, investigators confront the attorney general with the gruesome details of the crash, at one point telling him, "His face was in your windshield, Jason, think about that."

Ravnsborg appeared unsure of many details in the crash, but investigators told him Boever's glasses had been found in the attorney general's Ford Taurus and bone scrapings were found on the highway shoulder. As investigators described how his car swerved onto the shoulder and struck Boever, causing major damage to the car hood and windshield, Ravensborg appears distressed.

"I never saw him," he told the investigators. "I never saw him."

This story has been corrected to show that the resolution to impeach the attorney general has been filed in the House, but not formally introduced.

House lawmakers push office for missing Indigenous people

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House on Tuesday passed a proposal to create an office under the attorney general to coordinate tribal, state and local law enforcement agencies in tackling the crisis of missing Indigenous people.

Democrat Rep. Peri Pourier, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, proposed the office as part of an effort to solve how a disproportionate number of Indigenous people go missing and are murdered in the state. She said that of 179 missing people statewide, 77 are Indigenous.

Pourier's bill would create a one-person office within the attorney general's office to specialize in coordinating law enforcement efforts across agencies. The attorney general's office assisted in writing the bill, but declined to support it because funding was not addressed, Pourier said. However, the lawmaker said that tribal governments have committed to seeking federal funding for the office.

She pointed out that the federal government and tribes have made the issue a priority, saying, "This is an opportunity for the state to come to the table."

Oglala Sioux Tribal President Kevin Killer said there is an "epidemic" of women and girls going missing from Native communities, both on reservations and in urban areas.

The bill will next proceed to the Senate.

US drug agents: Drug seizures surged in Nebraska in 2020

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The seizure of illegal drugs in Nebraska surged last year, according to federal drug agents for the state, and officials warned that methamphetamine and the powerful painkiller fentanyl remained dangerous threats in the state.

Authorities in Nebraska seized 421 pounds (191 kilograms) of meth last year — a jump of 68% from the year before, the Omaha field division of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration said Tuesday in a news release. Officials also seized 4,644 pounds (2,106.5 kilograms) of marijuana, six times the amount seized the year prior.

The meth and marijuana seizures for 2020 combined had an estimated street value of \$13.3 million, the agency said.

Last year, DEA agents also seized more than 5.5 pounds (2.5 kilograms) of fentanyl and 1,000 fentanyl-laced counterfeit pills, the release said.

Cocaine was the third most commonly seized drug in Nebraska, although numbers dropped slightly from 2019 to 2020.

Omaha Division Special Agent in Charge Justin King said agents have seen a jump in fentanyl and counterfeit pills across the division's territory, which includes Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

"We want to make people aware of the fact that pills purchased off of the street should be considered incredibly dangerous and potentially lethal," King said.

Man in organic seed fraud case given 51 months in prison

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A man accused of using his South Dakota businesses to defraud wholesale seed distributors out of millions of dollars has been sentenced to more than four years in federal prison.

Kent Duane Anderson, of Bradenton, Florida, is accused of reselling thousands of tons of non-organic seeds at a marked-up organic price through his businesses, Bar Two Bar Ranch and Green Leaf Resources and several Green Leaf spinoffs.

An indictment says that between October 2012 and December 2017, Anderson bought about \$46 million worth of non-organic seed, sold it as organic for about \$71 million and used the profits to buy a yacht, Florida home, jewelry, expensive vehicles and land in South Dakota, among other things.

The indictment says Anderson listed a relative and a college friend as "figurehead" executives who were certified with the Department of Agriculture as authorized organic handlers. Those certifications were used as a cover to pass off the non-organic products as organic, the Argus Leader reported.

Anderson pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering in November as part of an agreement with prosecutors. He was initially indicted on more than 40 charges.

He was sentenced by U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier Monday to 51 months in federal prison followed by two years of supervised release. A sentencing document did not state the amount of restitution he will be ordered to repay.

School voucher push taps frustration over distance learning

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — With her children struggling in many classes last spring, Kelli Rivera became so frustrated with how her suburban Atlanta district was handling the coronavirus pandemic that she withdrew

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them to home-school them. They're back in public school and mostly attending class in person. For now, Rivera is thinking of enrolling her younger son in private school next year, and she hopes the state of Georgia might help her pay for it with an expansion of school choice programs.

"We've been just a public school family forever, without any intention or desire to leave," Rivera said. "But when the pandemic hit and we moved into virtual schooling, it really wasn't working for us."

School choice advocates and lawmakers in many states are counting on the frustrations of parents like Rivera to bolster efforts to pass or expand laws allowing families to use public money to pay for private school or to help teach their own children at home.

Some sort of school choice program already gets public money in 29 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico, according to EdChoice, a group that supports the concept.

Backers say they are optimistic about making new gains this year as surveys nationwide have indicated private schools have been more likely to offer in-person instruction.

"If you talk to any parent of a school-aged child, what you'll find, literally across the board, is they're just mad, frustrated, that traditional public school districts failed to deliver education to their children," said American Federation for Children President John Schilling, who lobbies for school choice programs. "What the pandemic has laid bare is just how inflexible the K-12 system is."

Opponents argue vouchers, publicly funded educational savings accounts and tax credits for private school scholarships will sap funding for the traditional public schools, which could be particularly damaging for districts that serve low-income families and face overwhelming challenges. Voucher programs generally target students in less affluent districts where schools are struggling, but opponents argue in some cases they amount to unnecessary subsidies for families who could pay their own way for private school.

Any loss in funding also could further hobble public schools' ability to help children who have lost ground as districts struggle to reopen or soldier on in hybrid or distance-learning scenarios.

"They drain money from public schools and they allow private schools to discriminate in all kinds of ways," said Jessica Levin of the Education Law Center, which is part of the anti-voucher group Public Funds for Public Schools. She said private schools aren't required to admit students, often don't have their academic outcomes publicly tracked, and may not be equipped to offer special education services.

While it remains early in many states' legislative sessions, there are fresh proposals in states that already offer abundant subsidies for private and homeschooling, such as Indiana, Arizona and Florida, and in states where there are none, such as Missouri. The proposals appear more likely to pass in Republican-controlled states, where schools have been more likely to open for in-person instruction.

In Georgia, Republican state Rep. Wes Cantrell has introduced a bill that would create educational savings accounts, which would let parents direct money to private school tuition or home-schooling costs. The proposal would give the money to various groups including students in districts not offering full in-person instruction.

"The major concern I've had over the last year has been from parents who don't have a public school offering in-person classes," Cantrell said. "If the public schools are not meeting their needs, they should have another choice."

Rivera said grades for both her sons, a sixth grader and sophomore, have been terrible during periods of virtual learning. Last spring, she home-schooled them, spending money on computers and curriculum. She said this year has been bumpy as well, even though the 107,000-student Cobb County district has been offering in-person classes four days a week.

She said her sophomore is intent on sticking with his public high school, but she's considering enrolling her younger son next fall in a private school that provides two days a week of in-person instruction, with parents home-schooling the other days. Tuition is a concern.

"As it stands, I'm not sure we could swing it," Rivera said.

In Missouri, where school choice measures have repeatedly failed, Republican Senate Majority Leader Caleb Rowden said his top priority is a bill giving tax breaks for donations to organizations providing scholarships to private schools or other public schools outside a student's home district.

"I've got a lot of left and center-left friends who are more frustrated with the public school system than

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they ever have been in their lives," said Rowden, who sends his child to a private Christian school. "They have now recognized they have so little control over the say of their kid's education that something needs to be done about it."

In Indiana, which already has one of the nation's largest voucher programs, Republicans are trying to increase the number of students getting assistance by up to 40% next year by opening eligibility to wealthier families.

Iowa's Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds has proposed a bill that would make open enrollment available in all school districts, expand charter school options and create an education savings account allowing parents to move a child to another public or private school, taking the taxpayer money allocated for that student with them.

Rivera herself wonders about the tension between her desires to support her kids and support public schools.

"I would love to put my kids where I can offer certainty," she said, "but I don't know what that does to our schools, I don't know the stresses it puts on our teachers.

Associated Press writers David Pitt in Des Moines, Iowa; David A. Lieb in Jefferson City, Missouri; Lindsay Whitehurst in Salt Lake City and Casey Smith in Indianapolis contributed to this report.

Italy presses UN for answers on envoy's slaying in Congo

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Italy on Wednesday pressed the United Nations for answers about the attack on a U.N. food aid convoy in Congo that left a young ambassador and his paramilitary police bodyguard dead.

Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio told lawmakers in Rome that Italy has asked both the U.N. and the U.N. World Food Program to open an investigation into the security arrangements for convoy, which was attacked two days earlier.

The minister said Italy also will spare no effort to determine the truth behind the killing of Ambassador Luca Attanasio and Carabinieri paramilitary officer Vittorio Iacovacci. A WFP Congolese driver, Moustapha Milambo, was also killed in the attack.

"We have formally asked the WFP and the U.N. to open an inquest that clarifies what happened, the motivations for the security arrangements employed and who was responsible for these decisions," Di Maio said.

The trip was undertaken at the U.N.'s invitation, according to Di Maio.

The two Italians had "entrusted themselves to the protocol of the United Nations," which flew them on a U.N. plane from Kinshasha to Goma, 2,500 kilometers (1,500 miles) away, Di Maio said.

The Italian embassy in Kinshasha, Di Maio noted, has two armored vehicles at the ambassador's disposal for moving around the city and the country. But for Monday's mission, to visit a WFP school food project in Rutshuri in eastern Congo, Attanasio was traveling in U.N. vehicles.

Only hours earlier, Di Maio, flanked by Premier Mario Draghi, met the arrival of the bodies of the two Italians at a Rome military airport. Autopsies are scheduled for Wednesday and a state funeral for both men was set for Thursday in Rome.

A special team of Carabinieri investigators, dispatched by Rome prosecutors, arrived Tuesday in Congo on what Di Maio said would likely be multiple missions to determine what happened.

Attanasio, 43, who leaves a widow involved in volunteer projects in Congo and three young children, "was in love with his profession, with Africa and his family," Di Maio said. He noted that the Carabinieri was nearing the end of his security detail in Congo and was soon due back in Rome.

The World Food Program, which won the Nobel Peace Prize last year for its efforts to feed refugees and other malnourished people worldwide, is headquartered in Rome.

"For this reason, I immediately asked WFP in Rome and the United Nations, involving directing the Secretary General (Antonio) Guterres, to supply a detailed report on the attack on the convoy," Di Maio said.

WFP has said the road had been previously cleared for travel without security escorts. U.N. security officials based in Congo usually determine road safety. On Tuesday, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said in New York that the U.N. had launched an internal review concerning the "security around the incident."

Di Maio said the attackers numbered six, had light arms and apparently spread obstacles on the road and fired shots in the air to stop the convoy.

"The noise of the shooting alerted soldiers of the Congolese Armed Forces and the rangers of Virunga park, less than a kilometer (half-mile) away, headed to the place of the incident."

Di Maio quoted the local governor as saying that to force the victims to go into the bush, they killed the WFP driver. When the ranger patrol arrived, Di Maio said, citing the Congolese interior minister's account, the attackers "fired upon the Carabinieri, killing him, and at the ambassador, gravely wounding him." Atanasio died of his wounds shortly afterward.

Italy will reinforce its commitments to aid Africa, Di Maio said, calling that the "best way to honor the memory" of the two slain Italians.

"A policy that puts Africa at the center of Italian diplomatic, European and international attention, this is the commitment Luca believed in and in which we believe in," the foreign minister said.

Funky electronics chain Fry's is no more

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Fry's Electronics, the go-to chain for tech tinkerers looking for an obscure part, is closing for good.

The company, perhaps even more well known for outlandish themes at some of its stores, from Aztec to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," said Wednesday in an online posting that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it impossible to continue.

Fans immediately took to Twitter to post images and memories (good and bad).

The chain was concentrated on the West Coast, but had 31 stores in nine states. It was founded 36 years ago.

The pandemic has done heavy damage to retailers, but Fry's was already getting hammered by online competition and a battle between heavy-hitters Best Buy and Amazon.com.

Fry's Electronics Inc. said its operations have ceased and the wind-down of locations will begin immediately. Customers with electronics being repaired in-store are being asked to pick them up.

The stores online presence appears largely to have been shut down.

The Latest: China ponders approving 2 more COVID-19 vaccines

By The Associated Press undefined

Beijing -- China is moving ahead with two more COVID-19 vaccines in the regulatory process, one from state-owned company Sinopharm and another from a private company CanSino.

Both vaccines have submitted been to regulators for approval this week. CanSino said that Chinese regulators are reviewing its application for its COVID-19 vaccine, in a stock filing on Wednesday. Sinopharm's subsidiary the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products announced Wednesday that it had submitted an application Sunday and that regulators were reviewing it.

China already has approved two vaccines that it has been using in a mass immunization campaign. One of them is also from Sinopharm, but it was developed by its Beijing subsidiary. The other is the Sinovac vaccine.

The Wuhan shot from Sinopharm is 72.51% effective, the company said. Both shots from Sinopharm rely on inactivated viruses, a traditional technology.

CanSino's vaccine is a one-dose shot that relies on a harmless common cold virus, called an adenovirus, to deliver the spike gene of the virus into the body. The technology is similar to both Astrazeneca and Johnson & Johnson's vaccines, which rely on different adenoviruses.

CanSino's vaccine is 65.28% effective, the company said Wednesday.

Neither company has published its trial data in peer-reviewed scientific journals yet.

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THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:

- U.S. states scramble to catch up after weather disruptions, hope to administer more shots as vaccine supply increases
- Health nominee Becerra says pandemic will be priority but also pledges to expand medical insurance, rein in drug costs and reduce racial disparities
- UK to push at G-7 for global standard for vaccine passports
- A food fight erupts in France over serving meatless school lunches during pandemic
- Dutch leader extends virus curfew but lets some high school students back in class
- Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>, <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine> and <https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

ACCRA, Ghana — Ghana has become the first country in the world to receive vaccines acquired through the U.N.-backed COVAX initiative, with a delivery Wednesday of 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India.

The vaccine shots, delivered by UNICEF, arrived at Accra's Kotoka International Airport and are part of the first wave of COVID-19 vaccines that COVAX is sending to several low- and middle-income countries.

Ghana is among 92 low-and middle-income countries that are receiving vaccines for free through COVAX program, which aims to ensure wider access to vaccines around the world. Another 90 countries and eight territories have agreed to pay to receive vaccines through COVAX.

The West African nation of 30 million has recorded 81,245 coronavirus cases and 584 deaths in the pandemic.

LISBON, Portugal -- Portuguese officials say the unexpectedly slow pace of vaccine deliveries likely means delays for plans to send batches to the country's former colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia.

Portugal has promised to send 5% of the vaccines it receives to five African countries and East Timor. Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva said Wednesday the government estimates it will be able to start sending vaccines abroad only in the second half of the year.

He said, "The goal is not compromised. The timing just needs to be adjusted."

Portugal has already sent medical equipment worth 3.5 million euros (\$4.3 million) to East Timor, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guiné-Bissau and São Tomé e Príncipe.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Denmark eased some coronavirus restrictions on Wednesday, saying older students in the north and east can return to school while some larger non-food shops can reopen on Monday.

So far, Denmark has kept all shops except food stores and pharmacies closed. Earlier this month, schools resumed teaching younger children up to the fourth grade.

A limit of 5 people in outdoor public gatherings was raised to 25 people during organized sports.

Health Minister Magnus Heunicke said the reopenings meant more infections and more hospitalizations were expected but with a mild spring coming and the nation's vaccination program, further reopenings were possible.

Denmark has seen 2,343 deaths and 208,556 cases.

PRAGUE — The Czech prime minister says the pandemic situation in his country, one of the hardest-hit in the European Union, is "extremely serious" and his government will have to impose more restrictions to slow down the spread of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Andrej Babis says the measures are needed to prevent "a total catastrophe" in hospitals that have been coming close to their limits.

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The government will decide those measures later Wednesday. Babis says they will be similar to those in place last spring when the borders and schools were completely closed. He also mentioned possible restrictions to limit movement of people.

Babis says the situation might be the worst on March 1, the anniversary of the first cases recorded in the Czech Republic.

Babis spoke amid a surge of new coronavirus cases caused by a highly contagious variant originally found in Britain as hospitals are filing up.

The day-to-day increase of new confirmed cases reached 15,672, about 3,000 more than a week ago. A total of 6,817 COVID-19 patients needed intensive care.

The country had almost 1.2 million confirmed cases with 19,682 deaths.

NEW DELHI — India will start inoculating people above 60, and those with underlying health problems above age 45 in the second phase of its massive vaccination drive from March 1.

India's Information and Broadcasting Minister Prakash Javadekar says the vaccinations will be done in 10,000 public and 20,000 private hospitals. Javadekar told reporters on Wednesday that vaccine shots in government hospitals will be free, but did not say how much it will cost in private hospitals.

India started inoculating health workers beginning on Jan. 16.

India is home to the world's largest vaccine makers. The government has authorized emergency use of Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine, manufactured by Serum Institute of India, and a homegrown vaccine developed by Bharat Biotech.

Cases of COVID-19 are increasing in some parts of India after months of a steady nationwide decline. In many cities, markets are bustling, roads are crowded and restaurants are nearly full. The country is reporting about 11,000 to 13,000 new cases a day, compared to a peak of nearly 100,000 in September.

BANGKOK — Thailand on Wednesday received its first delivery of COVID-19 vaccine for mass inoculations, 200,000 doses from the China-based company Sinovac.

The lot received by Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport is part of a total 2 million doses the government earlier reserved from Sinovac.

The government plans to start vaccinations in 13 high-risk provinces on March 1. They will be for front-line medical personnel, officials with exposure to infected patients, and people with congenital diseases.

About a third of the initial 200,000 doses is earmarked for Samut Sakhon province, near Bangkok, where an outbreak last year set off a surge of coronavirus infections.

Tourism Minister Pipat Ratchakitprakan said some doses have been reserved for workers in the tourism sector to help promote a revival of the hospitality industry, which was badly hurt by restrictions to fight the spread of the coronavirus.

KUALA LUMPUR, Malaysia — Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin received Malaysia's first COVID-19 vaccine shot on Wednesday at the start of its inoculation campaign.

"I did not feel anything at all. It was all over before I realized, just like a normal injection," he said at a ceremony broadcast live.

Health Director-General Noor Hisham Abdullah was also among the first to be vaccinated.

Malaysia, which has signed deals with several vaccine suppliers including Pfizer and AstraZeneca, aims to vaccinate up to 80% of its 32 million people by next year. More than half a million health care and front-line workers will be given priority in the first phase.

CANBERRA, Australia — Two elderly people have received higher-than-prescribed doses of the Pfizer vaccine, Australia's health minister said Wednesday.

The 88-year-old man and 94-year-old woman were being monitored and the doctor who administered the shots has been removed from the vaccination program, Health Minister Greg Hunt said.

The error occurred at the Holy Spirit aged care home in the Brisbane suburb of Carseldine on Tuesday,

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the day after the vaccine rollout in Australia began, Hunt said.

"Both patients are being monitored and both patients are showing no signs at all of an adverse reaction," Hunt said.

Lincoln Hopper, chief executive of St. Vincent's Care Services that owns the home, said he was "very concerned" for the residents' welfare. The woman remained at the home while the man has been admitted to a hospital, Hopper said.

"This incident has been very distressing to us, to our residents and to their families and it's also very concerning," Hopper said. "It's caused us to question whether some of the clinicians given the job of administering the vaccine have received the appropriate training."

Hunt later revealed that the doctor who administered the overdoses had not completed the online training that all health professionals in the program must undertake.

Hunt apologized for earlier telling Parliament that the doctor had been trained. He said he had asked the Health Department to take action against the doctor and the company the doctor works for.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey has started administering vaccines to teachers as it prepares for a gradual re-opening of schools.

Education Minister Ziya Selcuk, who received the first shot on Wednesday, said 1.25 million teachers and other school staff are being prioritized for vaccines along with health care workers and people above 65.

Schools in rural areas resumed in-person education on Feb. 15. Schools in other parts of the country are to re-open on March 1, with many students attending classes twice a week only. Students preparing for high school and university entrance exams are scheduled to attend classes full time.

More than 7 million people have received shots of the vaccine developed by China's Sinovac company.

Turkey has reported more than 2.6 million confirmed infections and 28,000 deaths.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's top infectious disease expert has warned that vaccines will not end the coronavirus pandemic quickly as the country prepared to give its first vaccinations this week.

Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, said during a briefing Wednesday it would take a "considerably long time" before the vaccination campaign brings the virus under control.

The country aims to vaccinate more than 70% of its population by November. But a safe return to maskless normalcy is highly unlikely in 2021, due to the growing spread of virus variants and other factors, said Choi Won Suk, an infectious disease professor at the Korea University Ansan Hospital who joined Jeong at the briefing.

"We are concerned that people might drop their guard as vaccination begins, triggering another massive wave of the virus," Jeong said.

South Korea on Wednesday began transporting its first available doses of vaccines that rolled off a production line in the southern city of Andong, where local pharmaceutical company SK Bioscience manufactures vaccines developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford.

The country will kick off its mass immunization campaign on Friday. Separately, 55,000 doctors, nurses and other health professionals treating COVID-19 patients will begin receiving shots of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Saturday.

JERUSALEM — Israel's government has approved a night-time curfew from Thursday until Sunday to prevent the spread of the coronavirus over the Purim holiday.

The Prime Minister's Office and Health Ministry said a curfew from 8:30 p.m. until 5 a.m. would be in force starting Purim eve.

Purim, a Jewish holiday traditionally marked with public festivities and gatherings, begins Thursday at sundown. The holiday lockdown prohibits any large gatherings of more than 10 people indoors at concerts, parades or parties typical of the holiday's observances.

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Israel reopened its economy last week after a nearly two-month lockdown, the country's third since the start of the pandemic. But recent days have seen a slight uptick in new infections.

It has one of the highest immunization rates per capita, with over 4.5 million of its citizens having received at least one dose of the coronavirus vaccine. The Health Ministry has reported over 759,000 cases and at least 5,634 deaths from COVID-19.

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — More than 2,400 doses of COVID-19 vaccines in Tennessee's most populous county went to waste while local officials sat on tens of thousands of shots they thought had already gone into arms, the state's top health official announced Tuesday.

The Department of Health began an investigation over the weekend into a report that recent winter storms caused 1,000 doses to be tossed in Shelby County, which encompasses Memphis.

But Health Commissioner Lisa Piercey on Tuesday revealed that the problems were far more widespread. She said issues dating back to Feb. 3 included multiple incidents of spoiled doses, an excessive vaccine inventory, insufficient record-keeping and a lack of a formal process for managing soon-to-expire vaccines. A federal investigation is also expected.

As a result, Shelby County's local health department will temporarily no longer be allowed to allocate the vaccine. Instead, Memphis city officials, hospitals, clinics and other pharmacies will handle the distribution. Meanwhile, the physical management of the vaccine will now be handled by hospital partners.

2 hard-hit cities, 2 diverging fates in vaccine rollout

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

CENTRAL FALLS, R.I. (AP) — Mario Valdez, his wife and their 18-year-old son were fully vaccinated for COVID-19 this month as part of a special effort to inoculate every resident of Central Falls, the Rhode Island community hit hardest by the pandemic.

"I feel happy," the 62-year-old school bus driver said shortly after receiving his second and final dose. "Too many people here have COVID. It's better to be safe."

Roughly 50 miles (80 kilometers) across the state line in Chelsea, a Massachusetts city that was an early epicenter of the virus, high school sophomore Mannix Resto fears the state's slow rollout of the vaccine will continue to prevent students from attending classes in-person.

The 15-year-old says no one in his family has been vaccinated yet as the state focuses on vaccinating front-line workers and residents who are older or have serious health conditions.

"I just want to know how much longer it's going to last," Resto said earlier this month while walking with a friend on Broadway, the city's busy main street. "It's been a year already. We can't keep living like this."

On paper, Central Falls and Chelsea are mirror image communities.

Both are tiny former industrial cities that are now overwhelmingly Latino. Their residents, living in dense rows of triple-decker homes and apartment complexes, are the workforce for the state capitals to their south — Providence and Boston.

But their fortunes could not have been more different during the COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

Rhode Island began offering vaccinations to elderly Central Fall residents in late December and gradually expanded it so that anyone 18 or older who lives or works in the city is now eligible.

Nearly a third of adults in the city have received at least one dose of vaccine and about 16% are fully vaccinated, according to state data. Health officials say the city of about 20,000 has seen a marked drop in COVID-19 cases as a result.

In Massachusetts, meanwhile, public health experts, civil rights groups and immigrant activists have been complaining for months that the state isn't doing nearly enough to make sure Black and Latino residents are inoculated.

Under mounting pressure, Gov. Charlie Baker recently announced outreach and public awareness efforts targeted to hard-hit, minority communities, but critics say bolder action is needed to make up for lost ground.

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White residents have so far received 66% of all doses in the state while Black residents have received about 5% and Latino residents 4%, according to state data. Meanwhile, Black and Latino residents are dying from the virus at three times the rate of whites in the state by some measures, and Chelsea remains one of the state's hardest hit communities, with a COVID-19 positivity rate higher than the state's.

"It's frustrating," said Gladys Vega, executive director of La Colaborativa, a community nonprofit in Chelsea that's part of a new statewide coalition calling for greater vaccine equity. "Chelsea has demonstrated over and over again that we support the economy. But we've been neglected for decades."

Some states and counties have taken different approaches to ensuring vaccines are fairly distributed to communities of color, but too many government leaders are reluctant to fully embrace the strategies as a necessity, says Dr. Bernadette Boden-Albala, dean of the public health program at the University of California, Irvine.

Until hard-hit communities are properly addressed, their residents will continue to spread the infection, ensuring the virus persists, she and other experts say.

"If the pandemic is a fire, the vaccination is the water," Boden-Albala said. "You need to bring it to where the fire is burning the most, or you'll never put it out."

To be sure, Rhode Island and Massachusetts leaders have both faced withering criticism about the slow pace of vaccinations overall in their states. And the vaccine rollout hasn't been all smooth sailing in Central Falls.

Mayor Maria Rivera, who took office in January, says the state hasn't provided additional resources or manpower for the rollout in Central Falls, which went bankrupt during the 2008 recession and emerged from state receivership in 2013.

The city's main vaccination site, held every Saturday at the high school gymnasium, is an almost entirely volunteer operation.

Rivera says city volunteers have been going door-to-door registering residents unwilling or unable to sign up for appointments online or by phone. They've also had to reassure residents living in the country illegally that they won't be targeted by immigrant enforcement officials for seeking a shot, she says.

"We just want them to show up," Rivera says. "We're not going to turn anyone away."

According to data provided by Rivera's office this week, nearly 40% of doses have gone to Latinos and 27% to whites at three of the city's main vaccination sites. Another 23% of vaccine recipients didn't provide their race or ethnicity, and demographic data wasn't available for other vaccine locations, the office said.

Across the state line in Chelsea, Vega's organization has partnered with a community health center to launch a public vaccination site at its office on Broadway.

Vega says bringing the site to the city was a hard-fought achievement by local advocates. The only mass vaccination site the state has so far opened in a Boston-area community of color is about 10 miles (16 kilometers) from Chelsea, in Boston's historically Black Roxbury neighborhood, she and other advocates say.

And unlike vaccination sites in Central Falls, Chelsea's sites are limited by Massachusetts' eligibility rules, which only last week expanded to persons 65 or older, as well as people with two or more serious medical conditions.

The clinic has vaccinated more than 900 since opening Feb. 4, but the numbers are expected to rise this week as more people in the state now qualify, according to the East Boston Neighborhood Health Center, which operates the site.

Earlier this month, David Evans was surprised to find he had the clinic mostly to himself as he received his first dose. "That went pretty smoothly," the 82-year-old Chelsea resident said. "I was preparing for this to be an ordeal after hearing about places where people couldn't get appointments or they didn't have shots."

Out on Broadway that same day, the opening of the clinic was largely met with shrugs and indifference, suggesting officials have a long road ahead to win over skeptical residents.

"If the government told me I must take the vaccine, then I'd take it. But at the moment, I don't want it," said Cesar Osorio, a 30-year-old construction worker washing his clothes at a self-service laundry down the block. "Spanish people, we have our own medicines. We don't want vaccines."

Central Falls Mayor Maria Rivera is already dreaming of the return of beloved community events, like the city's summertime salsa nights.

She says the city is on pace to inoculate most residents by the summer. "I'm looking forward to the day we don't have to wear face masks," Rivera said while volunteering recently at the high school site.

Resident Mario Valdez has equally modest hopes. Now that he and his family are fully inoculated, they're making plans to fly to his native Guatemala in July, a trip they make nearly every year to visit relatives.

"It's going to be great," he said. "We love it down there."

Conviction in landmark case over Syrian government torture

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — A former member of Syrian President Bashar Assad's secret police was convicted Wednesday by a German court of facilitating the torture of prisoners in a landmark ruling that human rights activists hope will set a precedent for other cases.

Eyad Al-Gharib was convicted of accessory to crimes against humanity and sentenced by the Koblenz state court to 4 1/2 years in prison.

It was the first time that a court outside Syria ruled in a case alleging Syrian government officials committed crimes against humanity. German prosecutors invoked the principle of universal jurisdiction for serious crimes to bring the case that involved victims and defendants who were in Germany.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the verdict represented a "historic juncture" that would send "real messages to all those who committed war crimes and crimes against humanity against the Syrian people and gives hope to the victims and their families that right will prevail."

The group, which has documented the decade-long war, urged Syrian refugees in Europe to come forth with any evidence and documents to courts to help more such cases.

Al-Gharib could have faced more than a decade behind bars, but judges took into account mitigating factors, including his testimony in court.

The 44-year-old was accused of being part of a unit that arrested people following anti-government protests in the Syrian city of Douma and took them to a detention center known as Al Khatib, or Branch 251, where they were tortured.

Al-Gharib went on trial last year with Anwar Raslan, a more senior Syrian ex-official who is accused of overseeing the abuse of detainees at the same jail near Damascus.

Raslan is accused of supervising the "systematic and brutal torture" of more than 4,000 prisoners between April 2011 and September 2012, resulting in the deaths of at least 58 people.

During the trial, al-Gharib testified against Raslan, implicating him in more than 10 deaths of prisoners. A verdict in Raslan's case is expected later this year.

The court also considered photographs of thousands of alleged victims of torture by the Syrian government. The images were smuggled out of Syria by a former police officer, who goes by the alias of Caesar.

"Today's verdict is the first time a court has confirmed that the acts of the Syrian government and its collaborators are crimes against humanity," said Patrick Kroker, a lawyer with the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, which represented multiple survivors at the trial.

"Testimony by torture survivors and intelligence officers, as well as the Caesar photos, prove the scale and systemic nature of enforced disappearances, torture and sexual violence in Syria," he said. "The relevance of this evidence extends far beyond the proceedings in Koblenz."

Delivering the oral verdict, the presiding judge made it clear that al-Gharib's crimes were part of the Syrian government's systematic abuses against its own population. Syrian officials did not testify during the 60-day trial.

The court concluded that al-Gharib's unit, which was under Raslan's command, was involved in chasing down and detaining at least 30 people following a demonstration in Douma, and then bringing them to the detention center where they were tortured.

Al-Gharib, who had the rank of sergeant major until he defected, left Syria in 2013 and came to Germany

in 2018. Both men were arrested a year later.

Some rights groups have raised questions about the trial, noting that government defectors like Al-Gharib may not realize that statements they make during asylum applications may be used against them.

Mohammad Al-Abdallah, director of the Washington-based Syria Justice and Accountability Center and a former prisoner in Syria, said Al-Gharib was a low-ranking officer with little value in the case against him.

He suggested that putting defectors like Raslan and Al-Gharib in prison would please the Assad government, "because this will deter anyone else from defecting or joining the opposition or supplying information to human rights groups."

But Wassim Mukdad, a Syrian survivor and co-plaintiff in Raslan's trial, said while al-Gharib was "just one small cog in the vast Syrian torture apparatus" the verdict against him was important.

"I hope it can shed light on all of the Assad regime's crimes," he said. "Only then will the trial really be a first step on this long road to justice for myself and other survivors."

The European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, which supports 29 survivors in the case against Raslan, of whom 14 are represented as co-plaintiffs in that case, is working to bring further cases against Syrian officials to trial in Germany, Austria, Sweden and Norway.

Sarah El Deeb in Beirut and David Rising in Berlin contributed to this report.

Ghana is first nation in world to receive COVAX vaccines

By FRANCIS KOKUTSE and CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

ACCRA, Ghana (AP) — Ghana has become the first country in the world to receive vaccines acquired through the United Nations-backed COVAX initiative with a delivery of 600,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine made by the Serum Institute of India.

The vaccines, delivered by UNICEF, arrived at Accra's international airport early Wednesday and are part of the first wave of COVID-19 vaccines being sent by COVAX, an international cooperative program formed to make sure low- and middle-income countries have fair access to COVID-19 vaccines. COVAX is led by the United Nation's World Health Organization; Gavi, a vaccine group; and the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations, or CEPI.

Ghana is among 92 low-and middle-income countries that are receiving vaccines for free through COVAX. Another 90 countries and eight territories have agreed to pay if they choose to receive vaccines through COVAX.

The West African nation of 30 million has recorded 81,245 cases and 584 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic, according to figures from Ghana's Health Services Tuesday.

Ghana's vaccination campaign will begin March 2 and will be conducted in phases among prioritized groups, beginning with health workers, adults of 60 years and over, people with underlying health conditions, frontline executive, legislature, judiciary, and their related staff, Ghana's acting Minister of Information Kojo Opong Nkrumah said in a statement.

"The government of Ghana remains resolute at ensuring the welfare of all Ghanaians and is making frantic efforts to acquire adequate vaccines to cover the entire population through bilateral and multi-lateral agencies," he said.

In a joint statement, the country representatives of UNICEF and WHO described the arrival of the COVAX vaccines as a "momentous occasion" critical to bringing the pandemic to an end.

"After a year of disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic ... the path to recovery for the people of Ghana can finally begin," said the statement.

The COVAX shipment to Ghana is the start of what will be the world's largest vaccine procurement and supply operation in history, according to the statement. COVAX plans to deliver close to 2 billion doses of COVID-19 vaccines around the world this year.

"Today marks the historic moment for which we have been planning and working so hard. With the first shipment of doses, we can make good on the promise of the COVAX Facility to ensure people from less

wealthy countries are not left behind in the race for life-saving vaccines," said Henrietta Fore, UNICEF's executive director.

"The next phase in the fight against this disease can begin -- the ramping up of the largest immunization campaign in history," said Fore. "Each step on this journey brings us further along the path to recovery for the billions of children and families affected around the world."

Petesch reported from Dakar, Senegal.

'Don't worry, come forward': Asian nations get 1st shots

By The Associated Press undefined

Many nations in the Asia-Pacific region are rolling out the first shots for COVID-19 this week.

Here's a look at major developments:

SOUTH KOREA

South Korea's top infectious disease experts warned that vaccines will not bring the disease to a quick end and called for continued vigilance in social distancing and mask wearing as the country prepares to give its first shots on Friday.

Jeong Eun-kyeong, director of the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency, said Wednesday it would take a "considerably long time" before the mass vaccination campaign brings the virus under control.

The country aims to vaccinate more than 70% of the population by November. But a safe return to a life without masks is highly unlikely this year, considering various factors including the growing spread of virus variants, said Choi Won Suk, an infectious disease professor at the Korea University Ansan Hospital.

"We are concerned that people might drop their guard as vaccination begins, triggering another massive wave of the virus," Jeong said.

Jeong spoke as South Korea began transporting the first vaccines rolled off a production line in the southern city of Andong, where local pharmaceutical company SK Bioscience is manufacturing the shots developed by AstraZeneca and the University of Oxford.

The country will kick off the vaccination on Friday starting with residents and employees at long-term care facilities.

Separately, some 55,000 doctors, nurses and other health professionals treating COVID-19 patients will begin receiving the shots developed by Pfizer and BioNTech on Saturday.

AUSTRALIA

Two elderly people have been administered with higher-than-prescribed doses of the Pfizer vaccine, Australia's health minister said Wednesday.

The 88-year-old man and 94-year-old woman were being monitored and the doctor who administered the shots had been stood down from the vaccination program, Health Minister Greg Hunt said.

The error occurred at the Holy Spirit aged care home in the Brisbane suburb of Carseldine on Tuesday, the day after the vaccine rollout in Australia began, Hunt said.

"Both patients are being monitored and both patients are showing no signs at all of an adverse reaction," Hunt said. He did not say how much more than the prescribed dose was injected.

Lincoln Hopper, chief executive of St. Vincent's Care Services that owns the home, said he was "very concerned" for the residents' welfare. The woman remained at the home while the man had been admitted to a hospital, Hopper said.

"This incident has been very distressing to us, to our residents and to their families and it's also very concerning," Hopper said. "It's caused us to question whether some of the clinicians given the job of administering the vaccine have received the appropriate training."

Hunt later revealed that the doctor who administered the overdoses had not completed the online training that all health professionals involved in the program must undertake.

Hunt apologized for earlier telling Parliament that the doctor had been trained. He said he had asked the Health Department to take action against the doctor and the company the doctor works for.

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THAILAND

Thailand on Wednesday received the first 200,000 doses of China's Sinovac vaccine.

Another 117,000 doses of AstraZeneca are expected later Wednesday.

Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha attended a ceremony with the Chinese Embassy deputy mission chief to receive the vaccines at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi airport.

Thailand has ordered a total of 2 million doses from China.

Later this year, local manufacturer Siam Bioscience will supply 200 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine for the region, of which 26 million are allocated for Thailand. Thai officials have said they had secured an additional deal with AstraZeneca for a total of 61 million doses.

Many critics and opposition parties have criticized the government's procurement plans as too slow and inadequate.

Thailand, whose economy relies on income from tourism, is aiming to inject 10 million doses a month from June, and plans to inoculate at least half the population by the end of the year.

MALAYSIA

Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin received Malaysia's first COVID-19 vaccine shot on Wednesday at the start of the inoculation campaign.

"I did not feel anything at all. It was all over before I realize, just like a normal injection. Don't worry, come forward anytime," he said at a ceremony broadcast live.

Health Director-General Noor Hisham Abdullah was also among the first to be vaccinated.

Malaysia, which has signed deals with several vaccine suppliers including Pfizer and AstraZeneca, aims to vaccinate up to 80% percent of its 32 million people by next year.

More than half a million health care and front-line workers will be given priority in the first phase.

CHINA

Chinese regulators are looking at two more potential COVID-19 vaccines, one from state-owned company Sinopharm and another from a private company, CanSino.

Both companies said their vaccine candidates were submitted to regulators this week for approval.

China already has approved two vaccines that it has been using in a mass immunization campaign. One of them is also from Sinopharm, but it was developed by its Beijing subsidiary.

Sinopharm said its vaccine candidate is 72.51% effective. Both shots from Sinopharm rely on inactivated viruses, a traditional technology whereby a live virus is killed and then purified. The inactivated virus then triggers an immune response.

CanSino's vaccine is a one-dose shot that relies on a harmless common cold virus, called an adenovirus, to deliver the spike gene of the virus into the body. The body then makes the spike proteins, and then generates an immune response. The technology is similar to both AstraZeneca's and Johnson & Johnson's vaccines, which rely on different adenoviruses.

CanSino said its vaccine candidate is 65.28% effective.

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

Biden to order a review of US supply chains for vital goods

By JOSH BOAK and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is preparing to sign an executive order to review U.S. supply chains for large-capacity batteries, pharmaceuticals, critical minerals and semiconductors that power cars, phones, military equipment and other goods.

The United States has become increasingly reliant on imports of these goods — a potential national security and economic risk that the Biden administration hopes to address with the planned 100-day review and the possibility of increased domestic production, according to administration officials who insisted on anonymity to discuss the order. However, Biden will also look to work with international partners to ensure

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a stable and reliable supply chain.

The order being signed Wednesday will include sectoral reviews to be completed within one year for defense, public health and biological preparedness, information communications technology, energy, transportation and food production.

Over the past year, the fragility of vital supply chains has been revealed repeatedly. The coronavirus outbreak led to an initial shortage of masks, gloves and other protective medical equipment. Automakers in the United States and Europe are now dealing with a shortage of computer chips.

Administration officials have met with automakers and are talking with foreign counterparts on how to boost supplies in the short term. But there is no magic bullet to immediately fixing the lack of semiconductors for automakers, an administration official said.

The chip shortage is indicative as to why Biden is trying to be proactive with the reviews, so that they can strengthen the supply chains to prevent additional challenges from emerging. Administration officials say that they plan to partner with industry and members of Congress as part of the effort and that no tool is off the table, including the use of the Defense Production Act.

Nearly every major automaker that produces vehicles in the U.S. has cut production because of the shortage by canceling shifts, slowing assembly line speeds or temporarily closing factories. Most automakers have tried to limit the cuts to slower-selling vehicles.

But the shortage has forced the Ford Motor Co. to at times cancel shifts at two plants that make the F-Series pickup truck, the top-selling vehicle in the nation. Besides Ford, Stellantis (formerly Fiat Chrysler), General Motors, Toyota and Honda have had to slow production.

Some are building vehicles without computer chips, which control engines, brakes, transmissions and other tasks, so they can be installed once more semiconductors are available.

The chip shortage has cost the global auto industry the production of about 1 million vehicles, according to IHS Markit. The analytics firm expects the chip crisis to hit bottom toward the end of March, with supplies constrained into the third quarter.

IHS Markit expects the lost production could be made up later in the year. But the shortage could compound already tight vehicle inventories in the U.S., driving up prices that rose when factories were closed last year due to the novel coronavirus.

Moody's predicts that the chip shortage will cost Ford and General Motors about one-third of their pretax earnings this year. It also expects electric vehicle maker Tesla to be affected, although less than GM and Ford.

The U.S. Semiconductor Industry Association says the country's share of global chip manufacturing capacity has dropped from 37% in 1990 to 12% today. The association wants Washington to fund domestic semiconductor manufacturing and research and pass an investment tax credit to help build and modernize chip factories in the U.S.

The wrangling over semiconductors dovetails with China's economic rise as it became a manufacturing center for electronics. Chinese companies began to account for half of global semiconductor consumption in 2012, and demand has grown as China makes 90% of all smartphones, 67% of all smart televisions and 65% of all personal computers, noted a 2020 research paper by Chad Bown, a senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics.

Woods faces hard recovery from serious injuries in car crash

By STEPHANIE DAZIO AND DOUG FERGUSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — In a career filled with remarkable comebacks, Tiger Woods faces his toughest recovery of all.

Woods was driving through a sweeping, downhill stretch of road through coastal suburbs of Los Angeles when his SUV struck a sign, crossed over a raised median and two oncoming lanes before it toppled down an embankment, coming to a halt on its side.

The airbags deployed. A sheriff's deputy poked his head through a hole in the windshield to see Woods,

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still wearing his seatbelt, sitting in the driver's seat.

The crash caused "significant" injuries all down his right leg that featured rods, pins and screws during what was described as a "long surgical procedure" at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center.

Anish Mahajan, the chief medical officer, said Woods shattered tibia and fibula bones on his right leg in multiple locations. Those were stabilized by a rod in the tibia. He said a combination of screws and pins were used to stabilize additional injuries in the ankle and foot.

A statement on his Twitter account said he was awake, responsive and recovering.

"I will say that it's very fortunate that Mr. Woods was able to come out of this alive," said Carlos Gonzalez, the deputy from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department who was the first on the scene after a neighbor called 911.

"As if his body hasn't endured enough," Jon Rahm, the No. 2 player in the world, said from the Workday Championship in Florida. "I just hope he can get out of the hospital after recovery and he can still play with his kids and have a normal life."

The single-car crash was the latest setback for Woods, who at times has looked unstoppable on the golf course with his 15 major championships and record-tying 82 victories on the PGA Tour. He is among the most recognizable sports figures in the world, and at 45 with a reduced schedule from nine previous surgeries, remains golf's biggest draw.

He won the 2008 U.S. Open with shredded knee ligaments and two stress fractures in his left leg. His personal life imploded on Thanksgiving weekend in 2009 when he was caught having multiple extramarital affairs, and he returned to win his 11th award as PGA Tour player of the year and reach No. 1.

And then after four back surgeries that kept him out of golf for the better part of two years, he won the Masters in April 2019 for the fifth time, a victory that ranks among the great comebacks in the sport.

Now it's no longer a matter of when he plays again — the Masters is seven weeks away — but if he plays again.

No charges were filed, and police said there was no evidence he was impaired.

Woods was in Los Angeles over the weekend as the tournament host of the Genesis Invitational at Riviera Country Club. Monday and Tuesday had been set aside for Discovery-owned GOLFTV for Woods to give playing tips to celebrities. A tweet Monday showed him in a cart at Rolling Hills Country Club with comedian David Spade. He also worked with NBA great Dwyane Wade, who posted a video to his Instagram account.

Woods was headed to Rolling Hills on Tuesday when the accident happened.

"It was a great day," Wade said Tuesday night on Turner Sports, where he is a studio analyst. "And I woke up today so proud to be able to post that moment for the world, like a little snippet of our moment together. And I took a nap, and I woke up to the news. So, you know, just like everybody out there, my thoughts and prayers are all to his loved ones."

Thoughts and prayers have come from everywhere — Jack Nicklaus and Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, and former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Woods played golf with both of them, and Trump awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2019 after perhaps his great triumph — the Masters after he had gone through four back surgeries.

Woods had a fifth back surgery, a microdiscectomy, on Dec. 23, just three days after he played the PNC Championship with his son Charlie, who now is 12. Woods also has a 13-year-old daughter, Samantha.

The news put a damper on the World Golf Championship in Florida, where Woods was eligible to play if healthy.

"I'm sick to my stomach," said Justin Thomas, No. 3 in the world and among the younger players whom Woods has embraced. "It hurts to see one of my closest friends get in an accident. Man, I just hope he's all right."

The crash happened about 7:15 a.m. as he drove his courtesy vehicle from the Genesis Invitational through the upscale suburbs. Gonzalez says he sometimes catches people topping 80 mph (129 kph) in the 45 mph zone and crashes are common.

Police said Woods was alert as firefighters pried open the front windshield to get him out. Los Angeles

County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said the airbags deployed and the inside of the SUV stayed mostly intact, which "gave him a cushion to survive the crash."

Authorities said they checked for any odor of alcohol or other signs he was under the influence of a substance and found none. They didn't say how fast he was driving.

This is the third time Woods has been involved in a car investigation. The most notorious was the early morning after Thanksgiving in 2009, when his SUV ran over a fire hydrant and hit a tree. That was the start of shocking revelations that he had been cheating on his wife with multiple women.

In May 2017, Florida police found him asleep behind the wheel of a car parked awkwardly on the side of the road. He was arrested on a DUI charge and said he had an unexpected reaction to prescription medicine for his back pain. Woods later pleaded guilty to reckless driving and checked into a clinic to get help with prescription medication and a sleep disorder.

Woods hasn't won since the Zozo Championship in Japan in fall 2019, and he's reduced his playing schedule in recent years because of injuries. Besides his five back surgeries, he's had four surgeries on his left knee.

He was asked during the CBS broadcast Sunday at Riviera about recovering from his back surgery in time to play the Masters and Woods replied, "God, I hope so. I've got to get there first."

Ferguson reported from Jacksonville, Florida. AP Basketball Writer Tim Reynolds reported from Miami.

Judge bans enforcement of Biden's 100-day deportation pause

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A federal judge late Tuesday indefinitely banned President Joe Biden's administration from enforcing a 100-day moratorium on most deportations.

U.S. District Judge Drew Tipton issued a preliminary injunction sought by Texas, which argued the moratorium violated federal law and risked imposing additional costs on the state.

Biden proposed the 100-day pause on deportations during his campaign as part of a larger review of immigration enforcement and an attempt to reverse the priorities of former President Donald Trump. Biden has proposed a sweeping immigration bill that would allow the legalization of an estimated 11 million people living in the U.S. illegally. He has also instituted other guidelines on whom immigration and border agents should target for enforcement.

Tipton, a Trump appointee, initially ruled on Jan. 26 that the moratorium violated federal law on administrative procedure and that the U.S. failed to show why a deportation pause was justified. A temporary restraining order the judge issued was set to expire Tuesday.

Tipton's ruling did not require deportations to resume at their previous pace. Even without a moratorium, immigration agencies have wide latitude in enforcing removals and processing cases.

But in the days that followed his ruling, authorities deported 15 people to Jamaica and hundreds of others to Central America. The Biden administration has also continued expelling immigrants under a separate process begun by Trump officials, who invoked public-health law due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The legal fight over the deportation ban is an early sign of Republican opposition to Biden's immigration priorities, just as Democrats and pro-immigrant legal groups fought Trump's proposals. Almost four years before Tipton's order, Trump signed a ban on travel from seven countries with predominantly Muslim populations that caused chaos at airports. Legal groups successfully sued to stop implementation of the ban.

It was not immediately clear if the Biden administration will appeal Tipton's latest ruling. The Justice Department did not seek a stay of Tipton's earlier temporary restraining order.

Tiger Woods seriously injured in crash on steep LA-area road

By STEFANIE DAZIO and DOUG FERGUSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Tiger Woods crashed his SUV on sweeping, downhill road in the Los Angeles sub-

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urbs Tuesday morning, and doctors tried to stabilize "significant" injuries to his right leg with rods and a combination of screws and pins.

Woods was driving to a television shoot when his SUV crashed into a median, rolled over and ended up on its side near a steep road known for wrecks, authorities said. Golf's biggest star had to be pulled out through the windshield.

Woods' foundation said in a statement he was awake, responsive and recovering in the hospital.

Dr. Anish Mahajan, the chief medical officer at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center, said Woods shattered the tibia and fibula bones of his lower right leg in multiple locations. Those injuries were stabilized with a rod in the tibia. Additional injuries to the bones in the foot and ankle required screws and pins, Mahajan said in a statement released on Woods' Twitter account late Tuesday night.

The lengthy surgery also reduced swelling. Woods was awake and recovering in his hospital room, the statement said.

A resident near the accident site called 911. A Los Angeles County sheriff's deputy, the first on the scene, poked his head through a hole in the windshield to see Woods, his seatbelt fastened, sitting in the driver's seat.

The single-car crash was another setback for Woods, the preeminent golfer of his generation who has spent the last decade in a cycle of injuries, self-inflicted personal problems and an arrest for DUI. Each time, he returned to the course and won.

Even at 45, Woods is among the more recognizable sports figures in the world and remains golf's biggest draw. His 2019 Masters victory was seen as a transcendent comeback and further cemented his reputation for toughness and clutch performances. Briefly Tuesday, the world paused and worried that Woods might be critically injured or worse. As it became clear that his life wasn't in danger, the obvious question came out: Can he play golf again?

"As if his body hasn't endured enough," Jon Rahm, the No. 2 player in the world, said from the Workday Championship in Florida. "I just hope he can get out of the hospital after recovery and he can still play with his kids and have a normal life."

No charges were filed, police said there was no evidence he was impaired and no one else was injured. It was the 10th surgery for Woods, who has suffered knee, back and neck problems for more than a decade.

Woods was in Los Angeles over the weekend as tournament host of the Genesis Invitational that ended Sunday, and then to film content for his sponsor, Discovery-owned GOLFTV. He was not playing while recovering from a fifth back surgery on Dec. 23.

Woods was alone in the SUV when it crashed into a raised median, crossed two oncoming lanes and rolled several times, authorities said at a news conference. Police said Woods was alert as firefighters pried open the front windshield to get him out.

Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva said the airbags deployed and the inside of the SUV stayed mostly intact, which "gave him a cushion to survive the crash."

There was no immediate evidence that Woods was impaired. Authorities said they checked for any odor of alcohol or other signs he was under the influence of a substance and found none. They didn't say how fast he was driving.

The crash happened about 7:15 a.m. on a sweeping, downhill stretch of a two-lane road through upscale suburbs. Gonzalez, the first to get to the wreck, said he sometimes catches people topping 80 mph in the 45 mph zone and crashes are common.

"I will say that it's very fortunate that Mr. Woods was able to come out of this alive," Gonzalez said.

Thoughts and prayers have come from everywhere — Jack Nicklaus and Michael Jordan, Mike Tyson, and former Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump, who has played golf with Woods and awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2019.

Woods, who shares with Sam Snead the PGA Tour record of 82 career victories, had said during the Genesis Invitational television broadcast that he was awaiting one more test from his Dec. 23 microdiscectomy surgery before learning if he could expand his work. Asked about playing the Masters on April

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8-11, Woods replied, "God, I hope so."

Woods has carried the sport since his record-setting Masters victory in 1997 when he was 21, winning at the most prolific rate in modern PGA Tour history. He is singularly responsible for TV ratings spiking, which led to enormous increases in prize money.

He feared he would never play again until fusion surgery on his lower spine in April 2017. He returned a year later, and won the 2018 Tour Championship.

He played patient, calculating golf as other contenders wilted on the final nine holes to win the 2019 Masters, his first major in 11 years. The previous one was the U.S. Open in 2008 at Torrey Pines, on a left leg with shredded knee ligaments and a double stress fracture. He had reconstructive surgery a few days later.

Woods last played Dec. 20 in the PNC Championship in Orlando, Florida, an unofficial event where players are paired with parents or children. He played with his son, Charlie, who is now 12. Woods also has a 13-year-old daughter, Samantha.

The news put a damper on the World Golf Championship in Florida, where Woods was eligible to play. "I'm sick to my stomach," said Justin Thomas, No. 3 in the world and among the younger players whom Woods has embraced. "It hurts to see one of my closest friends get in an accident. Man, I just hope he's all right."

This is the third time Woods has been involved in a car investigation. The most notorious was the early morning after Thanksgiving in 2009, when his SUV ran over a fire hydrant and hit a tree. That was the start of shocking revelations that he had been cheating on his wife with multiple women. Woods lost major corporate sponsorships, went to a rehabilitation clinic in Mississippi and did not return to golf for five months.

In May 2017, Florida police found him asleep behind the wheel of a car parked awkwardly on the side of the road. He was arrested on a DUI charge and said later he had an unexpected reaction to prescription medicine for his back pain. Woods later pleaded guilty to reckless driving and checked into a clinic to get help with prescription medication and a sleep disorder.

Woods hasn't won since the Zozo Championship in Japan in fall 2019, and he's reduced his playing schedule in recent years because of injuries. Besides his back surgeries, he's had four surgeries on his left knee.

Ferguson reported from Jacksonville, Florida.

Capitol defenders cite missed intelligence for deadly breach

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, MICHAEL BALSAMO and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Missed intelligence was to blame for the outmanned Capitol defenders' failure to anticipate the violent mob that invaded the iconic building and halted certification of the presidential election on Jan. 6, the officials who were in charge of security that day said in their first public testimony on the insurrection.

The officials, including the former chief of the Capitol Police, pointed their fingers at various federal agencies — and each other — for their failure to defend the building as supporters of then-President Donald Trump overwhelmed security barriers, broke windows and doors and sent lawmakers fleeing from the House and Senate chambers. Five people died as a result of the riot, including a Capitol Police officer and a woman who was shot as she tried to enter the House chamber with lawmakers still inside.

Former Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund, who resigned under pressure immediately after the attack, and the other officials said Tuesday they had expected the protests to be similar to two pro-Trump events in late 2020 that were far less violent. Sund said he hadn't seen an FBI field office report that warned of potential violence citing online posts about a "war."

Sund described a scene as the mob arrived at the perimeter that was "like nothing" he had seen in his 30 years of policing and argued that the insurrection was not the result of poor planning by Capitol Police but of failures across the board.

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"No single civilian law enforcement agency – and certainly not the USCP – is trained and equipped to repel, without significant military or other law enforcement assistance, an insurrection of thousands of armed, violent, and coordinated individuals focused on breaching a building at all costs," he testified.

The hearing was the first of many examinations of what happened that day, coming almost seven weeks after the attack and over a week after the Senate voted to acquit Trump of inciting the insurrection by telling his supporters to "fight like hell" to overturn his election defeat. Fencing and National Guard troops still surround the Capitol in a wide perimeter, cutting off streets and sidewalks that are normally full of cars, pedestrians and tourists.

The joint hearing, part of an investigation by two Senate committees, was the first time the officials testified publicly about the events of Jan. 6. In addition to Sund, former Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Michael Stenger, former House Sergeant-at-Arms Paul Irving and Robert Contee, the acting chief of police for the Metropolitan Police Department, testified.

Irving and Stenger also resigned under pressure immediately after the deadly attack. They were Sund's supervisors and in charge of security for the House and Senate.

"We must have the facts, and the answers are in this room," Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar said at the beginning of the hearing. The Rules panel is conducting the joint probe with the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

Even after the hearing, much still remains unknown about what happened before and during the assault. How much did law enforcement agencies know about plans for violence that day, many of which were public? And how could the Capitol Police have been so ill-prepared for a violent insurrection that was organized online?

Sund told the lawmakers that he didn't know then that his officers had received a report from the FBI's field office in Norfolk, Virginia, that forecast, in detail, the chances that extremists could bring "war" to Washington the following day. The head of the FBI's office in Washington has said that once he received the Jan. 5 warning, the information was quickly shared with other law enforcement agencies through a joint terrorism task force.

Sund said Tuesday that an officer on the task force had received that memo and forwarded it to a sergeant working on intelligence for the Capitol Police but that the information was not sent on to other supervisors.

"How could you not get that vital intelligence?" asked Senate Homeland Chairman Gary Peters, D-Mich., who said the failure of the report to reach the chief was clearly a major problem.

"That information would have been helpful," Sund acknowledged.

Even without the intelligence, there were clear signs that violence was a possibility on Jan. 6. Far-right social media users openly hinted for weeks that chaos would erupt at the U.S. Capitol while Congress convened to certify the election results.

Sund said he did see an intelligence report created within his own department warning that Congress could be targeted on Jan. 6. But he said that report assessed the probability of civil disobedience or arrests, based on the information they had, as "remote" to "improbable" for the groups expected to demonstrate.

Contee, the acting city police chief, also suggested that no one had flagged the FBI information from Norfolk, Virginia, which he said came in the form of an email. He said he would have expected that kind of intelligence "would warrant a phone call or something."

Sund and Irving disagreed on when the National Guard was called and on requests for the guard beforehand. Sund said he spoke to both Stenger and Irving about requesting the National Guard in the days before the riot, and that Irving said he was concerned about the "optics" of having them present. Irving denied that, saying Sund's account was "categorically false."

"We all agreed the intelligence did not support the troops and collectively decided to let it go," Stenger said.

After smashing through the barriers at the perimeter, the invaders engaged in hand-to-hand combat with police officers, injuring dozens of them, and broke into the building.

Once the violence had begun, Sund and Irving also disagreed on when the National Guard was requested

— Sund said he requested it at 1:09 p.m., but Irving denied receiving a call at that time.

Contee said he was “stunned” over the delayed response. He said Sund was pleading with Army officials to deploy National Guard troops as the rioting rapidly escalated. Police officers “were out there literally fighting for their lives” but the officials appeared to be going through a “check the boxes” exercise, he said.

Pentagon officials, who will be invited to testify before the committee at a second hearing next week, have said it took time to put the troops in position, and there was not enough contingency planning in advance. They said they offered the assistance beforehand but were turned down.

Klobuchar said after the hearing that the next police chief should have greater ability to make decisions both leading up to and during a crisis, and the Rules panel could consider such legislation once the investigation is completed. The current structure “clearly needs some reform,” she said.

The hearing Tuesday was the first of several this week examining what went wrong Jan. 6. A House subcommittee will examine damage to the Capitol on Wednesday and will hear testimony from current security officials, including Acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman, on Thursday. Next week, the Senate panels will invite officials from the Pentagon, FBI and Homeland Security Department.

In prepared testimony released ahead of the hearing on damage to the Capitol, Architect of the Capitol J. Brett Blanton and the curator of the House of Representatives, Farar Elliott, describe damage to statues and paintings and quick thinking by staff as the rioting was underway — including one aide who secured the House’s 1819 silver inkstand, the oldest object in the chamber.

Congress is also considering a bipartisan, independent commission, and multiple congressional committees have said they will look at different aspects of the siege. Federal law enforcement has arrested more than 230 people who were accused of being involved in the attack, and attorney general nominee Merrick Garland said in his confirmation hearing Monday that investigating the riot would be a priority.

Associated Press writers Lolita Baldor in Washington and Nomaan Merchant in Houston contributed to this report.

Iraq’s struggling Christians hope for boost from pope visit

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

Nasser Banyameen speaks about his hometown of Qaraqosh in the historical heartland of Iraqi Christianity with nostalgia. Before Islamic State group fighters swept through the Nineveh Plains in northern Iraq. Before the militants shattered his sense of peace. Before panicked relatives and neighbors fled, some never to return.

Iraq’s Christian communities in the area were dealt a severe blow when they were scattered by the IS onslaught in 2014, further shrinking the country’s already dwindling Christian population. Many hope their struggle to endure will get a boost from a historic visit by Pope Francis planned in March.

Among the places on his itinerary is Qaraqosh, where this week Vatican and Iraqi flags fluttered from light poles, some adorned with the pope’s image.

Francis’ visit, his first foreign trip since the coronavirus pandemic and the first ever by a pope to Iraq, is a sign that “You’re not alone,” said Monsignor Segundo Tejado Muñoz, the undersecretary of the Vatican’s development office. “There’s someone who is thinking of you, who is with you. And these signs are so important. So important.”

The IS juggernaut and the long war to drive the militants out left ransacked homes and charred or pulverized buildings around the north. But the biggest loss perhaps has been the people. Traditionally Christian towns across the Nineveh Plains virtually emptied out and, by some of the widely varying estimates, fewer than half of the Christians who fled have returned.

The Vatican and the pope have frequently insisted on the need to preserve Iraq’s ancient Christian communities and create the security, economic and social conditions for those who have left to return.

To do that, the Vatican for years has helped coordinate a network of Catholic non-governmental organizations providing help in the field in Iraq and other countries, including in education, health care and reconstruction. The aid is non-denominational — Muslims are helped as well as Christians -- and the overall

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hope is that the delicate interfaith balance can be preserved and strengthened. The pope's March 5-8 visit will also have a strong interfaith component.

"People want to look for a better future for their families, so you can't stop them if they have the intention of going somewhere else," Tejado said. "But at least we try to create the conditions they might return."

That could be difficult.

Many Christians who fled the IS advance have either stayed in Iraq's Kurdistan region or started new lives abroad. While those who have returned have been rebuilding fractured but vibrant communities with resolve, some still feel vulnerable and eye better lives elsewhere.

Banyameen returned in 2019 from the Kurdish region to his house in Qaraqosh, also known as Bakhdida. But many family members who fled like him ended up in Australia and Germany. IS sleeper cells still carry out attacks in parts of Iraq, so he worries about the specter of a militant resurgence, the future of his three children and Iraq's economic and security woes.

"The homeland is the family, not the house ... I feel very homesick," he said. "When something is broken, it doesn't go back to the way it used to be."

Their home has been repaired, but the sight of empty or damaged ones on their street reminds his wife, Ban Saeed, of the IS reign of terror. After she gave birth to the couple's third child in December, she wondered if it would have been better for their daughter to have been born abroad.

"If we left, I am sure their future would be better abroad, not like here," she said. "There would be safety and I wouldn't be scared for them when they come and go."

In nearby Bartella, Sargon Issa said he felt the town's spirit dim with so many familiar faces gone.

"Walking down a street, I used to salute so many people, friends and neighbors. Now, there's hardly any of that," said Issa. "Life is not like before. There's no flavor to it. ... Even those Christians who have returned to Bartella say they want to leave to find stability."

He, too, would like to leave if he could; his mother tells him she wants to die in Iraq.

"I try to change her mind and tell her, 'Let's travel and live without worry or fear ... somewhere where we wouldn't be driven out of our homes,'" he said. "She tells me we should stay, and that God is with us."

The numerical decline and waning clout of Iraqi Christians started before the Islamic State's persecution of religious minorities like theirs. Christians were among groups targeted by militants amid the breakdown in security after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion that overthrew Saddam Hussein.

The Chaldean Catholic Patriarch, Cardinal Louis Raphael Sako, estimated that 1 million Christians have left Iraq since 2003 and about 500,000 remained. But there are no official figures, and estimates vary: Some put the number left at fewer than 250,000.

Without faith the government can provide security from potential violence, legal protections and economic opportunities, many Christians are wary of returning.

William Warda, co-founder of Hammurabi Human Rights Organization in Baghdad, said the Christian presence is under threat. "To this day, they don't feel safe and secure ... because the state is weak, and the rule of law is weak."

Some Christians lament broken trust with some Muslims in neighboring villages who they believe sympathized with IS or helped pillage their homes. They are also wary of the ascension of largely Shiite militias and fearful of what they say are unfavorable demographic changes in some traditionally Christian areas.

Etched in the minds of many are the memories of the flight to escape IS, the indignities of displacement and the scenes of devastation that awaited those who returned, including burnt out churches and desecrated tombs.

As he left under cover of darkness shortly before the militants entered his town of Karamlis in 2014, the Rev. Thabet Habeb felt pain for all that he was leaving behind. He took little besides some manuscripts, including a Bible.

"It was as if we had been expelled forever from the lands of our grandfathers."

More than two years would pass before Habeb could set foot in the town. The smell of smoke from burnt out structures still hung in the air. In November 2016, he held prayers at the St. Adday church, the sound of broken glass crunching beneath the feet of worshippers stunned by the damage around them. Decapi-

tated statues of Jesus and Virgin Mary stood in the scarred church that day; one woman wept bitterly.

Much reconstruction has taken place since. But so far, only about 345 of about 820 Christian families in pre-2014 Karamlis have returned, Habeb said.

"We need to restore our numbers to support the Christian presence and identity in the town," he said.

Those who did come back make sure an ancient heritage and a way of life endure.

At St. Paul's House for Church Services in Qaraqosh, religious paintings and musical instruments were burned and a statue of Jesus hurled to the ground, said the Rev. Duraid Barber, the former manager.

But the house's activities, which include religious classes and teaching the Syriac language, have been revived and even expanded.

"We decided to return and serve this wounded and pained country to the last drop of our blood," he said. "As Christians, we believe that we are like the salt that adds flavor to food."

Associated Press writers Nicole Winfield in Rome, Hadi Mizban in Qaraqosh and Samya Kullab in Baghdad contributed.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Experts fear fresh wave of political prisoners in Myanmar

By VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Whether taken from their homes in the middle of the night or grabbed off the streets during protests, hundreds of people have been arrested in the weeks since Myanmar's military coup, leading human rights groups and experts to fear a sizable expansion in the number of political prisoners in the country.

As of Tuesday, some 696 people — including monks, writers, activists, politicians and others — had been arrested in relation to the coup, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, or AAPP, a Myanmar-based organization.

Many of those arrested were charged using a legacy of laws — some dating back to British colonial times and others instituted under previous military regimes — that have been used against critics by every government, including the one led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party, which was ousted in the Feb. 1 coup.

"The National League for Democracy was comfortable leaving repressive laws on the books because in some instances they felt they might be able to take advantage of those laws themselves," said Ronan Lee, a visiting scholar at Queen Mary University of London's International State Crime Initiative.

"It's now clear that some of those laws are now going to be weaponized against democracy campaigners in a way that maybe the National League for Democracy didn't foresee," Lee said.

While the military continues to use and amend old laws to crack down on dissidents, new laws are being introduced as well, signaling the military's intent to continue arresting protesters.

The hundreds arrested since the coup join the already hundreds of political prisoners in the country who were imprisoned both under the previous junta and the National League for Democracy, or NLD.

"We have now seen not just a new generation of political prisoners, but also the retargeting of former political prisoners," said Manny Maung, a Myanmar researcher at New York-based Human Rights Watch.

During the NLD's rule, journalists, critics of the military and the government, and others were charged under colonial-era laws. According to the AAPP, Myanmar had over 700 political prisoners as of Jan. 31, with hundreds being charged during the NLD's time in power.

Many of the repressive laws used against dissidents date back to the country's colonial era.

After over 120 years of British colonial rule, Myanmar, then called Burma, became an independent republic in 1948. Though no longer a British territory, the country retained many of its colonial-era laws, which were "designed in nature to be repressive and silence political opponents," said Nick Cheeseman,

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a fellow at the Department of Political and Social Change at Australian National University.

In 1962, the military took control of the country through a coup, and it remained under junta rule for decades. Under the junta, people were regularly imprisoned for speaking out against the military. Those arrested were often sent to prison for years, and torture — including beatings, waterboarding, and deprivation of food and sleep — was commonplace, according to the AAPP. Suu Kyi was kept under house arrest for 15 years over a 21-year period during this time.

Before democratic reforms eventually took place — a period during which Suu Kyi was released from house arrest, her political party agreed to participate in 2012 by-elections and press censorship was softened — Amnesty International estimated that Myanmar had more than 1,000 political prisoners, calling it “one of the highest of such populations worldwide.”

In the years following Suu Kyi’s 2010 release from house arrest, a prisoner amnesty led to the freeing of thousands of inmates, including some 200 political prisoners, while others remained incarcerated.

For many observers, this signaled hope for further reforms, a view bolstered when Suu Kyi’s party took power following a landslide victory in 2015 elections.

But hope quickly dissipated in the years that followed, as repressive laws widely stayed on the books and political prisoners remained without official recognition.

The lack of repealing hard criminal codes left some free-speech and other activist groups upset in Myanmar, but “really didn’t impact how many in the West interacted with Aung San Suu Kyi” or her government, said Lee, the scholar.

“What the military is trying to do is use the laws to add some legitimacy to their illegitimate grab for power and the NLD gave them an opportunity to do that by leaving old laws intact,” Lee said. “But there’s also no question that if these laws didn’t work for the military, they’d still find other ways of arresting people.”

Since this month’s coup, the military has also amended old penal codes and proposed new laws that experts say could be used as further tools to crack down on dissidents.

For example, amendments made on Feb. 14 to the country’s Penal Code sections on High Treason state that people can be sentenced to “up to 20 years for planning to hinder the success of defense or law enforcement.”

A controversial proposed cybersecurity law demands the elimination of online comments considered to be misinformation or disinformation that might cause “hate” or disrupt stability, and any comment that might violate any existing law. Those who are deemed to break the law can be sentenced to up to three years in prison.

The legal changes “are a textbook example of a military attempting to suppress dissent,” said Bo Kyi, a former political prisoner and founder of the AAPP. “The wording of these amendments exposes quite literally anyone to imprisonment.”

With the continued crackdown on anti-coup protesters — including arrests by plainclothes police in the middle of the night — prominent pro-democracy activists told The Associated Press that they have begun to stay in safehouses to avoid arrest. Others who have been arrested have not had contact with their families, and their locations remain unknown.

“Conditions (for prisoners) is something that we’re really worried about,” said Maung, the Human Rights Watch researcher. “We are expecting the worst, which is that people are being mistreated and possibly even tortured, because that’s what used to happen.”

Top board leaders resign after deadly Texas power outages

By PAUL J. WEBER and DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Top board leaders of Texas’ embattled power grid operator said Tuesday they will resign following outage over more than 4 million customers losing electricity last week during a deadly winter storm, including many whose frigid homes lacked heat for days in subfreezing temperatures.

The resignations are the first since the crisis began in Texas, and calls for wider firings remain in the aftermath of one of the worst power outages in U.S. history.

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All of the five board directors who are stepping down, including Chairwoman Sally Talberg, live outside of Texas, which only intensified criticism of the Electric Reliability Council of Texas. The resignations are effective Wednesday — a day before Texas lawmakers are expected to sharply question grid managers and energy officials about the failures during hearings at the state Capitol.

Another candidate for a director position, who also does not live in Texas, said he was withdrawing his name.

Four of the departing board members acknowledged “concerns about out-of-state board leadership” in a letter to grid members and the state’s Public Utility Commission, which oversees ERCOT. During the crisis, ERCOT officials removed contact information for board members off its website, saying they had become the target of threats.

The board members did not reflect on their own performance in the letter.

“Our hearts go out to all Texans who have had to go without electricity, heat, and water during frigid temperatures and continue to face the tragic consequences of this emergency,” the letter read.

The other board members are vice chairman Peter Cramton, Terry Bulger and Raymond Hepper. Talberg lives in Michigan and Bulger lives in Wheaton, Illinois, according to their biographies on ERCOT’s website. Cramton and Hepper spent their careers working outside Texas. The fifth board member leaving is Vanessa Anesetti-Parra.

There are a total of 16 members on ERCOT’s board, which appoints officers who manage the grid manager’s day-to-day operations.

Historic snowfall and single-digit temperatures in Texas last week left millions without power and water for days. The storm was part of any icy blast across the Deep South that is blamed for more than 80 deaths, roughly half of which were in Texas.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott has largely blamed the outages on ERCOT and called for investigations. But the problems were wider than ERCOT, including power plants that were knocked offline by the extreme cold and natural gas producers didn’t protect wellheads from freezing.

“The lack of preparedness and transparency at ERCOT is unacceptable, and I welcome these resignations,” Abbott said in a statement. “The State of Texas will continue to investigate ERCOT and uncover the full picture of what went wrong, and we will ensure that the disastrous events of last week are never repeated.”

ERCOT president Bill Magness has said Texas’ power grid — which is uniquely isolated from the rest of the U.S. — was on the brink of collapse in the early hours of Feb. 15 as power plants froze in the cold and a record demand for electricity to heat home overwhelmed the system. He has defended the outages as a necessity, while Abbott has accused ERCOT of misleading Texas about the readiness of the grid.

As governor, Abbott picks the commissioners of the Public Utility Commission that oversees ERCOT. The selection of “unaffiliated” ERCOT board members — like most of those who are resigning — must be approved by the PUC.

According to tax filings from 2018, Cramton received \$87,000 in compensation and worked an average of five hours a week. Bulger got \$65,250 and worked an average of eight hours a week. Three others on the board at the time were paid between \$92,600 and \$100,100, though it was not immediately known how many hours they worked. ERCOT valued Magness’ total compensation that year at \$883,264.

After ERCOT removed board members’ information from the website, Magness conceded it was public information in a call last week with reporters but did not describe the nature of the threats.

“It was a security, safety idea,” Magness said.

Cramton, whose page on the professional networking site LinkedIn lists him as living in California, declined comment when contacted Tuesday. Hepper also declined comment beyond the resignation letter, and other board members did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Meantime, Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner said the Public Utility Commission of Texas is as responsible for the loss of electric power as ERCOT.

“ERCOT alone should not be made the scapegoat,” said the Democratic ex-state lawmaker who presides

over the largest city in the state and one of the hardest hit by recent weather.

"When I was in the Texas Legislature, I filed a bill in 2011 relating to the PUC to ensure ERCOT has adequate reserve power to prevent blackout conditions. That bill never got a hearing.

"The PUC oversees ERCOT, and the governor appoints all three commissioners. The resignations do not change the fact that the PUC and the Texas Legislature failed to provide oversight or enact common-sense policy," Turner said.

Koenig reported from Dallas.

For Senate rules arbiter, minimum wage is latest minefield

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — She's guided the Senate through two impeachment trials, vexed Democrats and Republicans alike with parliamentary opinions and helped rescue Electoral College certificates from a pro-Trump mob ransacking the Capitol. She also does spot-on impersonations of senators including Bernie Sanders.

Elizabeth MacDonough, an English literature major and the Senate's first woman parliamentarian, is about to demonstrate anew why she's one of Washington's most potent, respected yet obscure figures. Any day, she's expected to reveal if she thinks a federal minimum wage boost, progressives' most prized plank in Democrats' \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan, should fall from the bill.

Her decision, a political minefield likely to elicit groans from whichever side she disappoints, will play an outsize role in deciding the wage increase's fate. It may not be definitive — majority Democrats might try overriding an opinion they don't like.

"Elizabeth has a soul-crushing job, to which she brings an enormous amount of soul," said her predecessor, Alan Frumin, whom she replaced when he retired in 2012.

The House plans to vote Friday on its version of the relief bill, which includes the minimum wage increase.

Part of MacDonough's job, in which she's supposed to be nonpartisan, is enduring high-stakes lobbying from both parties when she's making pivotal decisions. But she's found a home in the Capitol, where she's spent most of the past three decades after starting as an assistant Senate librarian in 1990. "She knows the names of every police officer and janitor," Frumin said.

Sometimes, the pressure can be extraordinary. Frumin said that when the Senate was enacting former President Barack Obama's 2010 health care law — which was opposed by Republicans and infuriated grassroots tea party conservatives — he had police protection at his home as a precaution. "And the political climate hasn't gotten friendlier," he said.

Even so, MacDonough, 55, has garnered high marks from both parties. Underscoring that, while she was initially appointed in 2012 by Democrat Harry Reid of Nevada, Senate majority leader at the time, she was retained by Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., when he became majority leader in 2015.

"She's very solid. She listens to all the evidence," Sanders, the independent Vermont senator and chief sponsor of the minimum wage proposal, said in a recent interview.

"She is a brilliant lawyer, a thorough and fair referee and a walking encyclopedia of Senate precedent and procedure," McConnell spokesperson David Popp said Tuesday.

She's also used the time to hone an ability to replicate the voices and cadence of several senators including Sanders, associates say.

MacDonough earned her reputation for fairness while helping steer the Senate through some of its highest-profile moments. Rulings she issued striking anti-abortion and other provisions from numerous failed GOP attempts to repeal Obama's health care law weakened their bills.

She helped Chief Justice John Roberts preside over then-President Donald Trump's 2020 Senate impeachment trial and was beside Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., for Trump's second trial this month. Trump was acquitted both times.

And as Trump supporters fought past police and into the Capitol last month in hopes of disrupting Con-

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gress' certification of Joe Biden's Electoral College victory, MacDonough and other staffers rescued those ballots and hustled mahogany boxes containing them to safety. MacDonough's office, on the Capitol's first floor, was ransacked and declared a crime scene.

Raised by a single mother in the comfortable Washington suburb of Chevy Chase, Maryland, MacDonough graduated with an English literature degree from George Washington University. She began her Senate career in its library before leaving to get a law degree at Vermont Law School.

She worked briefly as a Justice Department trial attorney before returning to the Senate in 1999, this time as an assistant in the parliamentarian's office. Less than two years later, she helped Vice President Al Gore preside over Congress' certification of electoral ballots that sealed his own 2000 election defeat to George W. Bush.

"It was very exciting and humbling," MacDonough said in a Vermont Law School alumni profile.

As Democrats begin pushing Biden's sweeping relief package through Congress, they're using a special procedure that shields the bill from Senate Republican filibusters, which require 60 votes to thwart. That's out of reach for Democrats in a 50-50 chamber they control with Vice President Kamala Harris' tiebreaking vote.

But Senate rules require that items in such a bill must have a substantial budget impact that is not "merely incidental" to the language's main intended purpose.

MacDonough has been meeting with Democrats who have tried convincing her that their minimum wage provision meets that test and with Republicans who have told her it doesn't. Democrats want to raise the federal floor, fixed at \$7.25 hourly since 2009, to \$15 over five years.

The Senate usually heeds the parliamentarian's advice, which is whispered to the senator presiding over the chamber. But the majority party will on rare occasion force a vote to overrule the parliamentarian.

If MacDonough decides the minimum wage hike should remain in the bill, it would likely survive because GOP opponents would need an unachievable 60 votes to remove it. But at least two Democrats have expressed opposition to the \$15 proposal, so it still could be amended or even dropped.

If MacDonough says it should be stricken, Democrats would have no chance of garnering 60 votes to overrule her. But they might choose the rarely utilized, hardball tactic of having the presiding officer, presumably Harris, ignore her and announce that the minimum wage language meets the test to stay in the overall legislation.

That would force Republicans to find 60 votes to strip the provision, which they'd fail to do. Such a tactic is called the nuclear option because Democrats would be using their majority to muscle through rules changes, enraging Republicans and inviting a future tit-for-tat retaliation.

Majority Democrats overruled MacDonough in 2013, eliminating filibusters for executive branch and most judicial nominees. In 2017, Republicans extended that to Supreme Court picks. "It was a stinging defeat that I tried not to take personally," she said during a 2018 commencement speech at her law school.

Southern Baptists oust 2 churches over LGBTQ inclusion

By DAVID CRARY AP National Writer

The Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee voted Tuesday to oust four of its churches, two over policies deemed to be too inclusive of LGBTQ people and two more for employing pastors convicted of sex offenses.

The actions were announced at a meeting marked by warnings from two top leaders that the SBC, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, was damaging itself with divisions over several critical issues including race.

"We should mourn when closet racists and neo-Confederates feel more at home in our churches than do many of our people of color," said the SBC's president, J.D. Greear, in his opening speech.

The two churches expelled for LGBTQ inclusion were St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, and Towne View Baptist Church, in Kennesaw, Georgia.

Towne View's pastor, the Rev. Jim Conrad, told The Associated Press last week that he would not appeal

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the ouster and plans to affiliate his church, at least temporarily, with The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which lets churches set their own LGBTQ policies.

Towne View began admitting LGBTQ worshippers as members in October 2019 after a same-sex couple with three adopted children asked Conrad if they could attend, a decision he defends as the right thing to do.

"The alternative would have been to say, 'We're probably not ready for this,' but I couldn't do that," said Conrad, pastor there since 1994.

St. Matthews Baptist was among more than 12 churches that lost their affiliation with the Kentucky Baptist Convention in 2018 because they made financial contributions to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which had recently lifted a ban on hiring LGBTQ employees.

In a statement Tuesday, St. Matthews said the SBC's decision to oust it was based on its LGBTQ-inclusive membership policy — which asserts that "a belief in Jesus as personal Savior is the sole criterion for membership in our Church."

"Nothing in the Southern Baptist Convention's decision changes St. Matthews Baptist Church's deep commitment to carrying out what God calls us to do in our worship and spiritual growth," the church said.

SBC officials said West Side Baptist Church in Sharpsville, Pennsylvania, was ousted because it "knowingly employs as pastor a registered sex offender," while Antioch Baptist Church in Sevierville, Tennessee, has a pastor who was convicted of statutory rape.

Baptist Press, the SBC's official news agency, identified the Antioch Baptist pastor as John Randy Leming Jr., and said he had pleaded guilty in 1998 to two counts of statutory rape for oral sex with a 16-year-old congregant when he pastored at nearby Shiloh Baptist Church in Sevier County in 1994. The Associated Press was unable to find a working phone number for Leming's church and there was no immediate reply to a message sent via its Facebook page.

West Side Baptist had made clear on its website that its pastor, David Pearson, has a troubled past.

"Over 29 years ago Pastor David lived as a great sinner and rebel," the site says. "But Christ Jesus is a great Savior! Today Pastor David has gone from disgrace to amazing grace and now has served the Lord Jesus Christ at West Side for 18 years."

Pearson is listed on Florida's sex-offender registry as having been convicted of sexual assault of a child in Texas in 1993.

Also on Tuesday's agenda was a report by an executive committee task force about the SBC's public policy arm, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and its president, the Rev. Russell Moore. Moore has dismayed some SBC conservatives with various stances — including criticism of former President Donald Trump and support for a more welcoming immigration policy.

But the executive committee took no action on the report, declining to embrace some recommendations aimed at reining in Moore's outspokenness.

The two-day meeting opened Monday in Nashville, Tennessee, with a schedule featuring speeches by Greear and executive committee president Ronnie Floyd bemoaning the multiple acrimonious divisions within the denomination.

"This sound of war in the camp of Southern Baptists is concerning to me, and I know it is also concerning to many of you," Floyd said. "While we hear and see how the American culture is so out of control, my friends, our own culture within the Southern Baptist family is also out of control."

Floyd noted that the divisions mirror ideological, political and racial differences nationwide.

"In this fever-pitch environment, each of us needs to be very careful with the words we write, speak, tweet or post," he said. "As SBC leaders and followers of Jesus, our public behavior matters."

Greear addressed racial tensions in the SBC, a longstanding problem that has recently been rekindled. Some Black pastors have left the SBC and others are voicing dismay over pronouncements by the SBC's six seminary presidents — all of them white — restricting how the subject of systemic racism can be taught at their schools.

Going forward, Greear said, Black Southern Baptists should be included in discussions on this topic,

including the SBC's stance toward the concept of Critical Race Theory, which the seminary presidents repudiated.

"The reality is that if we in the SBC had shown as much sorrow for the painful legacy that racism and discrimination has left in our country as we have passion to decry CRT, we probably wouldn't be in this mess," Greear said

"Do we want to be a Gospel people, or a Southern culture people? Which is the more important part of our name — Southern or Baptist?"

After the two speeches, the executive committee unanimously adopted an expansion plan called Vision 2025. It would increase full-time Southern Baptist international missionaries from 3,700 to 4,200, boost the number of congregations by 5,000 and seek to reverse the decline in baptizing 12- to 17-year-olds.

Floyd said SBC churches are baptizing 38% fewer teenagers than in 2000.

Associated Press reporter Travis Loller in Nashville, Tennessee, contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to reflect that the Pennsylvania church's name is West Side, not Westside.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

AP Exclusive: Black Lives Matter opens up about its finances

By AARON MORRISON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The foundation widely seen as a steward of the Black Lives Matter movement says it took in just over \$90 million last year, according to a financial snapshot shared exclusively with The Associated Press.

The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation is now building infrastructure to catch up to the speed of its funding and plans to use its endowment to become known for more than protests after Black Americans die at the hands of police or vigilantes.

"We want to uplift Black joy and liberation, not just Black death. We want to see Black communities thriving, not just surviving," reads an impact report the foundation shared with the AP before releasing it.

This marks the first time in the movement's nearly eight-year history that BLM leaders have revealed a detailed look at their finances. The foundation's coffers and influence grew immensely following the May 2020 death of George Floyd, a Black man whose last breaths under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer sparked protests across the U.S. and around the world.

That growth also caused longstanding tensions to boil over between some of the movement's grassroots organizers and national leaders — the former went public last fall with grievances about financial transparency, decision-making and accountability.

The foundation said it committed \$21.7 million in grant funding to official and unofficial BLM chapters, as well as 30 Black-led local organizations. It ended 2020 with a balance of more than \$60 million, after spending nearly a quarter of its assets on the grant funds and other charitable giving.

In its report, the BLM foundation said individual donations via its main fundraising platform averaged \$30.76. More than 10% of the donations were recurring. The report does not state who gave the money in 2020, and leaders declined to name prominent donors.

Last year, the foundation's expenses were approximately \$8.4 million — that includes staffing, operating and administrative costs, along with activities such as civic engagement, rapid response and crisis intervention.

One of its focuses for 2021 will be economic justice, particularly as it relates to the ongoing socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on Black communities.

The racial justice movement had a broad impact on philanthropic giving last year. According to an upcoming report by Candid and the Center for Disaster Philanthropy, 35% of the \$20.2 billion in U.S. funding

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dollars from corporations, foundations, public charities and high-net-worth individuals to address COVID-19 was explicitly designated for communities of color.

After the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighborhood watch volunteer who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Florida, BLM's founders pledged to build a decentralized movement governed by consensus of a members' collective. In 2015, a network of chapters was formed, as support and donations poured in. But critics say the BLM Global Network Foundation has increasingly moved away from being a Black radical organizing hub and become a mainstream philanthropic and political organization run without democratic input from its earliest grassroots supporters.

BLM co-founder Patrisse Cullors told the AP that the foundation is focused on a "need to reinvest into Black communities."

"One of our biggest goals this year is taking the dollars we were able to raise in 2020 and building out the institution we've been trying to build for the last seven and a half years," she said in an interview.

Cullors, who was already active in her native Los Angeles, where she created her own social justice organization, Power and Dignity Now, became the global foundation's full-time executive director last year.

Fellow co-founders Alicia Garza, who is the principal at Black Futures Lab, and Opal Tometi, who created a Black new media and advocacy hub called Diaspora Rising, are not involved with the foundation. Garza and Tometi do continue to make appearances as movement co-founders.

In 2020, the foundation spun off its network of chapters as a sister collective called BLM Grassroots. The chapters, along with other Black-led local organizations, became eligible in July for financial resources through a \$12 million grant fund. Although there are many groups that use "Black Lives Matter" or "BLM" in their names, less than a dozen are currently considered affiliates of the chapter network.

According to foundation records shared with the AP, several chapters, including in the cities of Washington, Philadelphia and Chicago, were notified last year of their eligibility to receive \$500,000 each in funding under a multiyear agreement. Only one BLM group in Denver has signed the agreement and received its funds in September.

CHAPTERS CALL FOR MORE TRANSPARENCY

A group of 10 chapters, called the #BLM10, rejected the foundation's funding offer last year and complained publicly about the lack of donor transparency. Foundation leaders say only a few of the 10 chapters are recognized as network affiliates.

In a letter released Nov. 30, the #BLM10 claimed most chapters have received little to no financial resources from the BLM movement since its launch in 2013. That has had adverse consequences for the scope of their organizing work, local chapter leaders told the AP.

The chapters are simply asking for an equal say in "this thing that our names are attached to, that they are doing in our names," said April Goggans, organizer of Black Lives Matter DC, which is part of the #BLM10 along with groups in Indianapolis, Oklahoma City, San Diego, Hudson Valley, New York, and elsewhere.

"We are BLM. We built this, each one of us," she said.

Records show some chapters have received multiple rounds of funding in amounts ranging between \$800 and \$69,000, going back as far as 2016. The #BLM10 said the amounts given have been far from equitable when compared to how much BLM has raised over the years. But Cullors disagreed.

"Because the BLM movement was larger than life — and it is larger than life — people made very huge assumptions about what our actual finances looked like," Cullors said. "We were often scraping for money, and this year was the first year where we were resourced in the way we deserved to be."

Still, the #BLM10 members said reality didn't match the picture movement founders were projecting around the world. In its early years, BLM disclosed receiving donations from A-list celebrities such as Beyoncé, Jay-Z and Prince, prior to his death in 2016.

Leaders at the BLM foundation admit that they have not been clear about the movement's finances and governance over the years. But now the foundation is more open about such matters. It says the fiscal sponsor currently managing its money requires spending be approved by a collective action fund, which

is a board made up of representatives from official BLM chapters.

After Floyd's killing in Minneapolis, the surge of donations saw the foundation go from small, scrappy movement to maturing institution. Last summer, leaders sought nonprofit status with the IRS, which was granted in December, allowing the organization to receive tax-deductible donations directly. In the near future, that also will require the foundation to file public 990 forms, revealing details of its organizational structure, employee compensation, programming and expenses.

Brad Smith, president of Candid, an organization that provides information about philanthropic groups, said there are other ways for nonprofits to be transparent with the public besides federal disclosure forms. He said a philanthropic organization's website is its best tool to show how willing it is to be held accountable.

"In exchange for getting tax exempt status, you as an organization committed to providing a greater level of transparency to confirm you are fulfilling your mission," he said.

It's because of Cullors, Garza and Tometi's vision, along with the work of so many Black organizers in the ecosystem, that the BLM movement finds itself at a new phase of its development, said Melina Abdullah, co-founder of BLM's first ever chapter in Los Angeles.

"We're turning a corner, recognizing that we have to build institutions that endure beyond us," Abdullah told the AP.

Morrison is a member of AP's Race and Ethnicity team. Follow him on Twitter: <https://www.twitter.com/aaronlmorrison>.

Mars rover's giant parachute carried secret message

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — The huge parachute used by NASA's Perseverance rover to land on Mars contained a secret message, thanks to a puzzle lover on the spacecraft team.

Systems engineer Ian Clark used a binary code to spell out "Dare Mighty Things" in the orange and white strips of the 70-foot (21-meter) parachute. He also included the GPS coordinates for the mission's headquarters at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California.

Clark, a crossword hobbyist, came up with the idea two years ago. Engineers wanted an unusual pattern in the nylon fabric to know how the parachute was oriented during descent. Turning it into a secret message was "super fun," he said Tuesday.

Only about six people knew about the encoded message before Thursday's landing, according to Clark. They waited until the parachute images came back before putting out a teaser during a televised news conference Monday.

It took just a few hours for space fans to figure it out, Clark said. Next time, he noted, "I'll have to be a little bit more creative."

"Dare Mighty Things" — a line from President Theodore Roosevelt — is a mantra at JPL and adorns many of the center's walls. The trick was "trying to come up with a way of encoding it but not making it too obvious," Clark said.

As for the GPS coordinates, the spot is 10 feet (3 meters) from the entrance to JPL's visitor center.

Another added touch not widely known until touchdown: Perseverance bears a plaque depicting all five of NASA's Mars rovers in increasing size over the years — similar to the family car decals seen on Earth.

Deputy project manager Matt Wallace promises more so-called hidden Easter eggs. They should be visible once Perseverance's 7-foot (2-meter) arm is deployed in a few days and starts photographing under the vehicle, and again when the rover is driving in a couple weeks.

"Definitely, definitely should keep a good lookout," he urged.

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.

Authorities: Prison riots in Ecuador leave 62 dead

QUITO, Ecuador (AP) — Sixty-two inmates have died in riots at prisons in three cities in Ecuador as a result of fights between rival gangs and an escape attempt, authorities said Tuesday.

Prisons Director Edmundo Moncayo said in a news conference that 800 police officers have been helping to regain control of the facilities. Hundreds of officers from tactical units had been deployed since the clashes broke out late Monday.

Moncayo said that two groups were trying to gain “criminal leadership within the detention centers” and that the clashes were precipitated by a search for weapons carried out Monday by police officers.

Photographs and videos on social media show alleged inmates decapitated and dismembered amid pools of blood.

Deadly prison riots have happened relatively frequently in recent years in Ecuador, whose prisons were designed for some 27,000 inmates but house about 38,000.

President Lenín Moreno tweeted that he has ordered the Ministry of Defense “to exercise strict control of weapons, ammunition and explosives in the outer perimeters of prisons” as a result of this week’s riots.

Moncayo said 33 died at the prison in Cuenca in southern Ecuador, 21 in the Pacific coast city of Guayaquil and eight in the central city of Latacunga.

Moncayo said that close to 70% of the country’s prison population lives in the centers where the unrest occurred.

Minister of Government Patricio Pazmiño sent a tweet blaming “the concerted action of criminal organizations to generate violence in the country’s prisons,” but added, “We are managing actions to regain control.”

States rush to catch up on delayed vaccines, expand access

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — A giant vaccination center is opening in Houston to administer 126,000 coronavirus doses in the next three weeks. Nevada health officials are working overtime to distribute delayed shots. And Rhode Island is rescheduling appointments after a vaccine shipment failed to arrive as scheduled earlier in the week.

From coast to coast, states were scrambling Tuesday to catch up on vaccinations a week after winter storms battered a large swath of the U.S. and led to clinic closures, canceled appointments and shipment backlogs nationwide.

But limited supply of the two approved COVID-19 vaccines hampered the pace of vaccinations even before extreme weather delayed the delivery of about 6 million doses.

The White House promised on Tuesday that help is on the way.

States can expect about 14.5 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine this week, an almost 70% increase in distribution over the past month, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Tuesday. And White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients told governors on Tuesday that the number of doses sent directly to pharmacies will increase by about 100,000 this week, Psaki said.

The stepped-up efforts come as the COVID-19 death toll in the U.S. surpassed 500,000, far more than any other country.

More than 44 million Americans have received at least one dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, and about 1.4 million per day received either a first or second dose over the past seven days, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Although average daily deaths and cases have been falling, some experts say not enough Americans have been inoculated for the vaccine to be the reason. The decline instead is attributed to the passing of the holidays, more people staying indoors during the winter and better adherence to mask rules and social distancing.

What’s more, they warn that dangerous variants could cause the trend to reverse itself. States are responding by simultaneously trying to catch up from last week’s pause and gear up to vaccinate more people in coming weeks.

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Houston's federally funded vaccination site will open Wednesday at NRG Park, operating seven days a week for three weeks to distribute 126,000 first doses, before transitioning to second doses, officials said.

Texans are recovering from a devastating winter storm that killed at least 35 people, left millions without power and water, and delayed vaccinations.

"It's been trauma after trauma, and people deserve some good news, some hope," said Harris County Judge Lina Hidalgo, the county's chief elected official.

In Buda, Texas, retired teachers Donna and Gerald Haschke, both 74, were supposed to get their second doses last week but their appointments were canceled three times because of the storm. They're scheduled to receive doses on Thursday.

The couple are eager to get completely vaccinated after months of having to scale back all their activities because of the coronavirus. Gerald Haschke has heart stents and Donna Haschke has atrial fibrillation, she said.

"My cardiologists said, 'You do not want to get COVID,'" Donna Haschke said. "I said, 'No, I don't.' To me that was a warning that I need to stay home."

In Mississippi, where COVID-19 vaccinations plummeted last week amid freezing temperatures and icy roads, health officials were automatically rescheduling appointments, and planned to schedule more than normal through the weekend.

The state Department of Health said Monday that just 32,540 vaccinations were given in the state last week, down from 106,691 the previous week.

Nevada Gov. Steve Sisolak said Monday that 46,000 doses of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine that were delayed by weather began arriving in the state. The head of the state's Bureau of Child, Family and Community Wellness said officials would work overtime to administer those doses along with this week's regularly scheduled shipment.

President Joe Biden has said that every American who wants a vaccine will be able to get one by the end of July.

But demand continues to outpace limited supplies distributed by the U.S. government.

Executives from five companies with contracts to supply shots to the U.S. — Pfizer, Moderna, Johnson & Johnson, AstraZeneca and Novavax — testified about supply issues Tuesday before Congress' Energy and Commerce Committee.

Looking ahead to summer, Pfizer and Moderna executives said they expect to complete delivery of 300 million doses each, and J&J aims to provide an additional 100 million doses — more than enough to vaccinate every American adult.

Arizona will increase vaccinations by opening its fourth state-run mass vaccination clinic, state health department officials said. In addition, transportation costs to and from vaccination appointments now will be covered for people enrolled in Arizona's Medicaid program, Gov. Doug Ducey said.

"This change will make it easier for our most vulnerable Arizonans ... to get vaccinated," Ducey said.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom said 11 mobile clinics will open in California's vast Central Valley, an agricultural region that's been hit hard by the coronavirus. They'll be used mainly to vaccinate farmworkers who don't have transportation to larger vaccination sites or can't navigate the state's online signup portal.

Newsom said the state also is sending 34,000 extra vaccine doses to that area from a pharmacy that wasn't using them quickly enough.

Meanwhile, Tennessee's top health official said Tuesday that more than 2,400 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine went to waste over the past month in Shelby County, which encompasses Memphis, while local officials sat on tens of thousands of shots that they thought had already gone into arms.

Health Commissioner Lisa Piercey said a Department of Health investigation over the weekend found issues dating to Feb. 3 that included spoiled doses, an excessive vaccine inventory, insufficient record-keeping and no formal process to manage soon-to-expire vaccines. A federal investigation is also expected.

Webber reported from Fenton, Michigan. Associated Press writers Emily Wagster Pettus in Jackson, Mississippi; Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas City, Kansas; Kimberlee Kruesi in Nashville, Tennessee; Mark

Pratt in Providence, Rhode Island; Michelle Monroe in Sacramento, California; Michelle Price in Las Vegas; and Terry Tang in Phoenix contributed to this report.

HHS pick says pandemic is top job, but agenda is broader

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Health secretary nominee Xavier Becerra told senators Tuesday that confronting the coronavirus pandemic will be his first priority if confirmed, but he also pledged to expand health insurance, rein in prescription drug costs and reduce racial and ethnic disparities in medical care.

"To meet this moment, we need strong federal leadership," Becerra said at the first of two hearings on his nomination. "I understand the enormous challenges before us and our solemn responsibility to faithfully steward this agency that touches almost every aspect of our lives."

Becerra now serves as California's attorney general and previously represented the Los Angeles area for more than 20 years in the U.S. House. A liberal politician-lawyer, he faces opposition from many GOP senators, who question his support for abortion rights and government-run health insurance, along with his lack of a clinical background. However, in the past 25 years, only one medical doctor has led the Department of Health and Human Services in a permanent capacity.

Appearing before the Senate health committee, Becerra seconded President Joe Biden's goals of 100 million vaccine shots in his first 100 days, increased coronavirus testing, ramped-up DNA mapping of the virus to track worrisome mutations and reopening schools and businesses.

On health insurance, he pledged to work to expand the Obama-era Affordable Care Act, though in the past he's supported a government-run system like Sen. Bernie Sanders' "Medicare for All" idea. He said he would act to lower drug prices, particularly the cost of insulin. It's a goal that has bipartisan backing. Republican Sen. Mike Braun of Indiana noted that Becerra seems to have no drug industry support, adding, "I think I know why."

Although leading Republicans are portraying Becerra as unfit, Democrats seem unfazed about his prospects, accusing the GOP of playing politics despite the urgency of dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

Becerra "has fought against pharmaceutical companies, opioid manufacturers, tobacco companies and polluters, and for more affordable quality health care for every patient," said health committee chair Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash. "I have no doubt that, as secretary, he will put special interests on notice, patients and public health first, and put science, data and experts back in the driver's seat."

Following Tuesday's appearance before the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, Becerra will be questioned Wednesday by the Finance Committee, which will vote on sending his nomination to the Senate floor. If confirmed, he'd be the first Latino to head HHS, a \$1.4 trillion agency with a broad portfolio that includes health insurance programs, drug safety and approvals, advanced medical research and the welfare of children.

Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, the ranking Republican on the health committee, left no doubt that Becerra faces tough scrutiny.

"I'm not sold yet," Burr said at Tuesday's hearing, looking straight at the nominee. "I'm not sure that you have the necessary experience or skills to do this job at this moment." Burr questioned whether Becerra respects the role of private companies in the health care system, particularly innovative pharmaceutical firms.

But other Republican senators sidestepped ideological confrontation and asked questions that centered on home state concerns. Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., made a reference to "when" Becerra is confirmed, not "if." And Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, said she would encourage him to visit her state early.

Becerra sought to soften his image as an enemy of drug companies. "We need the pharmaceutical industry in America to always feel like we've got their back to innovate," he told Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn. "COVID is a perfect example of how we can come up with a vaccine, but we have to make sure that we're getting our dollar's worth."

And he also credited the Trump administration for its shepherding of two highly effective coronavirus vaccines. "There are a lot of people to thank, but without the work that the previous administration did,

we would certainly not be here," he told Braun.

Although Becerra, 63, is politically liberal, his style is low-key and oriented toward problem solving.

Still, Republican opposition has grown louder ahead of his nomination hearings. On Monday, Sens. John Kennedy of Louisiana and Tom Cotton of Arkansas released a letter in which they asked Biden to withdraw the nomination, calling Becerra "unfit for any position of public trust." Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has called him "famously partisan."

Opponents of abortion rights had signaled from the beginning that they would fight the nomination, and the political group Heritage Action for America launched a cable and digital ad campaign against Becerra.

Democrats are shrugging it off.

Republicans are "just flailing around," Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden of Oregon said Monday.

In many ways, Becerra was California's early face of opposition to the Trump administration. He was appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown to replace Kamala Harris as state attorney general in early 2017.

Over four years, he filed 124 lawsuits, challenging the Trump administration on immigration, environmental and health care policies. His litigiousness and vocal resistance to Trump's policies could allow Republicans to paint him as an overly partisan figure. California took pride in viewing itself as the resistance to Trump, and Becerra embodied that ethos.

Lack of medical experience doesn't disqualify a nominee for HHS secretary, though it can be a plus. Recent Senate-confirmed secretaries have included one doctor but also a pharmaceutical executive, a White House budget director and three governors.

Associated Press writer Kathleen Ronayne contributed to this report from Sacramento, Calif.

Judge says wife of drug kingpin 'El Chapo' must stay in jail

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A U.S. judge ordered the wife of Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman to remain behind bars Tuesday after she was charged with helping her husband run his multibillion-dollar criminal empire.

Emma Coronel Aispuro, 31, a dual U.S.-Mexican citizen, appeared by video conference for an initial court appearance before a federal magistrate judge in Washington, D.C. She was arrested Monday at Dulles International Airport in Virginia.

When asked by the judge if she understood what was happening, Coronel said through the interpreter: "I understood everything very well, thank you."

At the hearing, prosecutor Anthony Nardozi alleged that Coronel "worked closely with the command-and-control structure" of the Sinaloa cartel and conspired to distribute large quantities of drugs, knowing they would be smuggled into the U.S. If convicted, she could face more than 10 years in prison.

Coronel's attorney, Jeffrey Lichtman, said he would consent to her temporary detention.

Colonel's arrest was a surprise in part because authorities made no move to arrest her over the past two years, even after she was implicated in her husband's crimes. During Guzman's 2019 trial, prosecutors said she helped orchestrate Guzman's two prison breaks in Mexico — audacious escapes that raised serious questions about whether Mexico's justice system was capable of holding him accountable.

He is now serving life in prison in the United States.

Colonel was a fixture at her husband's three-month trial, which took place in New York. The two, separated in age by more than 30 years, have been together since at least 2007, and their twin daughters were born in 2011.

As Mexico's most powerful drug lord, Guzman ran a cartel responsible for smuggling cocaine and other drugs into the United States during his 25-year reign, prosecutors say. They also said his "army of sicarios," or "hit men," was under orders to kidnap, torture and kill anyone who got in his way.

On Tuesday, Nardozi said Coronel had access to criminal associates, including other members of the cartel, and "financial means to generate a serious risk of flight."

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Coronel was charged in a single-count criminal complaint with conspiracy to distribute cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana in the U.S. She is also accused of helping her husband escape from a Mexican prison in 2015 and participating in the planning of a second prison escape before Guzman was extradited to the U.S.

Coronel worked with Guzman's sons and a witness, who is now cooperating with the U.S. government, to organize the construction of the underground tunnel that Guzman used to escape from the Altiplano prison to prevent his extradition to the U.S., according to court documents. The plot also included purchasing a piece of land near the prison, firearms and an armored truck and smuggling him a GPS watch so they could "pinpoint his exact whereabouts so as to construct the tunnel with an entry point accessible to him," the court papers say.

Her father, Ines Coronel Barreras, was arrested in 2013 with one of his sons and several other men in a warehouse with hundreds of pounds of marijuana across the border from Douglas, Arizona. Months earlier, the U.S. Treasury had announced financial sanctions against her father for his alleged drug trafficking.

Beat poet, publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti dies at 101

By JANIE HAR and HILLEL ITALIE Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Lawrence Ferlinghetti, the poet, publisher, bookseller and activist who helped launch the Beat movement in the 1950s and embodied its curious and rebellious spirit well into the 21st century, has died at age 101.

Ferlinghetti, a San Francisco institution, died Monday at his home, his son Lorenzo Ferlinghetti said. A month shy of his 102nd birthday, Ferlinghetti died "in his own room," holding the hands of his son and his son's girlfriend, "as he took his last breath." The cause of death was lung disease. Ferlinghetti had received the first dose of the COVID vaccine last week, his son said Tuesday.

Few poets of the past 60 years were so well known, or so influential. His books sold more than 1 million copies worldwide, a fantasy for virtually any of his peers, and he ran one of the world's most famous and distinctive bookstores, City Lights. Although he never considered himself one of the Beats, he was a patron and soul mate and, for many, a lasting symbol — preaching a nobler and more ecstatic American dream.

"Am I the consciousness of a generation or just some old fool sounding off and trying to escape the dominant materialist avaricious consciousness of America?" he asked in "Little Boy," a stream of consciousness novel published around the time of his 100th birthday

He made history. Through the City Lights publishing arm, books by Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs and many others came out and the release of Allen Ginsberg's landmark poem "Howl" led to a 1957 obscenity case that broke new ground for freedom of expression.

He also defied history. The Internet, superstore chains and high rents shut down numerous booksellers in the Bay Area and beyond, but City Lights remained a thriving political and cultural outlet, where one section was devoted to books enabling "revolutionary competence," where employees could get the day off to attend an anti-war protest.

"Generally, people seem to get more conservative as they age, but in my case, I seem to have gotten more radical," Ferlinghetti told Interview magazine in 2013. "Poetry must be capable of answering the challenge of apocalyptic times, even if this means sounding apocalyptic."

The store even endured during the coronavirus outbreak, when it was forced to close and required \$300,000 to stay in business. A GoFundMe campaign quickly raised \$400,000.

Ferlinghetti, tall and bearded, with sharp blue eyes, could be soft-spoken, even introverted and reticent in unfamiliar situations. But he was the most public of poets and his work wasn't intended for solitary contemplation. It was meant to be recited or chanted out loud, whether in coffee houses, bookstores or at campus gatherings.

His 1958 compilation, "A Coney Island of the Mind," sold hundreds of thousands of copies in the U.S. alone. Long an outsider from the poetry community, Ferlinghetti once joked that he had "committed the sin of too much clarity." He called his style "wide open" and his work, influenced in part by e.e. cummings,

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was often lyrical and childlike: "Peacocks walked/under the night trees/in the lost moon/light/when I went out/looking for love," he wrote in "Coney Island."

Ferlinghetti also was a playwright, novelist, translator and painter and had many admirers among musicians. In 1976, he recited "The Lord's Prayer" at the Band's farewell concert, immortalized in Martin Scorsese's "The Last Waltz." The folk-rock band Aztec Two-Step lifted its name from a line in the title poem of Ferlinghetti's "Coney Island" book: "A couple of Papish cats/is doing an Aztec two-step." Ferlinghetti also published some of the earliest film reviews by Pauline Kael, who with *The New Yorker* became one of the country's most influential critics.

He lived long and well despite a traumatic childhood. His father died five months before Lawrence was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1919, leaving behind a sense of loss that haunted him, yet provided much of the creative tension that drove his art. His mother, unable to cope, had a nervous breakdown two years after his father's death. She eventually disappeared and died in a state hospital.

Ferlinghetti spent years moving among relatives, boarding homes and an orphanage before he was taken in by a wealthy New York family, the Bislands, for whom his mother had worked as a governess. He studied journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, received a master's in literature from Columbia University, and a doctorate degree from the Sorbonne in Paris. His early influences included Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe and Ezra Pound.

Ferlinghetti hated war, because he was in one. In 1945, he was a Navy commander stationed in Japan and remembered visiting Nagasaki a few weeks after the U.S. had dropped an atom bomb. The carnage, he would recall, made him an "instant pacifist."

In the early 1950s, he settled in San Francisco and married Selden Kirby-Smith, whom he divorced in 1976. (They had two children). Ferlinghetti also became a member of the city's rising literary movement, the so-called San Francisco Renaissance, and soon helped establish a gathering place. Peter D. Martin, a sociologist, had opened a paperback store in the city's North Beach section and named it after a recent Charlie Chaplin film, "City Lights." When Ferlinghetti saw the storefront, in 1953, he suggested he and Martin become partners. Each contributed \$500.

Ferlinghetti later told *The New York Times*: "City Lights became about the only place around where you could go in, sit down, and read books without being pestered to buy something."

The Beats, who had met in New York in the 1940s, now had a new base. One project was City Lights' Pocket Poets series, which offered low-cost editions of verse, notably Ginsberg's "Howl." Ferlinghetti had heard Ginsberg read a version in 1955 and wrote him: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career. When do I get the manuscript?" a humorous take on the message sent from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Walt Whitman upon reading "Leaves of Grass."

Ferlinghetti published "Howl and Other Poems" in 1956, but customs officials seized copies of the book that were being shipped from London, and Ferlinghetti was arrested on obscenity charges. After a highly publicized court battle, a judge in 1957 ruled that "Howl" was not obscene, despite its sexual themes, citing the poem's relevance as a criticism of modern society. A 2010 film about the case, "Howl," starred James Franco as Ginsberg and Andrew Rogers as Ferlinghetti.

Ferlinghetti would also release Kerouac's "Book of Dreams," prison writings by Timothy Leary and Frank O'Hara's "Lunch Poems." Ferlinghetti risked prison for "Howl," but rejected Burroughs' classic "Naked Lunch," worrying that publication would lead to "sure premeditated legal lunacy."

Ferlinghetti's eyesight was poor in recent years, but he continued to write and to keep regular hours at City Lights. The establishment, meanwhile, warmed to him, even if the affection wasn't always returned. He was named San Francisco's first poet laureate, in 1998, and City Lights was granted landmark status three years later. He received an honorary prize from the National Book Critics Circle in 2000 and five years later was given a National Book Award medal for "his tireless work on behalf of poets and the entire literary community."

"The dominant American mercantile culture may globalize the world, but it is not the mainstream culture of our civilization," Ferlinghetti said upon receiving the award. "The true mainstream is made, not of oil, but of literarians, publishers, bookstores, editors, libraries, writers and readers, universities and all the

institutions that support them.”

In 2012, Ferlinghetti won the Janus Pannonius International Poetry Prize from the Hungarian PEN Club. When he learned the country’s right-wing government was a sponsor, he turned the award down.

Italie reported from New York.

Capitol defenders cite missed intelligence for deadly breach

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, MICHAEL BALSAMO and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Missed intelligence was to blame for the outmanned Capitol defenders’ failure to anticipate the violent mob that invaded the iconic building and halted certification of the presidential election on Jan. 6, the officials who were in charge of security that day said Tuesday in their first public testimony on the insurrection.

The officials, including the former chief of the Capitol Police, pointed their fingers at various federal agencies — and each other — for their failure to defend the building as supporters of then-President Donald Trump overwhelmed security barriers, broke windows and doors and sent lawmakers fleeing from the House and Senate chambers. Five people died as a result of the riot, including a Capitol Police officer and a woman who was shot as she tried to enter the House chamber with lawmakers still inside.

Former Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund, who resigned under pressure immediately after the attack, and the other officials said they had expected the protests to be similar to two pro-Trump events in late 2020 that were far less violent. Sund said he hadn’t seen an FBI field office report that warned of potential violence citing online posts about a “war.”

Sund described a scene as the mob arrived at the perimeter that was “like nothing” he had seen in his 30 years of policing and argued that the insurrection was not the result of poor planning by Capitol Police but of failures across the board.

“No single civilian law enforcement agency – and certainly not the USCP – is trained and equipped to repel, without significant military or other law enforcement assistance, an insurrection of thousands of armed, violent, and coordinated individuals focused on breaching a building at all costs,” he testified.

The hearing was the first of many examinations of what happened that day, coming almost seven weeks after the attack and over a week after the Senate voted to acquit Trump of inciting the insurrection by telling his supporters to “fight like hell” to overturn his election defeat. Fencing and National Guard troops still surround the Capitol in a wide perimeter, cutting off streets and sidewalks that are normally full of cars, pedestrians and tourists.

The joint hearing, part of an investigation by two Senate committees, was the first time the officials testified publicly about the events of Jan. 6. In addition to Sund, former Senate Sergeant-at-Arms Michael Stenger, former House Sergeant-at-Arms Paul Irving and Robert Contee, the acting chief of police for the Metropolitan Police Department, testified.

Irving and Stenger also resigned under pressure immediately after the deadly attack. They were Sund’s supervisors and in charge of security for the House and Senate.

“We must have the facts, and the answers are in this room,” Senate Rules Committee Chairwoman Amy Klobuchar said at the beginning of the hearing. The Rules panel is conducting the joint probe with the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

Even after the hearing, much still remains unknown about what happened before and during the assault. How much did law enforcement agencies know about plans for violence that day, many of which were public? And how could the Capitol Police have been so ill-prepared for a violent insurrection that was organized online?

Sund told the lawmakers that he didn’t know then that his officers had received a report from the FBI’s field office in Norfolk, Virginia, that forecast, in detail, the chances that extremists could bring “war” to Washington the following day. The head of the FBI’s office in Washington has said that once he received the Jan. 5 warning, the information was quickly shared with other law enforcement agencies through a

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joint terrorism task force.

Sund said Tuesday that an officer on the task force had received that memo and forwarded it to a sergeant working on intelligence for the Capitol Police but that the information was not sent on to other supervisors.

"How could you not get that vital intelligence?" asked Senate Homeland Chairman Gary Peters, D-Mich., who said the failure of the report to reach the chief was clearly a major problem.

"That information would have been helpful," Sund acknowledged.

Even without the intelligence, there were clear signs that violence was a possibility on Jan. 6. Far-right social media users openly hinted for weeks that chaos would erupt at the U.S. Capitol while Congress convened to certify the election results.

Sund said he did see an intelligence report created within his own department warning that Congress could be targeted on Jan. 6. But he said that report assessed the probability of civil disobedience or arrests, based on the information they had, as "remote" to "improbable" for the groups expected to demonstrate.

Contee, the acting city police chief, also suggested that no one had flagged the FBI information from Norfolk, Virginia, which he said came in the form of an email. He said he would have expected that kind of intelligence "would warrant a phone call or something."

Sund and Irving disagreed on when the National Guard was called and on requests for the guard beforehand. Sund said he spoke to both Stenger and Irving about requesting the National Guard in the days before the riot, and that Irving said he was concerned about the "optics" of having them present. Irving denied that, saying Sund's account was "categorically false."

"We all agreed the intelligence did not support the troops and collectively decided to let it go," Stenger said.

After smashing through the barriers at the perimeter, the invaders engaged in hand-to-hand combat with police officers, injuring dozens of them, and broke into the building.

Once the violence had begun, Sund and Irving also disagreed on when the National Guard was requested — Sund said he requested it at 1:09 p.m., but Irving denied receiving a call at that time.

Contee said he was "stunned" over the delayed response. He said Sund was pleading with Army officials to deploy National Guard troops as the rioting rapidly escalated. Police officers "were out there literally fighting for their lives" but the officials appeared to be going through a "check the boxes" exercise, he said.

Pentagon officials, who will be invited to testify before the committee at a second hearing next week, have said it took time to put the troops in position, and there was not enough contingency planning in advance. They said they offered the assistance beforehand but were turned down.

Klobuchar said after the hearing that the next police chief should have greater ability to make decisions both leading up to and during a crisis, and the Rules panel could consider such legislation once the investigation is completed. The current structure "clearly needs some reform," she said.

The hearing Tuesday was the first of several this week examining what went wrong Jan. 6. A House subcommittee will examine damage to the Capitol on Wednesday and will hear testimony from current security officials, including Acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman, on Thursday. Next week, the Senate panels will invite officials from the Pentagon, FBI and Homeland Security Department.

In prepared testimony released ahead of the hearing on damage to the Capitol, Architect of the Capitol J. Brett Blanton and the curator of the House of Representatives, Farar Elliott, describe damage to statues and paintings and quick thinking by staff as the rioting was underway — including one aide who secured the House's 1819 silver inkstand, the oldest object in the chamber.

Congress is also considering a bipartisan, independent commission, and multiple congressional committees have said they will look at different aspects of the siege. Federal law enforcement has arrested more than 230 people who were accused of being involved in the attack, and Attorney General nominee Merrick Garland said in his confirmation hearing Monday that investigating the riot would be a priority.

Associated Press writers Lolita Baldor in Washington and Nomaan Merchant in Houston contributed to this report.

Drug executives: Big jump in vaccine supply is coming soon

By MATTHEW PERRONE and LAURAN NEERGAARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — COVID-19 vaccine makers told Congress on Tuesday to expect a big jump in the delivery of doses over the coming month, and the companies insist they will be able to provide enough for most Americans to get inoculated by summer.

By the end of March, Pfizer and Moderna expect to have provided the U.S. government with a total of 220 million vaccine doses, up sharply from the roughly 75 million shipped so far.

"We do believe we're on track," Moderna President Stephen Hoge said, outlining ways the company has ramped up production. "We think we're at a very good spot."

That's not counting a third vaccine, from Johnson & Johnson, that's expected to get a green light from regulators soon. The Biden administration said Tuesday that it expects about 2 million doses of that vaccine to be shipped in the first week, but the company told lawmakers it should provide enough of the single-dose option for 20 million people by the end of March.

Looking ahead to summer, Pfizer and Moderna expect to complete delivery of 300 million doses each, and J&J aims to provide an additional 100 million doses. That would be more than enough to vaccinate every American adult, the goal set by the Biden administration.

Two other manufacturers, Novavax and AstraZeneca, have vaccines in the pipeline and anticipate eventually adding to those totals.

Asked pointedly if they face shortages of raw materials, equipment or funding that would throw off those schedules, all of the manufacturers expressed confidence that they had enough supplies and had already addressed some of the early bottlenecks in production.

"At this point I can confirm we are not seeing any shortages of raw materials," said Pfizer's John Young.

The hearing by a House subcommittee came as U.S. vaccinations continue to accelerate after a sluggish start and recent disruptions caused by winter weather. More than 44 million Americans have received at least one dose of either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccine, and about 1.4 million per day got a first or second dose over the past seven days, according to the CDC.

But state health officials say demand for inoculations still vastly outstrips the limited weekly shipments provided by the federal government.

"The most pressing challenge now is the lack of supply of vaccine doses," Rep. Diana DeGette, a Colorado Democrat, said as she opened the hearing. "Some of the companies here today are still short of the number of doses they promised to initially deliver when they last testified before this subcommittee in July."

Both Pfizer and Moderna failed to meet delivery quotas for the initial doses of their vaccines late last year. That's prompted Congress to scrutinize the companies' plans for vaccine development and delivery, which they noted benefited from \$16 billion in federal funding.

"A significant amount of American tax dollars were invested to be able to produce the vaccine immediately upon approval," said Rep. David McKinley, a West Virginia Republican, who questioned executives on why they were still unable to meet demand for the vaccines.

Nearly 14% of Americans have received at least an initial dose of the two-shot-regimen vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna.

The Trump administration's Operation Warp Speed focused most of its efforts on racing vaccines through research, development and manufacturing. But little planning or funding went to coordinating vaccination campaigns at the state and local levels. That effort is now picking up speed with plans for mass vaccination sites and an increasing supply distributed to chain pharmacies.

Rep. Frank Pallone, a New Jersey Democrat, questioned J&J Vice President Richard Nettles on why the company has fallen behind on the schedule outlined in its federal contract, which included delivering 12 million doses by late February.

Nettles said only that the company has faced "significant challenges" due to its "highly complex" manufacturing process. But he noted the company is partnering with drugmaker Sanofi to further expand production.

"This has been an unprecedented effort to scale up manufacturing for a vaccine against a disease that didn't even exist more than a year ago," Nettles told lawmakers.

Even with no manufacturing or supply interruptions, other issues could delay or block the U.S. from vaccinating 70% to 80% of its population -- the critical threshold needed to neutralize COVID-19 spread.

About 1 in 3 Americans say they definitely or probably will not get the vaccine, according to a recent poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Concerns about safety were the reason most frequently cited for vaccine hesitancy, despite few serious side effects reported with the currently available vaccines.

Associated Press Writer Zeke Miller contributed to this story.

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.

Takeaways from Congress' first hearing on Capitol riot

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Security officials testifying at Congress' first hearing on the deadly siege of the Capitol cast blame and pointed fingers on Tuesday but also acknowledged they were woefully unprepared for the violence.

Senators drilled down on the stunning security failure and missed warning signs as rioters loyal to former President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, in a misguided attempt to stop lawmakers from certifying President Joe Biden's election.

Five people died in the attack, including a Capitol Police officer. The security officials lost their jobs, and Trump was impeached by the House on a charge of inciting the insurrection, the deadliest attack on Congress in 200 years. Trump was ultimately acquitted by the Senate.

Here are some takeaways from the testimony:

FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Intelligence warnings of an armed uprising by extremist groups heading to the Capitol didn't rise to the level of alarm — or even get passed up the chain of command — in time for the Jan. 6 attack.

Crucially, a key warning flare from the FBI field office in Norfolk, Virginia, of a "war" on the Capitol was sent the night before to the Capitol Police's intelligence division. But then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund testified that he only learned about it the day before Tuesday's hearing.

Instead, Sund said he was bracing for demonstrations on par with other armed protests by mobs of Trump's supporters in the nation's capital in November and December after the presidential election.

"No entity, including the FBI, provided any intelligence indicating that there would be a coordinated violent attack on the United States Capitol by thousands of well-equipped armed insurrectionists," he testified in written remarks about a conference call the day before the attack.

The Democratic chair of the Senate Homeland Security Committee, Sen. Gary Peters of Michigan, said, "There was a failure to take this threat more seriously."

HE SAID, HE SAID

As hundreds of rioters stormed the Capitol, breaking into the iconic building's windows and doors, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat with police, there are conflicting accounts from the security officials over what happened next.

Sund, who had raised the idea of calling on the National Guard for backup days earlier, specifically recounted a 1:09 p.m. phone call he made to the then-sergeant-at-arms of the House, Paul Irving, his superior, requesting National Guard troops.

Sund said he was told they would run it up the chain of command .

Irving said he has no recollection of the conversation at that time and instead recalls a conversation nearly 20 minutes later. He said the 1:09 p.m. call does not show up on his cellphone log.

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As the riot escalated, Sund was “pleading” with Army officials for Guard troops in another phone call, testified Robert Contee III, the acting chief of the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Police Department, whose officers had arrived for backup.

Contee said he was “stunned” at the delayed response from the military.

Defense Department officials have said they offered National Guard troops days earlier but were rebuffed. Pentagon officials are scheduled to testify to the Senate next week.

COMMON FACTS: ‘A PLANNED INSURRECTION’

At the start of the hearing, coming 10 days after Trump was acquitted by the Senate on the impeachment charge of inciting the insurrection, some common facts were agreed to.

Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, the chair of the Rules Committee, asked the security officials if there was any doubt the riot was a planned attack and carried out by white nationalist and extremist groups.

None of the witnesses disputed the characterization of the facts of Jan. 6.

Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin read an alternative account, of mostly peaceful protesters festive that day, that he encouraged colleagues to consider.

But in closing, Klobuchar restated the testimony: “There was clear agreement this was a planned insurrection.”

ONE OFFICER’S PERSONAL STORY

The hearing opened with Capitol Police Capt. Carneysha Mendoza, a 19-year veteran of the force, delivering a compelling personal account of being called at home that day as she was spending time with her 10-year-old before the start of her shift.

She rushed to the Capitol only to find “the worst of the worst” scene of her career.

A former Army veteran, she recounted the deadly mayhem, fending off rioters inside the building’s stately Rotunda, inhaling gas and suffering chemical burns to her face she said still have not healed. Her Fitbit recorded four hours of sustained activity, she said.

The next night and following day she spent at the hospital consoling the family of Officer Brian Sicknick, who died after the attack.

“As an American, and as an Army veteran, it’s sad to see us attacked by our fellow citizens,” Mendoza told the senators.

TRUMP’S SHADOW

The former president was hardly a presence at the first hearing.

Instead, senators largely set aside their sharply partisan ways to drill down on the facts of what happened that day — on how to prevent it from happening again.

Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Calif., pointedly asked for the name of the commander in chief of the armed forces that day who was ultimately responsible for the military and security of the country. That drew out the former president’s name.

Among the senators on the panels are two of Trump’s staunch allies who led the effort to overturn Biden’s election victory — Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., and Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas.

Associated Press writers Mary Clare Jalonick, Michael Balsamo and Lolita Baldor in Washington and Nomaan Merchant in Houston contributed to this report.

Critics: GOP measures target Black voter turnout in Georgia

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and BEN NADLER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Fueled by Black turnout, Democrats scored stunning wins in Georgia in the presidential and U.S. Senate races. Now, Republicans are trying to make sure it doesn’t happen again.

GOP lawmakers in the once reliably red state are rolling out an aggressive slate of voting legislation that critics argue is tailored to curtail the power of Black voters and undo years of work by Stacey Abrams and others to increase engagement among people of color, including Latino and Asian American communities.

The proposals are similar to those pushed by Republicans in other battleground states: adding barriers

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to mail-in and early voting, major factors in helping Joe Biden win Georgia's 16 Electoral College votes and Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff take the two Senate seats that gave Democrats control of the chamber.

But one aspect of their plans, a proposal to eliminate early voting on Sundays, seems specifically targeted at a traditional get-out-the-vote campaign used by Black churches, referred to as "souls to the polls." It's led many to suggest Republicans are trying to stop a successful effort to boost Black voter turnout in Georgia, where they make up about a third of the population and have faced a dark history of attempts to silence their voices in elections.

"It's a new form of voter suppression, the Klan in three-piece suits rather than white hoods," said the Rev. Timothy McDonald III of the First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta, which has participated in souls to the polls events. "They know the power of the Black vote, and their goal is to suppress that power."

In previous elections, souls to the polls campaigns were festive, with vehicles and people parading to election offices during early voting windows. Churches would sometimes playfully compete to see which could bring the most voters, said McDonald, who described the GOP legislation as "spiteful."

In Georgia and elsewhere, Republicans say proposals to tighten voting access are meant to bolster confidence in elections, though they have been some of the loudest proponents of meritless claims that the election was fraudulent. The Brennan Center for Justice, a public policy group, has counted 165 bills in 33 states this year meant to limit access to voting.

In Georgia, Republicans control state government and have introduced dozens of legislative measures that would restrict voting access. GOP state Rep. Barry Fleming is chief sponsor of a wide-ranging proposal that would ban Sunday early voting, require a photo ID for absentee voting, limit the time when an absentee ballot could be requested, restrict where ballot drop boxes could be placed and curb the use of mobile voting units, among other changes.

In committee hearings, Fleming has cast the legislation as "an attempt to restore the confidence of our public in our election system." He didn't respond to an email or phone message requesting comment.

Nse Ufot, CEO of the New Georgia Project that Abrams founded in 2014, called the GOP measures a backlash "to our multiracial, multilingual progressive majority that is winning elections."

Biden beat former President Donald Trump by roughly 12,000 votes, becoming the first Democrat to win a presidential contest in Georgia since 1992. Biden received nearly double the number of absentee votes as Trump in a state that became a major target of Trump's baseless claims of fraud. Biden's win there was confirmed in three separate counts, including one by hand.

"These measures, in our opinion, are not based on any objective, data-driven, evidence-based assessment of the issue but solely with the intention to undermine Black voters and other communities of concern," said Democratic state Rep. Michael Smith, chairman of the Georgia Legislative Black Caucus Policy Committee.

Because Republicans control both chambers of the legislature and the governor's office, at least some form of their proposals are likely to become law.

Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, also a Republican, has called for a photo ID requirement for absentee voting but has yet to back a specific proposal. His office said it was still reviewing the legislation.

Republicans are trying to limit ways to vote that have been wildly popular. After states expanded access to mail-in and early voting during the coronavirus pandemic, nearly 70% of all ballots cast nationwide came before Election Day. An estimated 108 million people voted by mail, early in person or by dropping off absentee ballots. In Georgia, over 4 million voters cast early or absentee ballots.

"They realize if they continue to allow individuals to vote by mail, it is going to be an uphill battle for Republicans to win at the polls and maintain their position," Democratic state Rep. Debra Bazemore said.

At the federal level, Democrats are pushing for a sweeping overhaul of how Americans vote.

House Democrats are expected to vote next week on a measure that would establish federal election standards like early voting periods, same-day voter registration and other policies that Republicans have dismissed as federal overreach.

And they are expected to introduce another bill to restore a key provision of the Voting Rights Act that had triggered federal scrutiny of election changes in certain states and counties with histories of discrimi-

nation. Georgia was among the states that previously had to get approval for voting changes.

"If left to their own devices, Republicans will try to limit the ability of minority voters to exercise their fundamental right to vote," said U.S. Rep. Hank Johnson, a Georgia Democrat co-sponsoring the bill on federal election standards.

"It's open season on voting rights in Georgia," he said.

Izaguirre reported from Lindenhurst, New York.

Associated Press coverage of voting rights receives support in part from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Iran officially imposes curbs on UN nuclear inspections

By NASSER KARIMI and KIYOKO METZLER Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran officially started restricting international inspections of its nuclear facilities Tuesday, a bid to pressure European countries and President Joe Biden's administration to lift crippling economic sanctions and restore the 2015 nuclear deal.

World powers slammed the restrictions as a "dangerous" move.

It came as the International Atomic Energy Agency reported in a confidential document distributed to member countries and seen by The Associated Press that Iran had added 17.6 kilograms (38.8 pounds) of uranium enriched up to 20% to its stockpile as of Feb. 16.

It was the first official confirmation of plans Iran announced in January to enrich to the greater purity, which is just a technical step away from weapons-grade levels and far past the 3.67% purity allowed under the nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA.

Iran also increased its total enriched uranium stockpile to 2,967.8 kilograms (6,542.9 pounds), up from 2,442.9 kilograms (5,385.7 pounds) reported on Nov. 2, the IAEA reported.

Iran's violations of the JCPOA and the move Tuesday to limit international inspections underscore the daunting task facing Biden as he seeks to reverse former President Donald Trump's decision to pull the U.S. unilaterally out of the deal in 2018. That left Germany, France, Britain, China and Russia struggling to keep it alive.

The JCPOA was the most significant pact between Iran and major world powers since its 1979 Islamic revolution, and Germany, France and Britain stressed their commitment Tuesday to preserving it, urging Iran to "stop and reverse all measures that reduce transparency."

"The E3 are united in underlining the dangerous nature of this decision," the European powers said in a statement. "It will significantly constrain the IAEA's access to sites and to safeguards-relevant information."

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said a new law had gone into effect Tuesday morning, under which Iran will no longer share surveillance footage of its nuclear facilities with the U.N. agency.

"We never gave them live video, but (recordings) were given daily and weekly," Zarif said of the IAEA's access to information recorded by camera monitors. "The tape recording of our (nuclear) program will be kept in Iran."

The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, Tehran's civilian nuclear agency, has promised to preserve the tapes for three months, then hand them over to the IAEA — but only if granted sanctions relief. Otherwise, Iran has vowed to erase the tapes, narrowing the window for a diplomatic breakthrough.

Since Trump pulled the U.S. out of the JCPOA, Iran has gradually been violating its restrictions to put pressures on the remaining nations to come up with economic incentives to offset crippling American sanctions.

Besides surpassing the purity and stockpiles allowed, Iran has also been spinning advanced centrifuges and producing uranium metal.

Zarif stressed in a tweet Tuesday that Iran's new limits on nuclear inspections and other violations of the pact are reversible, insisting that the U.S. move first to revive the deal.

In a show of defiance, Cabinet spokesman Ali Rabiei outlined further developments in Iran's nuclear

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program on Tuesday. Over the last three weeks, he told reporters, Iran has installed and started feeding gas into an additional 148 high-tech IR2-m centrifuges at its Natanz nuclear enrichment facility and its fortified nuclear complex at Fordo, bringing the total number of centrifuges to up to 492. Another set of 492 centrifuges will be installed in the coming month, he said.

He added that Iran has installed two cascades of even more advanced centrifuges at its nuclear enrichment facilities, but did not specify where.

On Monday, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also signaled Iran would refuse to capitulate to U.S. pressure over its nuclear program. Khamenei said that Iran could enrich uranium up to 60% purity if necessary, but stressed the country forbids nuclear weapons. Tehran has long insisted that its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes, such as power generation and medical research.

Before the nuclear deal, in 2013, Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium was already more than 7,000 kilograms (7.72 tons) with higher enrichment, but it didn't pursue a bomb.

The Biden administration has said it's ready to join talks with Iran and world powers to discuss a return to the deal. Zarif responded to the overture cautiously Tuesday, saying Iran is "assessing the idea of an unofficial meeting" with the parties to the accord "in which America is invited as a non-member."

In further diplomatic moves, the new U.S. administration rescinded the Trump-imposed U.N. sanctions and eased restrictions on the domestic travel of Iranian diplomats posted to the United Nations.

Rabiei praised the steps on Tuesday but threw cold water on hopes for a swift revival of the deal.

"While we consider this as putting America on a constructive path, we see (the steps) as extremely insufficient," he said.

Before Iran implemented its new restrictions on IAEA inspections, the agency's director-general, Rafael Grossi, negotiated a temporary deal during an emergency weekend trip to Tehran. It allowed him to keep the same number of inspectors on the ground.

In the report to members, the IAEA said the understanding would enable the agency to continue with its necessary JCPOA verification and monitoring activities for three months.

It added it would also "enable the agency to resume its full verification and monitoring of Iran's nuclear-related commitments under the JCPOA if and when Iran resumes its implementation of those commitments."

The IAEA also said it was still awaiting answers from Iran on three sites where inspections had revealed traces of uranium of man-made origin

Associated Press writer David Rising in Berlin contributed to this report. Metzler reported from Vienna.

Fed's Powell: Recovery incomplete, high inflation unlikely

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell underscored the U.S. economy's ongoing weakness Tuesday in remarks that suggested that the Fed sees no need to alter its ultra-low interest rate policies anytime soon.

"The economic recovery remains uneven and far from complete, and the path ahead is highly uncertain," Powell said in testimony to the Senate Banking Committee.

Powell's comments are in contrast to the increasing optimism among many analysts that the economy will grow rapidly later this year. That outlook has also raised concerns, though, about a potential surge in inflation and has fueled a sharp increase in longer-term interest rates this year.

Most economists say they think the Fed's continued low rates, further government financial aid and progress in combating the viral pandemic could create a mini-economic boom as soon as this summer. Powell acknowledged the potential for a healthier economy. But he stressed the personal hardships caused by the pandemic, especially for unemployed Americans.

"As with overall economic activity, the pace of improvement in the labor market has slowed," Powell said. "Although there has been much progress in the labor market since the spring, millions of Americans remain out of work."

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Powell's focus on the economy's challenges reflects his reluctance to send any signal that the Fed is considering pulling back on its efforts to boost economic growth and hiring. The Fed cut its benchmark short-term interest rate to nearly zero last March in response to the pandemic recession. It is also purchasing \$120 billion a month in bonds in an effort to hold down longer-term rates.

Powell reiterated that those purchases will continue until "substantial progress" has been made toward the Fed's goals of low unemployment and stable inflation at about 2% annually.

The economy may improve rapidly later this year, Powell said, "but the job is not done yet, the job is not done."

Powell also downplayed concerns about rising longer-term interest rates and potentially higher inflation, which some analysts worry will result from a burst of spending and growth if the pandemic is brought under control later this year.

The Fed chair also refused to endorse or condemn President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion economic rescue package, which is beginning to make its way through Congress. When asked by Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., if he would "be cool" with Congress approving or voting down Biden's proposal, Powell said, "By either being cool or uncool, I would have to be expressing an opinion. ... which I'm not doing."

The divide in Congress in regard to the state of the economy was clearly on display, a key part of the debate over the stimulus. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, chairman of the committee, spoke of Americans facing eviction, struggling small businesses, and state and local governments that need financial assistance.

Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., however, noted that 18 states have unemployment rates below 5% and argued that incomes have recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

"We are well past the point where our economy is collapsing," Toomey said. "In fact our economy is growing rapidly ... There's also real danger that we have overheating ... that can lead to inflation."

Powell has previously endorsed government spending in general to offset the impact of the recession. Fed chairs typically avoid commenting on specific legislation.

The Fed chair also acknowledged that prices could rise later this year if Americans engage in a burst of spending as the coronavirus comes under control.

But Powell emphasized that he doesn't expect sustained price increases. Inflation has been held down for decades by greater international competition, growing online commerce, and other trends that take time to change, he said.

In response to a question from Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., Powell said, "We do expect that inflation will move up. But we don't expect the effects on inflation will be particularly large or persistent."

Powell's remarks to the Banking Committee are coming on the first of two days of semiannual testimony to Congress that is required by law. On Wednesday, he will testify to the House Financial Services Committee.

His testimony comes as the economy is showing gradual improvement in key areas, with manufacturing and retail sales rebounding despite a stagnant job market. Still, the steady rise in interest rates has unsettled the stock market. On Monday, the tech-heavy Nasdaq index tumbled a steep 2.5% as the yield on the 10-year Treasury note surged to nearly 1.37%. At the start of the year, the 10-year yield was below 1%.

Powell attributed that increase to optimism about a potential acceleration in growth.

"In a way it's a statement of confidence on the part of markets that we will have a robust recovery," Powell said.

In response to a question from Toomey, Powell acknowledged that "there is certainly a link" between the Fed's low-interest rate policies and rapid price increases for stocks, homes, and some commodities. But he also attributed much of the price gains that have occurred to rising optimism.

For now, interest rates remain, by historical standards, exceedingly low. As recently as the fall of 2018, for example, the 10-year yield briefly topped 3%. But for the past year, the economy and the markets have drawn strength from near-record-low borrowing rates.

Many analysts are bullish about the prospects for this year. On Monday, Michelle Meyer, an economist at Bank of America, raised her forecast for growth this year to 6.5%. That would be the strongest calendar year economy growth since 1984.

Still, the job market remains essentially stalled, with employers adding an average of just 30,000 jobs

a month in the past three months. The economy is about 10 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level.

Powell was also asked about the prospects of the Fed creating a digital currency, a move that is gaining steam among other central banks. Powell said the Fed is "looking carefully at whether to issue a digital dollar."

Fed governor Lael Brainard said last year that the central bank has conducted "in-house experiments" on a digital currency, as a complement to cash. Providing a digital dollar would ensure "the public has access to a range of payments options," she said.

Food fight: Meat-free school meals spark furor in France

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

LE PECQ, France (AP) — By taking meat off the menu at school canteens, the ecologist mayor of one of France's most famously gastronomic cities has kicked up a storm of protest and debate as the country increasingly questions the environmental costs of its meaty dietary habits.

Children in Lyon who were regularly offered such choices as beef and chicken in rich sauces found their meat option missing this week when they returned from school holidays. In its place: a meatless four-course meal that Lyon City Hall says will be quicker and easier to serve to children who, because of the coronavirus pandemic, must be kept apart during lunch to avoid infections.

City Hall insists that the meatless meals are temporary and that school canteens will again offer meat options when social distancing rules are relaxed and children once again have more time to dwell on their food choices and to eat.

And the meat-free menus still contain animal proteins. This week's planned main courses include fish on Monday and Friday and eggs — either as omelettes or hard boiled with a creamy sauce — on other days. Children also get salad starters, a milk product — often cheese or yoghurt — and dessert.

Still, farmers saw red. Some drove farm vehicles, cows and goats in protest on Monday into Lyon, which is fiercely proud of its rich restaurant culture and signature dishes, many of them meaty.

Protesters' banners and placards extolled meat-eating, proclaiming "meat from our fields = a healthy child" and "Stopping meat is a guarantee of weakness against coronaviruses to come."

The government's agriculture minister, Julien Denormandie, also weighed in, accusing Lyon City Hall of "putting ideology in our children's plates." He and other critics argued the measure would penalize children from poorer families who might not be able to eat meat outside of school.

"From a nutritional point of view, it is absurd to stop serving meat," the minister said Tuesday on RTL radio. "From a social point of view, it is shameful."

Although fueled by the quintessentially French obsession with food and the country's powerful farming lobby, the furor has also gathered steam and taken on a political hue because of France's electoral calendar.

A wave of wins by green candidates, including the mayor of Lyon, in municipal elections last year dealt a blow to the centrist party of French President Emmanuel Macron. Their success reflected growing concerns in France about the environmental damage from intensive farming and other green issues. With more local elections expected later this year, the arguing over Lyon's school meals offered a foretaste of broader political battles to come.

Lyon City Hall said serving the same meal to all children, instead of offering them their usual meat and meat-free options, would shorten the time they take for lunch. City Hall said it has just two hours to feed 29,000 children, which is a harder schedule to keep when classes have to be kept apart in canteens to minimize virus infections. City Hall said it also opted for meat-free meals because they suit all children, including those who habitually don't eat meats for religious, dietary or other reasons.

The mayor, Gregory Doucet, said he is a flexitarian, eats meat in reasonable amounts, and isn't trying to force vegetarianism on children.

"Being able to offer a seated hot meal to all the children is important," he told broadcaster BFM-TV. "This is Lyon, the capital of gastronomy. For us, flavor is also essential."

Unfriended no more: Facebook to lift Australia news ban

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia (AP) — Facebook announced Tuesday that it would lift a ban on Australians viewing and sharing news on its platform after it struck a deal with the government on proposed legislation that would make digital giants pay for journalism.

The social media company caused alarm with its sudden decision last week to block news on its platform across Australia after the House of Representatives passed the draft law. Initially, the blackout also cut access — at least temporarily — to government pandemic, public health and emergency services, fueling outrage.

Facebook's cooperation is a major victory in Australia's efforts to make two major gateways to the internet, Google and Facebook, pay for the journalism that they use — a faceoff that governments and tech companies the world over have watched closely. Google also had threatened to remove its search functions from Australia because of the proposed law, but that threat has faded.

"There is no doubt that Australia has been a proxy battle for the world," Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said.

"Facebook and Google have not hidden the fact that they know that the eyes of the world are on Australia, and that is why they have sought to get a code here that is workable," he added, referring to the bill, the News Media Bargaining Code.

In fact, this week, Microsoft and four European publishing groups announced they would work together to push for Australian-style rules for news payments from tech platforms.

The legislation was designed to curb the outsized bargaining power of Facebook and Google in their negotiations with Australian news providers. The digital giants would not be able to abuse their positions by making take-it-or-leave-it payment offers to news businesses for their journalism. Instead, in the case of a standoff, an arbitration panel would make a binding decision on a winning offer.

Frydenberg and Facebook confirmed that the two sides agreed to amendments to the proposed legislation. The changes would give digital platforms one month's notice before they are formally designated under the code. That would give those involved more time to broker agreements before they are forced to enter binding arbitration arrangements.

A statement Tuesday by Campbell Brown, Facebook's vice president for news partnerships, added that the deal allows the company to choose which publishers it will support, including small and local ones.

"We're restoring news on Facebook in Australia in the coming days. Going forward, the government has clarified we will retain the ability to decide if news appears on Facebook so that we won't automatically be subject to a forced negotiation," Brown said.

Frydenberg described the agreed upon amendments as "clarifications" of the government's intent. He said his negotiations with Facebook chief executive Mark Zuckerberg were "difficult."

A European publishers' lobbying group that is among those teaming up with Microsoft said the deal shows such legislation is possible — and not just in Australia.

"The latest twist proves that regulation works," said Angela Mills Wade, executive director of the European Publishers Council. "Regulators from around the world will be reassured that they can continue to take inspiration from the Australian government's determination to withstand unacceptable threats from powerful commercial gatekeepers."

Facebook said it would now negotiate deals with Australian publishers.

"We are satisfied that the Australian government has agreed to a number of changes and guarantees that address our core concerns about allowing commercial deals that recognize the value our platform provides to publishers relative to the value we receive from them," Facebook regional managing director William Easton said.

"As a result of these changes, we can now work to further our investment in public interest journalism and restore news on Facebook for Australians in the coming days," Easton added.

Google, meanwhile, has been signing up Australia's largest media companies in content-licensing deals through its News Showcase. The platform says it has deals with more than 50 Australian titles and more

than 500 publishers globally using the model, which was launched in October.

Peter Lewis, director of the Australia Institute's Center for Responsible Technology, a think tank, said in a statement that the "amendments keep the integrity of the media code intact."

However, others took a more skeptical stance. Jeff Jarvis, a journalism expert from the City University of New York, said media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, who owns most of Australia's major newspapers through his U.S.-based News Corp., is the biggest winner while smaller titles and new media startups would suffer most.

Jarvis said Murdoch's media empire was the driving force behind the Australian legislation, which he noted includes a requirement for media companies to earn at least 150,000 Australian dollars (\$119,000) in revenue to be eligible.

"So a startup which has no revenue has no real recourse," Jarvis said, adding that even if Facebook and Google open payment talks with smaller companies, "clearly a smaller player has less clout than a bigger player, than a News Corp."

Associated Press writer Kelvin Chan contributed to this report from London.

What NY prosecutors could learn from Trump's tax records

By JIM MUSTIAN and DAVID B. CARUSO undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus R. Vance Jr. fought for a year and a half to get access to former President Donald Trump's tax records.

Now, thanks to a U.S. Supreme Court ruling, he will soon have them. But what will that mean for the Democrat's grand jury investigation into Trump's business affairs?

Former prosecutors say the trove of records could give investigators new tools to determine whether Trump lied to lenders or tax officials, before or after he took office.

"Prosecutors look for discrepancies in paperwork. For example, if Trump told the IRS he's broke and lenders that he's rich that's just the type of discrepancy they could build a case around," said Duncan Levin, a former federal prosecutor who worked on a wide range of white collar cases as Vance's chief of asset forfeiture.

"These documents are a very important piece of the jigsaw puzzle," Levin said.

Whether Trump's records will contain evidence of a crime is uncertain. The former president, a Republican, has argued for years that he broke no laws and has been unfairly targeted by Democrats for political reasons.

Here is a look at where the tax records might be helpful, and where they might not help much, in the district attorney's investigation:

MORE THAN JUST RETURNS

Trump went to extraordinary lengths to keep his federal income tax returns from becoming public, but those aren't the only valuable documents included in this haul.

Trump's accounting firm, Mazars USA, is supposed to turn over not only the final versions of Trump's tax returns, but also draft versions of those returns and "any and all statements of financial condition, annual statements, periodic financial reports, and independent auditors' reports" held by the company.

The Mazars subpoena also sought engagement agreements that define the accountants' role in creating the tax returns and financial statements; source documents providing the accountants with raw financial data; and work papers and communications between the firm and Trump representatives. Those would include communications showing how the raw data was analyzed and treated in the preparation of the records.

That could give state prosecutors an "open book" into Trump's finances, said Adam D. Citron, a former state prosecutor and partner at Davidoff Hutter & Citron. "It's really the kitchen sink."

Examining those other documents could be key to determining whether Trump or his companies gave tax authorities different information about his income than they presented to other officials, like banks

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and business partners.

HUSH MONEY

When the district attorney's investigation first began, one of the initial subpoenas sent to the Trump Organization asked for information about payments Trump's former lawyer, Michael Cohen, arranged to women who had claimed to have had extramarital sexual encounters with Trump.

Cohen has said Trump's company later reimbursed him for one of those payments, to the adult film actress Stormy Daniels, disguising it in the form of a legal fees.

It isn't clear, though, whether Trump's tax records will add much to that part of the probe. The New York Times, which obtained years of Trump's tax data, wrote that it contained "no new revelations" about the payment to Daniels and didn't include any itemized payments to Cohen.

TAX BREAKS

The district attorney's office has been investigating some of the arrangements Trump made to reduce his tax bill. Data in the returns could be essential in analyzing whether any of those maneuvers crossed legal lines.

One of the breaks under scrutiny is the one that Trump got for donating part of his Seven Springs estate, north of New York City, to a conservation trust. Some experts have questioned whether Trump overvalued the land to get a bigger break than he deserved.

Investigators have already subpoenaed and received many documents related to the land deal. Trump benefited from a similar conservation donation in California.

STATEMENTS TO LENDERS

Vance's office hasn't disclosed the full nature of its inquiry. But in court filings, prosecutors have pointed to news articles that questioned whether Trump had chronically exaggerated the value of his assets to banks and insurance companies. The Associated Press reported last month that Vance's office recently interviewed Cohen for hours, asking him, among other things, about Trump's relationship with Deutsche Bank, his biggest and longest standing creditor.

One Washington Post story cited by prosecutors detailed how various Trump Organization financial disclosures inflated the number of home lots for sale at a California golf course, the acreage at one of his vineyards and the number of stories in Trump Tower while excluding information about debts at his Chicago and Las Vegas hotel projects.

Tax records will only be one tool prosecutors will use to examine whether any of those statements amounted to fraud.

"They're going to look at valuations and property values," Citron said of state prosecutors. "They'll look at the billings of attorneys to see what their expenses were for."

Monday's ruling does not ensure the public will see Trump's financial records. For now, they are protected by grand jury secrecy rules. Even if charges are brought in the case, those documents likely would be heavily redacted if filed into the record.

"Even then, I'm sure there will be tons of litigation about that," Citron said.

What kindness brought to folks featured in 'One Good Thing'

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS undefined

In 200 stories over this pandemic-ridden year, The Associated Press has celebrated selfless people who have given of themselves in trying times.

The stories have warmed hearts of readers around the world. But we've also heard from people spotlighted in the series — launched last March as "One Good Thing" — who reported that lives had been profoundly affected by the attention they received.

There was the Texas principal whose school runs a free store providing food and goods to the community

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and who wrote to say a talk show wanted to book a teenager featured in the AP's story. The volunteer tutor for isolated students who said even her doctor called with congratulations. The manager of a New York City initiative to get meals to Holocaust survivors who reported that calls, volunteers and thousands of dollars in donations had flooded in.

Here are excerpts from a few of our favorite follow-up notes.

"We have to remember that life is precious and wonderful. There is so much beauty everywhere, both nature and people," wrote Marjan Curtis.

The 79-year-old widow battling Stage 4 cancer had planted hundreds of tulips along a road in Spanish Fork, Utah, leading to a fast friendship with Amy Baird, an adjunct university professor who was moved by the explosion of color while driving past.

After the story was published in November, Curtis heard from long-lost friends and colleagues who saw it and got back in touch. She also heard from strangers: A woman in Florida sent her a gift of tulips that change color in the light; a Colorado man sent a book about his father's work saving Jewish people from Nazis in Amsterdam during World War II (Curtis' family had hidden children in their barn in her native Netherlands, as the story recounted.)

A woman from Baird's book club who helped Curtis plant tulips last fall brought her a meal and visited her on Thanksgiving.

"I think that we do need each other, everywhere," Curtis said. "It is this human touch and care for another that makes life meaningful."

In August, we brought you Tammi Truax, the Portsmouth, New Hampshire, poet laureate who writes weekly pandemic verses for her community newsletter.

A trip by Portsmouth residents to sister city Nichinan, Japan, was scrapped due to the pandemic, so Truax had written a poem honoring nursing students whose graduation they had planned to attend. A Japanese newspaper followed up on the AP story, publishing its own piece on Truax including a photo of the school's principal holding a copy of the poem at their delayed ceremony.

"Thanks again for dropping the 'pandemic poet' pebble in the pond. Such wide-ranging ripples!" Portsmouth public information officer Stephanie Seacord wrote to AP. "May the new year be much brighter and more hope-filled."

Emiliano Moscoso, a restaurateur delivering meals to poor families in the Colombian capital of Bogota, among them Venezuelan refugees, said the April story helped him expand his "Solidarity Menu" project.

It also caught the eye of members of the respected initiative "Colombia Takes Care of Colombia." They asked him to join their work blunting the coronavirus' impact on low-income communities.

"What was amazing," Moscoso wrote, "is that the story gave this project so much credibility."

Moscoso said he closed out 2020 with a little over 40,000 meals delivered.

Bonnie Matthews' 6-year-old son Chip got a birthday gift of \$2 from mail carrier Tawanna Purter after the two struck up an unlikely pandemic friendship. She reached out to say the AP's November article and video made the holidays "so much more special."

The Opelika, Alabama, family heard from relatives and friends all over, and strangers sent well-wishes and small amounts of money for both Chip and older sister Bennett, 8.

After Matthews lost her job as a counselor at a private school that had allowed for her kids to attend, the "kindness, grace and love" the family experienced reaffirmed her faith in a divine plan — if not for the pandemic, Chip would have been in school and wouldn't have met Purter.

Chip still looks for her each day from the window. Purter invited the two kids to her son Joshua's birthday party in December, and a playground play date is in the works.

"You have truly impacted my family, and obviously many around us nationwide," Matthews wrote.

"The Matthews family is forever grateful and blessed by your desire to share those stories. May the Lord bless your family throughout 2021 and beyond."

Former Colorado Rockies and Pittsburgh Pirates manager Clint Hurdle was overjoyed by the response to April's story on the daily notes of inspiration, encouragement and wisdom he was sending to some 5,000 subscribers.

"Yahooooo!" he texted the reporter.

He gained more than 3,700 new followers after the story was published, Hurdle said.

"Blessed," he added, a day later.

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

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

New or used? Either way, price hikes squeeze US auto buyers

By TOM KRISHER and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

FENTON TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — The viral pandemic has triggered a cascade of price hikes throughout America's auto industry — a surge that has made both new and used vehicles unaffordable for many.

Prices of new vehicles far outpaced overall consumer inflation over the past year. In response, many buyers who were priced out of that market turned to used vehicles. Yet their demand proved so potent that used-vehicle prices soared even more than new ones did.

The price of an average new vehicle jumped 6% between January of last year, before the coronavirus erupted in the United States, and December to a record \$40,578, according to data from Edmunds.com.

Yet that increase was nothing next to what happened in the used market. The average price of a used vehicle surged nearly 14% — roughly 10 times the rate of inflation — to over \$23,000. It was among the fastest such increases in decades, said Ivan Drury, a senior manager of insights for Edmunds.com.

The main reason for the exploding prices is a simple one of economics: Too few vehicles available for sale during the pandemic and too many buyers. The price hikes come at a terrible time for buyers, many of whom are struggling financially or looking for vehicles to avoid public transit or ride hailing because the virus. And dealers and analysts say the elevated prices could endure or rise even further for months or years, with new vehicle inventories tight and fewer trade-ins coming onto dealers' lots.

The supply shortage arose last spring after the coronavirus hit hard. Automakers had to shut down North American factories to try to stop the virus' spread. The factory shutdowns reduced the industry's sales of new vehicles and resulted in fewer trade-ins. So when buyer demand picked up late in the year, fewer used vehicles were available.

Compounding the shortage, rental car companies and other fleet buyers — normally a major source of used vehicles for dealers — have been selling fewer now. With travel down and fewer people renting cars, the fleet buyers aren't acquiring as many new vehicles, and so they aren't off-loading as many older ones.

"It's like a weird perpetual motion machine right now with pricing," said Jeff Goldberg, general manager of Goldie's Motors, a used vehicle dealership in Phoenix.

Charlie Chesbrough, senior economist for Cox Automotive, predicted a tight used-vehicle market with high prices for several more years.

"There are millions fewer used vehicles that are going to be available starting next year, 2022 and 2023," he said.

The resulting price spike essentially has created three classes of auto buyers: Those affluent enough to afford new vehicles. People who can afford late-model used cars. And buyers with low incomes or poor

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credit who are stuck with older, less reliable vehicles.

The industry is still trying to recover from the pandemic's devastation last spring. The resulting factory closures shrank output by 3.3 million vehicles. Sales temporarily dried up, and so did the influx of trade-ins.

Once the factories restored production in May, demand turned hot. Problem was, the supply of vehicles fell well short of demand, especially for pickup trucks and SUVs. Prices surged. And new-vehicle purchases for the year tumbled — by nearly 2.5 million to 14.6 million.

When Larry Parsons of Hartland Township, Michigan, went to buy a pickup truck in August, the question of whether to buy new or used was unfortunately an easy one.

"We did look at new trucks, but the price is excessive," he said. "Some trucks cost upwards of \$70,000. It's to the point where it's ridiculous."

Instead, Parsons settled on a 2019 Ford F-150 with 29,000 miles on it. The truck, priced at \$52,000 when new, cost \$37,000. He also bought an 84-month warranty to cover the vehicle while he is still making loan payments.

To be sure, vehicle prices had been rising well before the pandemic struck, with many buyers choosing loaded-out trucks or SUVs and taking on loans of six years or more to keep their payments low. Even so, used prices had remained relatively low, with an ample supply of 3 million-plus vehicles returning to the market each year from leases.

Then the virus hit. With it came government stimulus checks, which many buyers who used as down payments. Because they weren't spending on restaurants or vacations, some people spent even more on vehicles than they otherwise would have.

"If I'm going in at \$40,000, I might as well spend \$45,000," Drury said of buyers. "I might as well treat myself."

Even with loans of more than 60 months, average monthly payments range into the mid-\$500s for new vehicles, putting them out of reach for many. Right now, said Chesbrough, the Cox Automotive economist, the bulk of the growth in the new-vehicle market is in the \$50,000-and-above range.

In recent years, automakers had set the stage for higher prices by scrubbing many lower-priced new vehicles that had only thin profit margins. Starting five years ago, Ford, GM and Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) stopped selling many sedans and hatchbacks in the United States. Likewise, Honda and Toyota have canceled U.S. sales of lower-priced subcompacts. Their SUV replacements have higher sticker prices.

"The industry has been abandoning that \$30,000-and-below price point," Chesbrough said. "Essentially, they've been forgoing that territory to the used car market."

The increased demand and higher prices for late-model used cars have spelled trouble for lower-income buyers, noted Art Ramos, who runs a used-vehicle store in McAllen, Texas, near the Mexico border. Unemployed people who were receiving jobless aid during the pandemic have had trouble securing a loan. Those who can buy typically have to look at much older vehicles with significant miles on them.

"All the people who were unemployed for all these months — I couldn't get them approved," he said.

When lower-income buyers are able to get loans, they typically must pay higher rates — sometimes over 20% with some lenders, Ramos said.

Yet because many buyers have no other options, older vehicles with more than 100,000 miles on them are in high demand now, said Ryan LaFontaine, CEO of a 20-dealer chain in Michigan that includes two used-only stores.

In the past, dealers wouldn't have bothered with those trade-ins; they would have sent them to regional auction houses. But auto quality has sharply improved in the past decade. So LaFontaine's group is reconditioning such cars and providing credit counseling for buyers with lower incomes or poor credit.

"Every year, we increase our ability to cost-effectively recondition vehicles that we can present to consumers and stand behind it," said Mike Jackson, CEO of AutoNation, the country's largest dealership group.

Dealers say competition for used vehicles, especially from upstart online auto sellers Carvana and Vroom, contributed to the price increases with bidding wars at auctions. Still, Jackson argues that autos remain affordable because consumers are typically receiving more money for their trade-ins. Interest rates remain

low, too. New-vehicle loan rates not subsidized by automakers are averaging 4.4%, according to Edmunds, while used loans average 7.8%.

Average prices did subside a bit in January. But that might be deceptive, said Edmunds' Drury. Fewer expensive new and used luxury vehicles were sold during the month, he said, thereby temporarily lowering overall prices.

Those on the front lines says competition for vehicles is intensifying as dealers stock up for buyers who may soon receive additional government stimulus checks and income tax refunds.

In the meantime, a global shortage of computer chips for vehicles is forcing automakers to reduce production. The chip shortage could potentially diminish the supply of vehicles once again, which, in turn, would likely send new and used prices up further.

Unaffordable prices might open the door to a company that could profit on low-priced new cars with just basic features. That, Chesbrough notes, is what the Korean automaker Hyundai did to enter the U.S. market decades ago.

"I do think the industry does make itself kind of vulnerable," he said.

Biden attempt to resurrect Iran nuke deal off to bumpy start

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration's early efforts to resurrect the 2015 Iran nuclear deal are getting a chilly early response from Tehran. Though few expected a breakthrough in the first month of the new administration, Iran's tough line suggests a difficult road ahead.

Having made several significant overtures to Iran in its first weeks in office, the administration's outreach has been all but shunned by the Iranians. They had already rejected Biden's opening gambit: a U.S. return to the deal from which President Donald Trump withdrew in 2018 if Iran resumes full compliance with its obligations under the accord.

Iran is shaping up to be a major test of the Biden administration's overall approach to foreign policy, which the president has said will realign itself with the kind of multilateral diplomacy that Trump shunned. Although there are other hot-button issues — Russia, China and North Korea among them — Iran has a particular significance for Biden's top national security aides. They include Secretary of State Antony Blinken, national security adviser Jake Sullivan and special envoy for Iran Rob Malley, all of whom were intimately involved in crafting the 2015 deal under President Barack Obama and may have personal stakes in salvaging it.

Biden took office pledging to reverse Trump's pullout from the deal, which gave it billions of dollars in sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program. Just last week, Biden delivered in at least three ways: agreeing to return to multinational talks with Iran about reviving the deal, rescinding Trump's determination that all U.N. sanctions on Iran must be restored, and easing onerous travel restrictions on Iranian diplomats posted to the United Nations.

Yet, Iran has held firm to demands that it will not respond to anything less than a full lifting of the sanctions Trump reimposed. Over the weekend, Iran made good on a threat to suspend adherence to a U.N. agreement allowing intrusive inspections of its declared nuclear sites. Although it stopped short of ordering the removal of international inspectors, Iran reduced cooperation with them and vowed to revisit the step in three months if sanctions aren't removed.

The Iranians' hard-nosed stance has left the administration at the cusp of a difficult choice: move ahead with sanctions relief before Iran resumes full compliance and risk losing the leverage it has or double down on demands for full compliance first and risk Tehran walking away from the deal completely.

It's a delicate balance and one the administration is loathe to admit it faces, given the politically sensitive nature of Iran in Washington — Republicans strongly oppose the nuclear deal — and in Europe and the Middle East itself, particularly in Israel and the Gulf Arab states that are most directly threatened.

On Monday, Secretary of State Antony Blinken reaffirmed that the U.S. is prepared to return to the nuclear deal provided Tehran shows "strict compliance" with it. Speaking to the U.N.-backed Conference

on Disarmament in Geneva, Blinken said the U.S. is committed to ensuring Iran never acquires a nuclear weapon and pledged to work with allies and partners to "lengthen and strengthen" the deal struck between Iran and Germany, France, Britain, Russia, China and the U.S.

"Diplomacy is the best path to achieve that goal," he said.

Just 24 hours earlier, though, Iran on Sunday rejected entreaties to suspend cooperation with the U.N. nuclear watchdog. While Iran did not expel the International Atomic Energy Agency, which is charged with monitoring Iranian compliance with the deal, it did end the agency's access to video from cameras installed at a number of sites.

There was no immediate response to that development from the U.S., but on Monday the White House and State Department both downplayed the significance of the move.

"Our view is that diplomacy is the best path forward to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon," White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters. "That does not mean they have clearly not taken the steps needed to comply and we have not taken any steps or made any indication that we are going to meet the demands that they are putting forward either."

At the State Department, spokesman Ned Price addressed the IAEA mission more directly, praising the agency for its "professionalism" in keeping inspectors and their apparatus in the country despite Iran's early threat to expel them on Tuesday. He said the U.S. supports IAEA chief Rafael Grossi's success in reaching a temporary deal with Iran but lamented that Tehran remains out of compliance.

Price said the the administration was concerned that Iran appeared to be going in the wrong direction but would not comment on the administration's view of whether its outreach to date had achieved results. Nor was he prepared to say what the administration might do to push Iran back into compliance with the deal considering its continued threat to abandoned all restrictions it imposed.

"The United States is willing to meet with the Iranians to hash out these difficult complex questions," Price said, alluding to phrases that administration officials have used to refer to their initial aim of "compliance for compliance" and then "compliance for compliance-plus."

"Compliance-plus," according to administration officials, would include limits on Iran's non-nuclear activities, including missile development and support for Mideast rebel groups and militias. A main reason Trump gave for withdrawing from the nuclear deal was that it did not address those issues and his administration has tried for more than a year to expand the deal to include them.

Wife of drug kingpin El Chapo arrested on US drug charges

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The wife of Mexican drug kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman was arrested in the United States and accused of helping her husband run his multibillion-dollar cartel and plot his audacious escape from a Mexican prison in 2015.

Emma Coronel Aispuro, a 31-year-old former beauty queen, was arrested at Dulles International Airport in Virginia on Monday and is expected to appear in federal court in Washington on Tuesday afternoon. She is a dual citizen of the United States and Mexico.

Her arrest is the latest twist in the bloody, multinational saga involving Guzman, the longtime head of the Sinaloa drug cartel. Guzman, whose two dramatic prison escapes in Mexico fed into a legend that he and his family were all but untouchable, was extradited to the United States in 2017 and is serving life in prison.

And now his wife, with whom he has two young daughters, has been charged with helping him run his criminal empire. In a single-count criminal complaint, Coronel was charged with conspiracy to distribute cocaine, methamphetamine, heroin and marijuana in the U.S. The Justice Department also accused her of helping her husband escape from a Mexican prison in 2015 and participating in the planning of a second prison escape before Guzman was extradited to the U.S.

Coronel was moved to the Alexandria Detention Center in Virginia late Monday night and is expected to appear by video conference for her initial court appearance on Tuesday. Her attorney Jeffrey Lichtman declined to comment Monday night.

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As Mexico's most powerful drug lord, Guzman ran a cartel responsible for smuggling mountains of cocaine and other drugs into the United States during his 25-year reign, prosecutors said in recent court papers. They also said his "army of sicarios," or "hit men," was under orders to kidnap, torture and kill anyone who got in his way.

His prison breaks became the stuff of legend and raised serious questions about whether Mexico's justice system was capable of holding him accountable. In one case, he escaped through an entry under the shower in his cell to a milelong (1.6-kilometer-long) lighted tunnel with a motorcycle on rails. The planning for the escape was extensive, prosecutors say, with his wife playing a key role.

Court papers charge that Coronel worked with Guzman's sons and a witness, who is now cooperating with the U.S. government, to organize the construction of the underground tunnel that Guzman used to escape from the Altiplano prison to prevent his extradition to the U.S. The plot included purchasing a piece of land near the prison, firearms and an armored truck and smuggling him a GPS watch so they could "pinpoint his exact whereabouts so as to construct the tunnel with an entry point accessible to him," the court papers say.

Guzman was sentenced to life behind bars in 2019.

Coronel, who was a beauty queen in her teens, regularly attended Guzman's trial, even when testimony implicated her in his prison breaks. The two, separated in age by more than 30 years, have been together since at least 2007, and their twin daughters were born in 2011.

Her father, Ines Coronel Barreras, was arrested in 2013 with one of his sons and several other men in a warehouse with hundreds of pounds of marijuana across the border from Douglas, Arizona. Months earlier, the U.S. Treasury had announced financial sanctions against her father for his alleged drug trafficking.

After Guzman was rearrested following his escape, Coronel lobbied the Mexican government to improve her husband's prison conditions. And after he was convicted in 2019, she moved to launch a clothing line in his name.

Mike Vigil, the Drug Enforcement Administration's former chief of international operations, said Coronel "has been involved in the drug trade since she was a little girl. She knows the inner workings of the Sinaloa cartel."

He said she could be willing to cooperate.

"She has a huge motivation, and that is her twins," Vigil said.

Associated Press writers Christopher Sherman and Mark Stevenson in Mexico City contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 24, the 55th day of 2021. There are 310 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Feb. 24, 1868, the U.S. House of Representatives impeached President Andrew Johnson by a vote of 126-47 following his attempted dismissal of Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton; Johnson was later acquitted by the Senate.

On this date:

In 1803, in its *Marbury v. Madison* decision, the Supreme Court established judicial review of the constitutionality of statutes.

In 1815, American engineer and inventor Robert Fulton, credited with building the first successful commercial steamboat, died in New York at 49.

In 1938, the first nylon bristle toothbrush, manufactured by DuPont under the name "Dr. West's Miracle Toothbrush," went on sale.

In 1942, the SS *Struma*, a charter ship attempting to carry nearly 800 Jewish refugees from Romania to British-mandated Palestine, was torpedoed by a Soviet submarine in the Black Sea; all but one of the

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refugees perished.

In 1961, the Federal Communications Commission authorized the nation's first full-scale trial of pay television in Hartford, Connecticut.

In 1981, a jury in White Plains, New York, found Jean Harris guilty of second-degree murder in the fatal shooting of "Scarsdale Diet" author Dr. Herman Tarnower. (Sentenced to 15 years to life in prison, Harris was granted clemency by New York Gov. Mario Cuomo in December 1992.)

In 1988, in a ruling that expanded legal protections for parody and satire, the Supreme Court unanimously overturned a \$150,000 award that the Rev. Jerry Falwell had won against Hustler magazine and its publisher, Larry Flynt.

In 1989, a state funeral was held in Japan for Emperor Hirohito, who had died the month before at age 87.

In 1993, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) resigned after more than eight years in office.

In 1996, Cuba downed two small American planes operated by the group Brothers to the Rescue that it claimed were violating Cuban airspace; all four pilots were killed.

In 2008, Cuba's parliament named Raul Castro president, ending nearly 50 years of rule by his brother Fidel.

In 2015, the Justice Department announced that George Zimmerman, the former neighborhood watch volunteer who fatally shot Trayvon Martin in a 2012 confrontation, would not face federal charges.

Ten years ago: Discovery, the world's most traveled spaceship, thundered into orbit for the final time, heading toward the International Space Station on a journey marking the beginning of the end of the shuttle era.

Five years ago: President Barack Obama nominated Carla Hayden, longtime head of Baltimore's library system, to be the 14th Librarian of Congress; Hayden became the first woman and the first African-American to hold the position. An Indianapolis man was convicted of murder, arson and insurance fraud for his role in a 2012 house explosion that killed two neighbors and devastated a subdivision. (Bob Leonard was sentenced to two consecutive life prison terms without parole, plus 70 years.) Surgeons at the Cleveland Clinic performed the nation's first uterus transplant on a 26-year-old woman, using an organ from a deceased donor. (However, the transplant failed.)

One year ago: The White House sent lawmakers a \$2.5 billion plan to respond to the coronavirus; it was immediately slammed by Democrats as insufficient. Wall Street endured its worst session in two years, with the Dow industrials slumping more than 1,000 points on fears that the viral outbreak would weaken the world economy. Police manned checkpoints around sealed-off towns in northern Italy. Former Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein was convicted in New York on charges of rape and sexual assault against two women. Friends and family of Kobe Bryant joined 20,000 fans in mourning the NBA superstar at the Los Angeles arena where he played for 17 seasons. Kobe Bryant's widow sued the companies that owned and operated the helicopter that crashed and killed Bryant and the couple's 13-year-old daughter in January. Katherine Johnson, a mathematician who calculated rocket trajectories and earth orbits for NASA's early space missions, died at 101; she'd been portrayed in the 2016 film "Hidden Figures," about pioneering Black female aerospace workers. Adventure novelist Clive Cussler died at the age of 88.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-singer Dominic Chianese (kee-uh-NAY'-see) is 90. Opera singer-director Renata Scotto is 87. Singer Joanie Sommers is 80. Actor Jenny O'Hara is 79. Former Sen. Joseph Lieberman, I-Conn., is 79. Actor Barry Bostwick is 76. Actor Edward James Olmos is 74. Singer-writer-producer Rupert Holmes is 74. Rock singer-musician George Thorogood is 71. Actor Debra Jo Rupp is 70. Actor Helen Shaver is 70. News anchor Paula Zahn is 65. Baseball Hall of Famer Eddie Murray is 65. Country singer Sammy Kershaw is 63. Actor Mark Moses is 63. Actor Beth Broderick is 62. Actor Emilio Rivera is 60. Singer Michelle Shocked is 59. Movie director Todd Field is 57. Actor Billy Zane is 55. Actor Bonnie Somerville is 47. Jazz musician Jimmy Greene is 46. Former boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr. is 44. Rock musician Matt McGinley (Gym Class Heroes) is 38. Actor Wilson Bethel is 37. Actor Alexander Koch is 33. Actor Daniel Kaluuya (Film: "Get Out") is 32. Rapper-actor O'Shea Jackson Jr. is 30.