

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 1 of 95

- [1- Daylight Savings Time](#)
- [2- Tower being sandblasted](#)
- [3- February & March Groton Robotics News](#)
- [5- Covid-19 Update by Marie Miller](#)
- [8- Yesterday's COVID-19 UPDATE](#)
- [15- Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs](#)
- [16- Weather Pages](#)
- [19- Daily Devotional](#)
- [20- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [21- News from the Associated Press](#)



Daylight Saving Time
SPRING FORWARD

Saturday, March 14th



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 2 of 95



Sandblasting of the new water tower continued yesterday as the tower is being prepped for painting. If all goes well, priming of the tower will begin later this afternoon. The actual painting will have to wait until air temperatures are at least 40 degrees, day and night. (Photos by Paul Kosel)



February & March Groton Robotics News



Geek Squad: Blake Lord, Charlie Frost, Brody Lord with their robot 9050D ready to drop a blue ball in and score a point) (Photo by Britt Frost)

7th going into the semi-finals, Gear Heads-10th and Galaxy 18th. Galaxy lost during the round of 16. G-Force and Gear Heads made it to the semi-finals. Great job to all the teams!

Taking home the 1st place trophy from the state tournament was APEX PREDATORS and QUARIN-TEENS both from Harrisburg.

Saturday, March 6th-Three teams headed north to Valley City, ND to participate in their tournament even though it doesn't count towards any SD rankings, but due to how close it is and the teams just wanted to try their luck and have some robotic fun one more weekend! 13 teams participated in this tournament, unfortunately it was a tough day for the Groton teams, but they had fun and it's always interesting to see how different states and teams

Saturday, February 6th Groton Area hosted a Vex robotics tournament welcoming 21 teams, including three from Valley City, ND. G-Force 9050A(Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll and Garrett Schultz) advanced to the finals, but unfortunately were not able to beat their opponents from Lead/Deadwood and Valley City. The alliance of Bob's Little Builders (Valley City) and Lead/Deadwood Robotics took home the 1st place trophy from Groton. Congratulations to those two teams! Galaxy 9050E(Jack Dinger, James Brooks and Axel Warrington) and Gear Heads 9050B (Ethan Clark, River Pardnick and Isaac Higgins) advanced to the semi-finals. Geek Squad (Charlie Frost, Brody Lord and Blake Lord) were unable to beat their opponents during the Round of 16. Thank you to the 3M judges, Kyle Weber and Scott Dunn. Thanks to Clint Fjelstad for being a referee and Jim Lane for being our EMCEE!

Saturday, February 27th the South Dakota Vex Robotics State Tournament was held in Harrisburg with 26 teams from South Dakota participating. Groton sent three teams: Galaxy-9050E (Jack Dinger, James Brooks and Axel Warrington), Gear Heads-9050B (Ethan Clark, River Pardnick-not present was Isaac Higgins), G-Force-9050A (Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll-not present was Garrett Schultz). G-Force was ranked



GALAXY: Axel Warrington, Jack Dinger, James Brooks getting ready to start a match.

(Photo by Shane Clark)

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 4 of 95

put on a tournament. North Dakota doesn't have their state competition until April.

Thanks to all those who supported Groton Robotics by purchasing raffle tickets for the pellet grill drawing! The drawing was held Friday, March 5th and livestreamed on the Groton Tigers Robotics facebook page. The grand prize winner of the pellet grill was Julie Sandness.

Our robotics year has come to an end, time to clean up the room and organize parts! The new game for the Vex Robotics 2021-2022 season will be released in April, this is always an exciting for the teams as they start to tear apart their robots and build one for the new season!



Left to right –3M Volunteer Judges (sitting: Scott Dunn, standing: Kyle Weber, GEAR HEADS: Isaac Higgins, Ethan Clark and River Pardick and G-FORCE: Travis Townsend, Jace Kroll, Garrett Schultz, getting ready for a match] Former Groton Robotics Coach, Jim Lane, graciously volunteered to EMCEE our tournament! Thank you Jim! (Photo by Shane Clark)



Groton Robotics is open to 6-12th grade kids if anyone has a child interested, they are welcome to contact Neil Warrington or Weston Dinger, space is limited to 20 kids.

- Submitted by: Shane Clark

G-Force: Jace Kroll, Travis Townsend, Garrett Schultz with their robot 9050A getting ready to start a match. (Photo by Melissa Schultz)

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 5 of 95

#383 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I'm not a big fan of what seems to be happening here. We've had a small, but persistent uptick in cases, hospitalizations, and deaths all week. If we were getting ready to spike, this is how it would look. The weekend could our perception of whatever might be happening, so it may take a few days to get a sense of what's going on here; but I am feeling some unease at the moment. We're now at 29,373,100 total cases thus far in this pandemic, which is 0.2% more than yesterday's total. There were 66,100 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations are the same as yesterday at 43,254. A pattern seems to have developed of having the same number two days running; I'm thinking reporting practices may have changed and we'll get updates only every other day. I can work with that, but I don't much like that our steady downward march for this figure has definitely halted and it's ticked up most of the week. There were 1708 deaths reported today, which puts us now at 532,028, which is 0.3% more than yesterday. I don't know for sure where this is going, but I don't love what I'm seeing. Buckle up, folks; there might just be a rough road ahead. If so, we'll know soon.

On March 12, 2020, one year ago today the US had 1660 cases in 46 states, up from 1249 in 42 states the day before. I wrote, "That's around a 33% increase in cases in 24 hours, and we're running out of states--I guess that's one number that won't go up much more, no matter how bad it gets." The only states left without cases were Idaho, Montana, Alabama, and West Virginia; and Alabama and West Virginia were still not testing. Three states accounted for more than half our cases: 420 in Washington, 328 in New York, and 252 in California. Forty-one had died.

There were 124,519 cases in 118 countries worldwide with 4607 deaths. China (where new infections had largely tapered off), Italy, and Iran had the highest case counts. Germany reported 802 new cases in 24 hours, increasing their total to 2369 with five deaths.

Olympic organizers said it would be "unthinkable" to cancel the Tokyo Olympics. Cancellations and closures: the NCAA and NAIA basketball tournaments and all of their spring championships; Major League Baseball operations; the NBA season; the NHL season; the MLS season; the men's pro tennis tour; large group gatherings in New York, New Mexico, Oregon, and Utah; Broadway; the Metropolitan Opera; the Billie Eilish tour; Disney World; Disneyland Paris; Universal Studios in Florida and California; prison visits in many states; schools in New Mexico, Georgia, San Francisco, Kentucky, Maryland, Ohio, France, Israel, and Portugal; the Tonight Show and Late Night with Seth Meyers; the NRA annual meeting; the Los Angeles Zoo; Arlington National Cemetery; the Smithsonian Museums; the National Zoo; the Tribeca Film Festival; Madison Square Garden; all of Rome's Catholic churches; the Metropolitan Museum; Carnegie Hall; the National Archives; and a joint European-Russian mission to Mars. It was now clear that life was going to be changing, no matter how we wished it wasn't.

I wrote, "It is time we face the fact that the leading infectious disease specialists agree we've lost the race to contain this virus. Time to serious up and deal with this. Let's see whether we can reduce the number of funerals in upcoming weeks. I am recommending everyone avoid large events, no matter how young and healthy you are. Worship from home on Sunday; I think God will understand. Do a phone meeting or Skype instead of putting a bunch of people together in a room. Try to do your shopping at off hours, and get it done in fewer, less frequent trips. This isn't the time for clothes and home décor shopping; just buy essentials and get out of the store. Skip the theme park and the big game and the crowded mall. Eat at home for a couple of weeks. If you have the option to work from home, take it. Stay off crowded public transit if you can. Encourage your local school officials to at least suspend extracurricular activities, limit visitors, and educate students about precautionary measures. And exercise precautions yourself--all the things we've already been talking about."

An interesting question arose today which deals with something I've been reading lately, so I did some more reading, and here's what I found out. The question was about the effect of Covid-19 vaccine on people with what's being called long Covid, that is, people who, well after their Covid-19 infection is over, still experience symptoms. These symptoms can take many forms, including continuing muscle pain, head-

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 6 of 95

ache, tachycardia (abnormally rapid heartbeat), sensory disturbances (of taste and smell), memory and concentration problems, sleep issues, skin rash, hair loss, and fatigue. For some, these go on for weeks or months after the infection itself has resolved. Some of the people thus affected had only very mild cases of Covid-19 while others were very severely ill. People who are suffering these lingering problems have formed groups on social media and such to exchange ideas and advice as well as support. We talked recently about the fact that the NIH is launching a major research effort into the condition.

Some of these groups have been discussing vaccination. A couple of informal surveys have been done, and some folks are reporting their long Covid symptoms have improved or even disappeared after vaccination. Depending which survey you consult, anywhere from maybe 15 percent to nearly a third report improvement. There have also been less frequent reports of symptoms becoming somewhat worse. Now we've talked before about the fact that two things related in time are not necessarily causally related; so we have to say up front that there is no evidence the vaccine caused either of these outcomes—the improvement or the worsening. Some people with long Covid get better and others get worse, even when no one's been vaccinated. The change in symptoms might be simply coincidental. It could also be the result of misreporting, misremembering, or confirmation bias—where you expect the vaccine to make you better, so you think you do feel better, or conversely, you expect the vaccine to make you worse, so you think you feel worse. As a result, scientists are considering some prospective studies to try to nail down just what might be operating here.

One such, Akiko Iwasaki at Yale University, has proposed possible mechanisms by which long Covid mechanisms might be operating; these are based on various pieces of research, and she mentioned that any or all of these might be operating. The first is that there is a persistent viral reservoir in the patient, that is, the virus is never successfully eliminated from the body after the acute phase of the infection passes; it could be in some people low levels of virus persist, continuing to cause trouble. The second is that there may be viral fragments persisting which drive inflammation. So perhaps you never eliminate all of the last pieces of virus and those are stimulating to the inflammatory response which then causes damage. And the third is that the infection might have induced an autoimmune response. We've talked about autoimmunity before; in brief, this is when your immune system fails to appropriately differentiate your tissues from an invading organism and so attacks those tissues as if they were an invading organism, sort of by mistake.

The thinking is that vaccine-induced humoral (antibody) and cell-mediated responses, being so robust, can eliminate the virus or viral fragments if they're what's causing the problem. There is also some thought that the vaccine might divert the auto-sensitized cells if autoimmunity is the issue. It could also be that the vaccines are eliciting an innate response: That's the nonspecific response that occurs to any sort of antigenic stimulus. It could also be that the short-term inflammation that occurs in response to vaccine might be diverting the white blood cells previously causing long Covid; in that case, the improvement might be short-term too. We need more research, but having an idea how vaccine may improve the condition of a patient with long Covid gives scientists something to work with. There have also been concerns from patients that vaccine might excite a cytokine storm, that damaging, over-the-top immunological response to infection which can destroy tissue; but I haven't seen any evidence that this is so. You'd think if a vaccine could cause a cytokine storm, we'd have seen a case of that in the tens of millions of doses which have been administered so far; and we have not seen that.

The first step will be to collect data on folks who get vaccinated. We need to know how many people have what kind of experience after vaccination and how long-lasting any effects turn out to be. We need well-designed studies to figure out just what we have here. It's good to know we might get those studies. We can't help people with long Covid until we understand what's going on in these patients.

Back in December, Evelyn Topper was out picking up a coffee; when she returned home, she realized she didn't have her wallet. She had used it when she paid for her coffee, so she knew she'd lost it somewhere between the shop and her home. Nonetheless, it was gone. She told KNTV, "I called the coffee shop immediately. I tore apart my car and my house. I knew it must have dropped somewhere in the parking

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 7 of 95

lot." As with most wallets, half her life was in there: credit cards, debit card, health insurance cards, her driver's license, and her roadside assistance. The next day, she received a call from a stranger, Sean Currey, who had found it and wanted to return it to her. She said, "I couldn't believe it!"

They arranged to meet in a nearby parking lot because that is where Sean lives in his car; he'd been homeless on and off for five years at that point, but he'd never been in his car for so long before. While he worked in construction and building maintenance, the pandemic had been really difficult for him—all he could find is the occasional handyman job. He later explained he'd been dumpster-diving for food or usable items when he came across the wallet. There was no money in it and he nearly tossed it aside; but then he realized there were several credit cards and perhaps the owner might need those back. He admits the thought crossed his mind to use the credit cards himself. "Anybody in the position of being homeless and cold and tired and hungry, if they found a credit card, they're going to think about it, but whether you're going to act on it is two different things. I would rather be cold and hungry and know that I did the right thing." So he located her phone number and called her. When he handed over the wallet, Evelyn gave him a little money in appreciation. As they talked, she discovered he was homeless, so when her 12-year-old granddaughter, Mikayla, later decided to do a fundraiser for her birthday instead of gifts, she decided to raise money to help Currey.

He told the Washington Post that, when they asked his permission to do this, "I choked up and got a tear. I felt very humbled and special that they would go out of their way to do that for me;" but he agreed. This was a drive-by birthday party: The family set up a table with a photo of Currey and a bowl to leave donations and picked up \$475. Mikayla and her mom, Vanessa, took the money to a parking lot to deliver to him. The Mikayla said, "I got to see him smile, and it made me really happy." They helped him get on the waiting list for a Section 8 housing voucher to help him into permanent housing. This is the sort of story that can have legs, and it hit the local television news. Soon, people were getting in touch with the family, asking how they could help; so they set up a GoFundMe page in the hopes of raising enough to help him get into housing again. The goal would be to get Currey housed and, according to the GoFundMe page, "to create a sustainable row of tiny houses for the San Rafael homeless community at large, using his design and construction experience."

That's working: The page has raised almost \$56,000 to date. So now that Currey is housed, they have closed the fundraiser and can begin the next steps. Curry said, "I believe I have a good heart. Maybe, if I keep doing the right thing, more people will too, and it will change the world, in a small way, for the better." I think it already has.

Take care. We'll talk again.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 8 of 95

County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
▲						
Aurora	455	432	874	15	Minimal	0.0%
Beadle	2820	2679	5942	39	Substantial	15.6%
Bennett	382	370	1183	9	None	0.0%
Bon Homme	1510	1476	2098	26	Minimal	3.8%
Brookings	3646	3538	12136	37	Moderate	2.6%
Brown	5192	5033	12840	89	Substantial	8.1%
Brule	697	681	1890	9	Minimal	8.6%
Buffalo	421	406	899	13	None	0.0%
Butte	990	956	3251	20	Moderate	9.0%
Campbell	131	126	258	4	Minimal	25.0%
Charles Mix	1317	1253	3966	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	377	362	956	5	Moderate	5.9%
Clay	1818	1776	5436	15	Substantial	3.0%
Codington	4064	3889	9743	77	Substantial	7.7%
Corson	473	457	1004	12	Minimal	14.8%
Custer	767	742	2742	12	Substantial	11.4%
Davison	2992	2889	6612	63	Moderate	6.3%
Day	674	633	1793	29	Substantial	6.5%
Deuel	478	462	1146	8	Minimal	0.0%
Dewey	1426	1389	3827	26	Substantial	4.7%
Douglas	435	421	921	9	Moderate	0.0%
Edmunds	486	466	1069	13	Moderate	5.0%
Fall River	553	517	2651	15	Substantial	9.8%
Faulk	362	347	703	13	Minimal	14.3%
Grant	985	925	2264	39	Substantial	6.8%
Gregory	554	505	1300	30	Moderate	11.9%
Haakon	257	243	542	10	Moderate	0.0%
Hamlin	728	669	1794	38	Substantial	21.9%
Hand	349	331	826	6	Moderate	5.3%
Hanson	369	355	729	4	Moderate	26.3%
Harding	92	90	184	1	Minimal	20.0%
Hughes	2331	2261	6648	36	Substantial	1.2%
Hutchinson	795	757	2401	26	Minimal	5.3%

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 9 of 95

Hyde	139	137	412	1	Minimal	5.3%
Jackson	281	264	918	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	252	560	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	86	86	225	0	Minimal	0.0%
Kingsbury	652	625	1690	14	Moderate	5.6%
Lake	1233	1170	3382	18	Substantial	9.0%
Lawrence	2839	2773	8582	45	Moderate	3.4%
Lincoln	7926	7673	20480	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	606	589	1883	10	Minimal	2.6%
Marshall	344	316	1206	6	Substantial	12.3%
McCook	759	716	1639	24	Moderate	12.1%
McPherson	240	233	559	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2639	2548	7758	31	Substantial	9.5%
Mellette	256	247	740	2	Moderate	8.8%
Miner	274	254	580	9	Minimal	18.2%
Minnehaha	28581	27663	79015	336	Substantial	8.7%
Moody	621	599	1761	17	Moderate	5.6%
Oglala Lakota	2072	1996	6664	49	Moderate	5.4%
Pennington	13051	12683	39740	188	Substantial	5.6%
Perkins	348	330	823	14	Minimal	2.8%
Potter	383	365	837	4	Moderate	0.0%
Roberts	1247	1159	4181	36	Substantial	19.4%
Sanborn	335	324	696	3	Minimal	5.2%
Spink	808	769	2149	26	Minimal	6.3%
Stanley	337	331	940	2	Moderate	2.9%
Sully	137	133	315	3	Minimal	0.0%
Todd	1220	1188	4167	29	Minimal	0.0%
Tripp	719	679	1498	16	Substantial	20.0%
Turner	1087	1010	2744	53	Moderate	6.3%
Union	2023	1937	6340	39	Substantial	8.0%
Walworth	732	703	1834	15	Moderate	8.6%
Yankton	2835	2763	9400	28	Moderate	7.9%
Ziebach	336	326	865	9	Minimal	7.7%
Unassigned	0	0	1784	0		

Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 10 of 95

South Dakota



AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	4647	0
10-19 years	12980	0
20-29 years	20232	7
30-39 years	18813	18
40-49 years	16341	36
50-59 years	16117	114
60-69 years	13114	253
70-79 years	6965	436
80+ years	5138	1043

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59492	898
Male	54855	1009

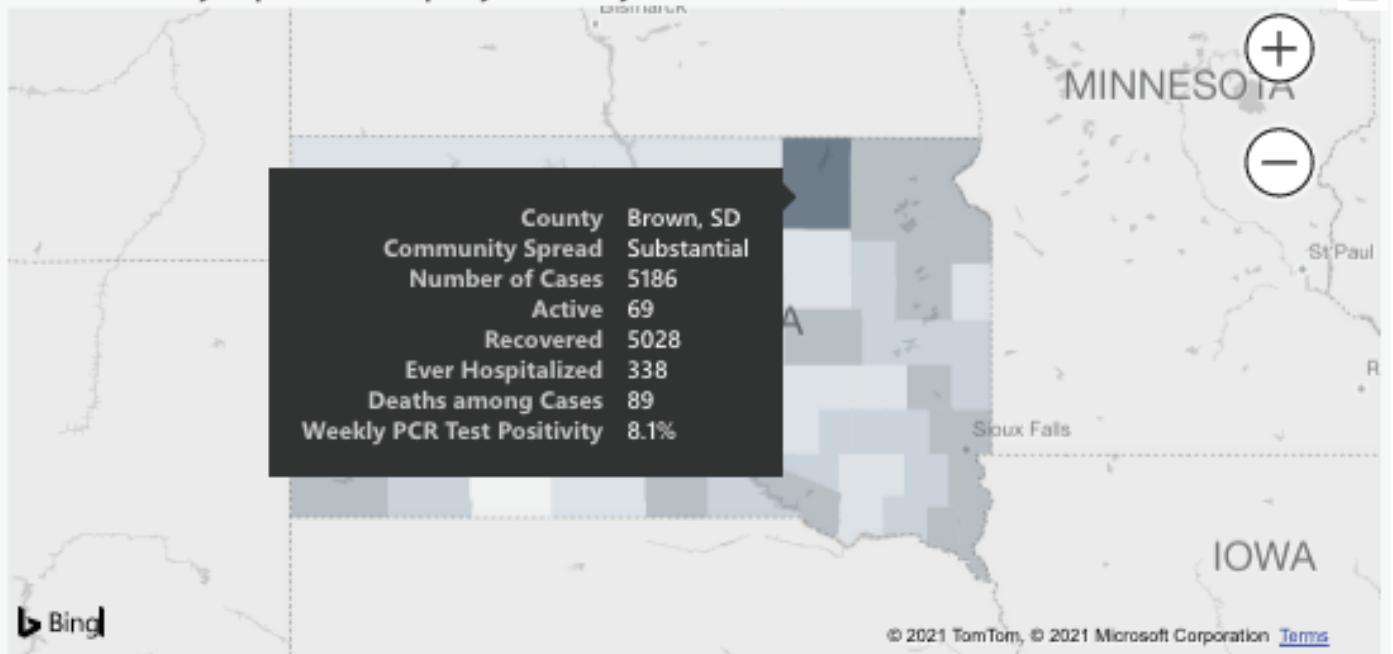
Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 11 of 95

Brown County

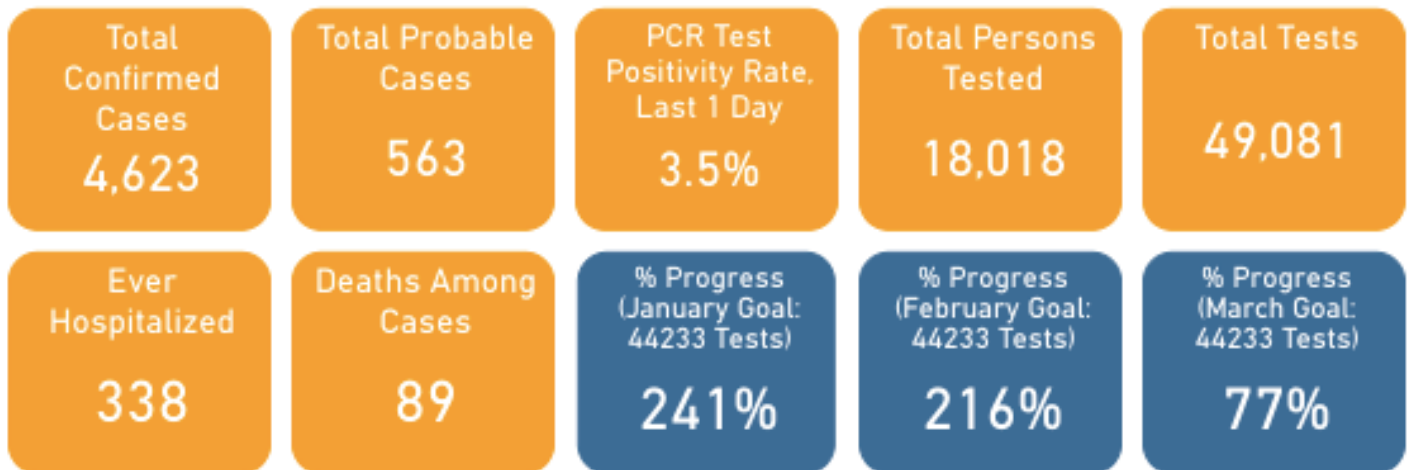


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● None ● Minimal ● Moderate ● Substantial

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



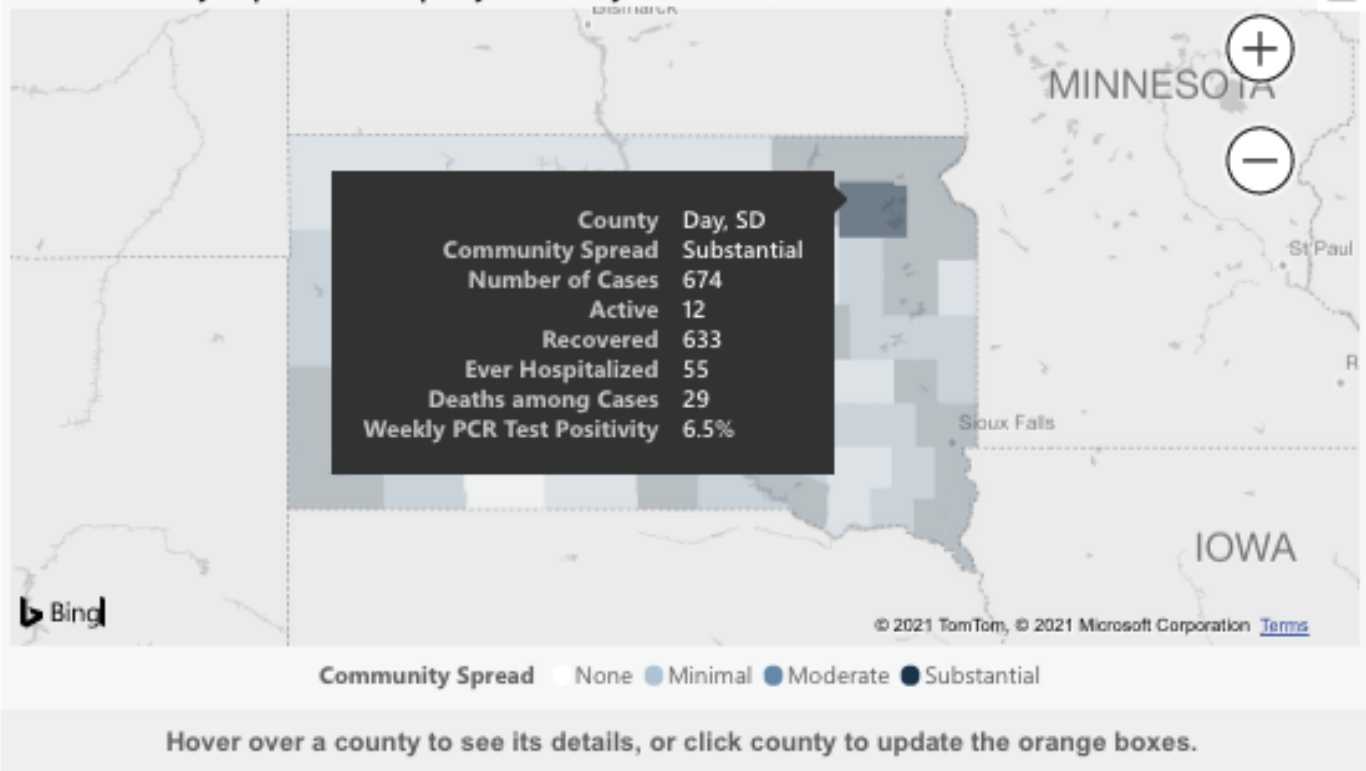
Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 12 of 95

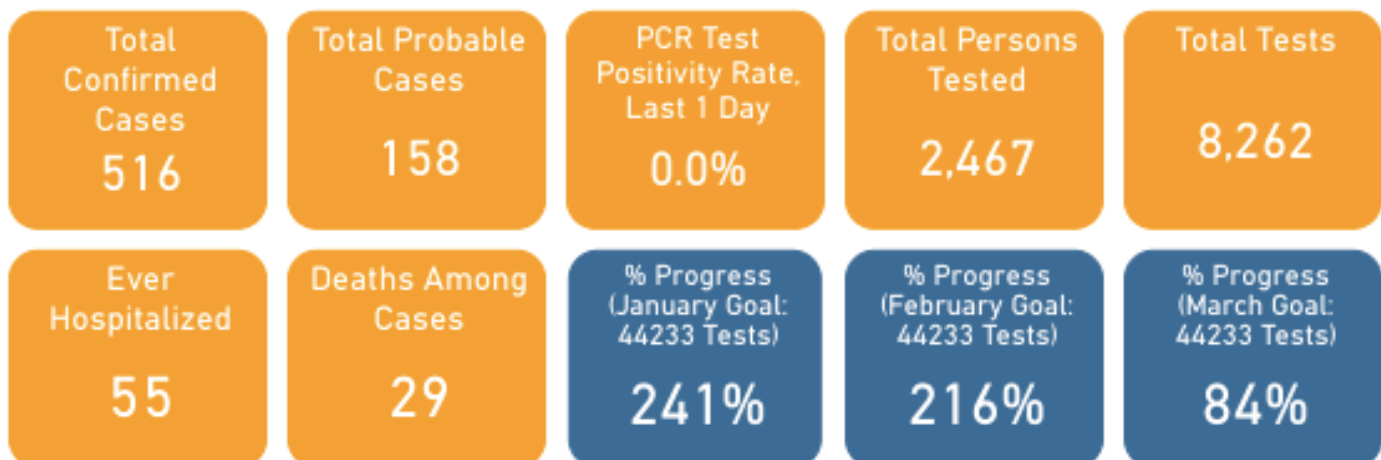
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 13 of 95

Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

283,216

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	1,419
Moderna	139,162
Pfizer	142,635

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

181,530

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	1,419
Moderna - 1 dose	41,586
Moderna - Series Complete	48,788
Pfizer - 1 dose	36,858
Pfizer - Series Complete	52,888

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

31%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	31.46%
Series Complete	17.67%

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16+ years. Includes...

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	771	275	248	523
Beadle	5621	1,828	1,896	3,724
Bennett*	439	123	158	281
Bon Homme*	3251	1,023	1,114	2,137
Brookings	8266	2,784	2,741	5,525
Brown	13721	3,227	5,247	8,474
Brule*	1719	485	617	1,102
Buffalo*	125	79	23	102
Butte	1960	800	580	1,380
Campbell	905	317	294	611
Charles Mix*	2903	1,007	948	1,955
Clark	1090	314	388	702
Clay	4220	1,618	1,301	2,919
Codington*	8769	2,843	2,963	5,806
Corson*	281	101	90	191
Custer*	2533	885	824	1,709
Davison	6524	1,836	2,344	4,180
Day*	2265	857	704	1,561
Deuel	1392	564	414	978
Dewey*	356	78	139	217
Douglas*	1096	340	378	718
Edmunds	1290	410	440	850
Fall River*	2237	737	750	1,487
Faulk	979	279	350	629
Grant*	2520	1,064	728	1,792
Gregory*	1680	626	527	1,153
Haakon*	513	153	180	333

Groton Daily Independent

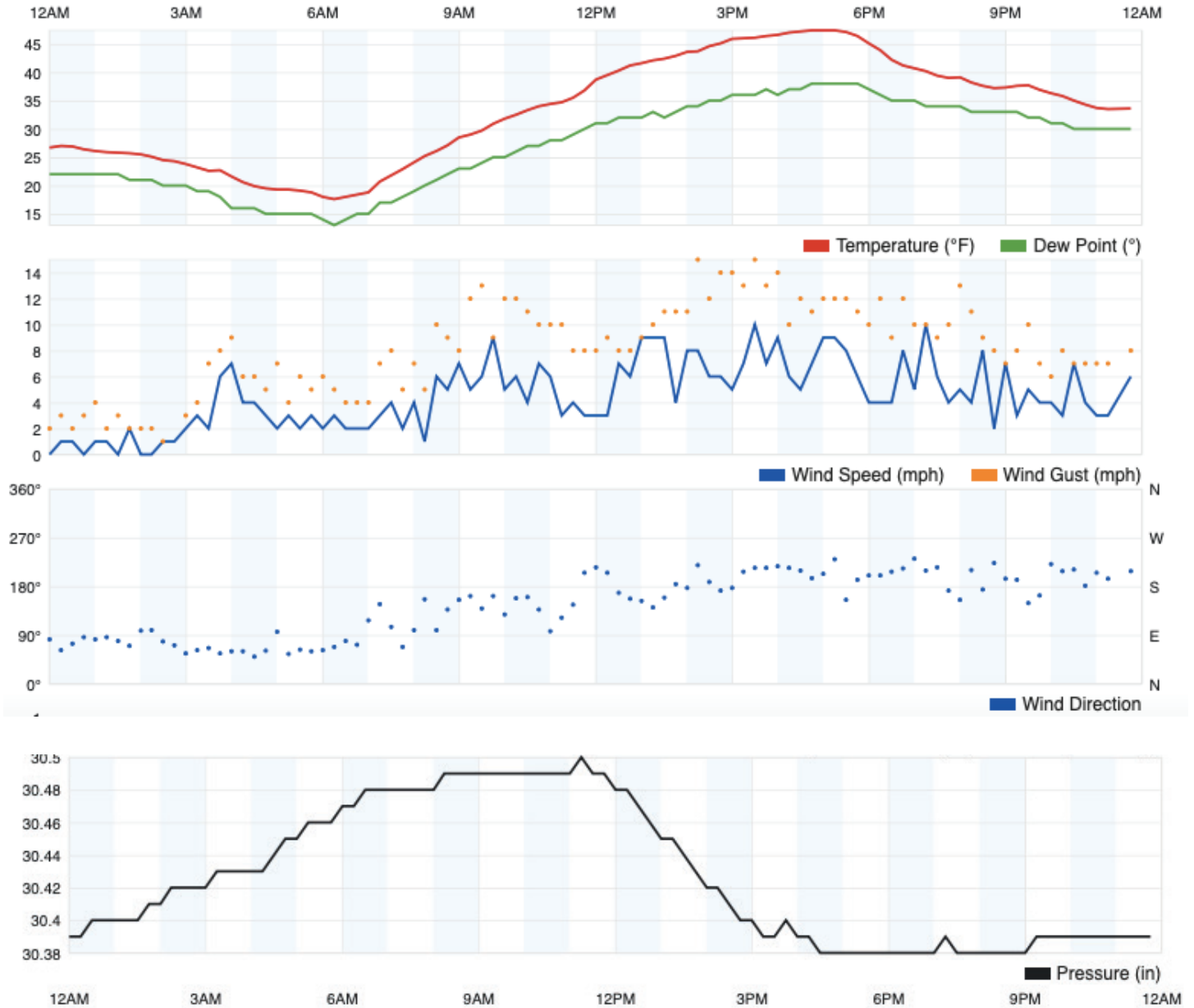
Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 14 of 95

Hamlin	1538	498	520	1,018
Hand	1314	444	435	879
Hanson	410	152	129	281
Harding	99	51	24	75
Hughes*	6955	1,463	2,746	4,209
Hutchinson*	3084	1,083	1,000	2,083
Hyde*	502	142	180	322
Jackson*	360	108	126	234
Jerauld	790	328	231	559
Jones*	576	156	210	366
Kingsbury	2105	743	681	1,424
Lake	3475	1,293	1,091	2,384
Lawrence	7340	2,778	2,281	5,059
Lincoln	23679	5,420	9,129	14,549
Lyman*	718	234	242	476
Marshall*	1420	482	469	951
McCook	2101	625	738	1,363
McPherson	229	75	77	152
Meade*	5578	1,720	1,929	3,649
Mellette*	40	16	12	28
Miner	828	236	296	532
Minnehaha*	73350	18,562	27,391	45,953
Moody*	1563	578	492	1,070
Oglala Lakota*	163	49	57	106
Pennington*	33184	8,230	12,477	20,707
Perkins*	645	313	166	479
Potter	813	305	254	559
Roberts*	3899	1,315	1,292	2,607
Sanborn	872	280	296	576
Spink	2735	851	942	1,793
Stanley*	1064	222	421	643
Sully	320	66	127	193
Todd*	149	47	51	98
Tripp*	1869	507	681	1,188
Turner	3265	959	1,153	2,112
Union	2706	1,064	821	1,885
Walworth*	1747	593	577	1,170
Yankton	8809	1,719	3,545	5,264
Ziebach*	52	16	18	34
Other	5444	1,478	1,983	3,461

Groton Daily Independent




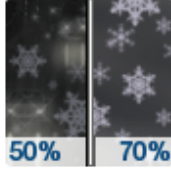
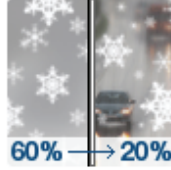
Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 15 of 95

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 16 of 95

Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny and Breezy	Chance Rain/Snow then Snow Likely	Snow Likely then Slight Chance Rain/Snow
High: 53 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 46 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 36 °F

Today
Highs: 50s

Tonight
Lows: 30s
Negligible Snowfall

Sunday
Highs: 40s
Windy

Sunday Night
Lows: Upper 20s
Best Chance For Accumulation

Monday
Highs: 30s

Mixed Precipitation Spring System

A slow moving system will spread moisture across South Dakota Saturday – Monday. Precipitation associated with this system will occur as a mix, with a lot of uncertainty concerning snowfall

Potential for +2" Snow

Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 3/13/2021 3:19 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

A spring system will bring a mix of conditions this weekend into Monday. There is still some uncertainty with respect to temps and snowfall so please continue to monitor for changes!

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 17 of 95

Today in Weather History

March 13, 1971: During an evening thunderstorm in Moody County, South Dakota, lightning destroyed a transformer plant in Coleman. Damages were estimated at \$250,000.

March 13, 1997: A winter storm began with widespread freezing drizzle, creating icy roadways and walkways, before changing over to snow. Before the snow was over, 2 to 8 inches had fallen on an already expansive and deep snowpack. The winds accelerated to 20 to 40 mph, resulting in widespread blowing and drifting snow. Visibilities were reduced to near zero at times, making travel treacherous. Many roads again became blocked by snowdrifts, and several were closed. Many area schools were still closed, adding to an already substantial total of days missed for the winter season. Some people were stranded and had to wait out the storm. Some airport flights were canceled. The icy roads and low visibilities resulted in several vehicle mishaps as well. There was a rollover accident west of Mobridge and an overturned van 7 miles west of Webster. On Interstate-29, there were several rollover accidents, including vehicles sliding off of the road. Some snowfall amounts included, 4 inches at Timber Lake, Mobridge, Eureka, Leola, Britton, and Clark, 5 inches at Leola, 6 inches at Waubay and Summit, and 8 inches at Pollock.

1907 - A storm produced a record 5.22 inches of rain in 24 hours at Cincinnati, OH. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1951 - The state of Iowa experienced a record snowstorm. The storm buried Iowa City under 27 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1953: An F4 tornado cut an 18-mile path through Haskell and Knox counties in Texas. 17 people were killed, and an eight-block area of Knox City was leveled.

1977 - Baltimore, MD, received an inch of rain in eight minutes. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1987 - A winter storm produced heavy snow in the Sierra Nevada Range of California, and the Lake Tahoe area of Nevada. Mount Rose NV received 18 inches of new snow. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Unseasonably cold weather prevailed from the Plateau Region to the Appalachians. Chadron NE, recently buried 33 inches of snow, was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 19 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989: Residents of the southern U.S. viewed a once in a lifetime display of the Northern Lights. This solar storm also caused the entire province of Quebec, Canada, to suffer an electrical power blackout.

1990: Thunderstorms produced severe weather from northwest Texas to Wisconsin, Iowa, and Nebraska during the day and into the night. Severe thunderstorms spawned 59 tornadoes, including twenty-six strong or violent tornadoes, and there were about two hundred reports of large hail or damaging winds. There were forty-eight tornadoes in Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa, and some of the tornadoes in those three states were the strongest of record for so early in the season, and for so far northwest in the United States. The most powerful tornado of the day was one that tore through the central Kansas community of Hesston. The F5 tornado killed two persons, injured sixty others, and caused 22 million dollars damage along its 67-mile path. The tornado had a lifespan of two hours. Another tornado tracked 124 miles across southeastern Nebraska, injuring eight persons and causing more than five million dollars damage during its three-hour lifespan.

Groton Daily Independent

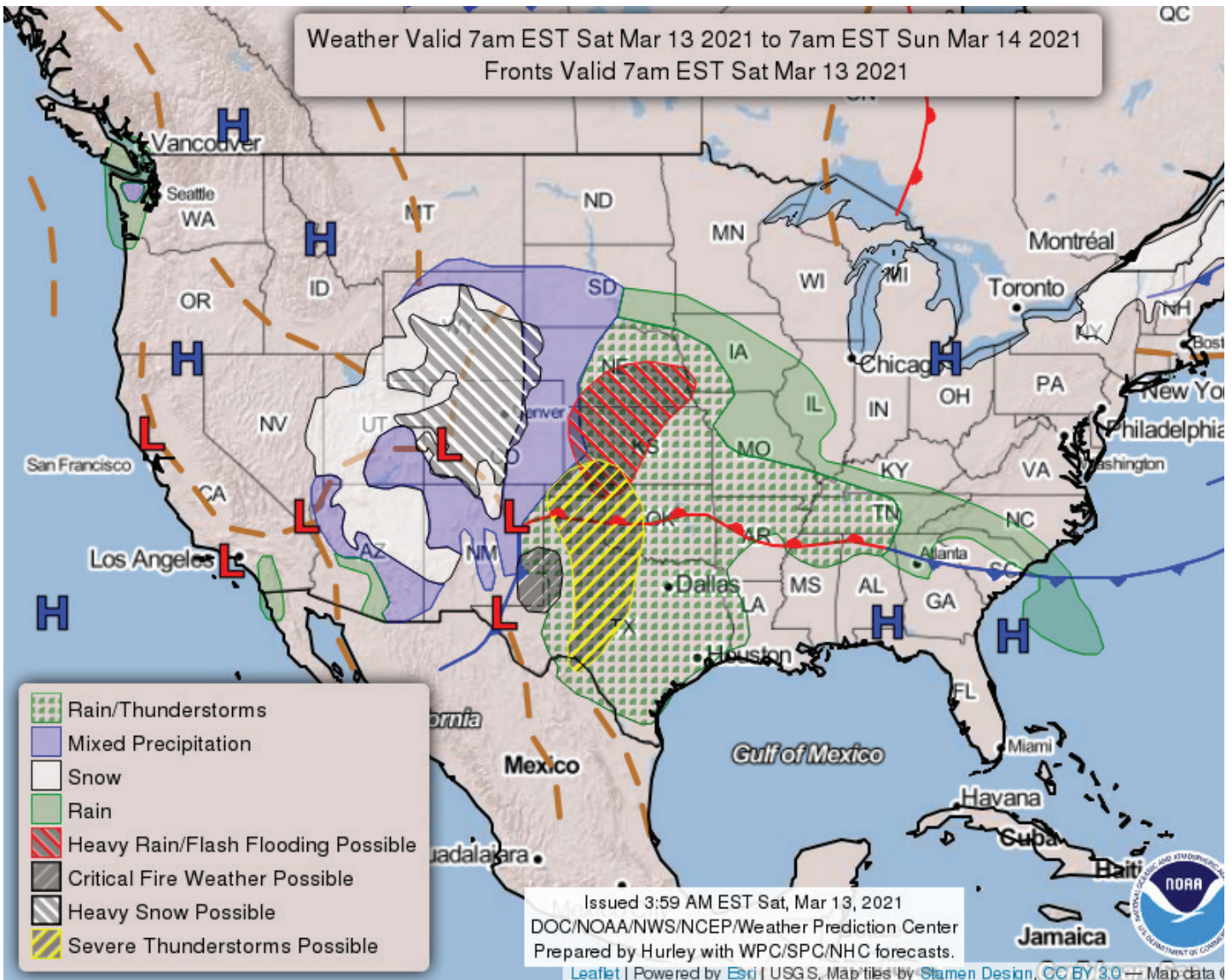
Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 18 of 95

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 48 °F at 4:52 PM
Low Temp: 17 °F at 6:19 AM
Wind: 16 mph at 2:06 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 71° in 2012
Record Low: -28° in 1896
Average High: 38°F
Average Low: 19°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.36
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.38
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 6:37 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:48 a.m.



Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 19 of 95



GETTING THERE FROM HERE

Following directions to get from one place to another is sometimes difficult. Even using a map or listening to a distant voice speak to us on a global positioning system often create suspicion. Often, we have feelings of uncertainty until we arrive safely at our intended destination.

There was no doubt in the mind of David if someone wanted directions from God. It is a clear if/then. "If," David wrote, "you want to stand in His presence, 'then' you must have clean hands and a pure heart." Hands refers to our actions and hearts refers to our attitudes. Certainly, the word "pure" would eliminate most of us. In our moments of honesty and openness before God, we all recognize our soiled hands and devious hearts. What then are we to do if we want to plead our case before God? Who can say, "My hands are clean and my heart is pure?"

Jesus said, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." There is little doubt that any of us will achieve a pure heart in this life. Was Jesus teasing us? Indeed not!

In the beatitudes Jesus is talking about how we are to live. And He knew that we could never achieve the goals for Christian living that He was talking about.

So, what are we to do? Give up? No! In the beatitudes He is talking about motives! He wants us to have an inner attitude and desire to continually seek the Lord by reading His Word, seeking to know Him, and then honoring Him by the way we live.

Prayer: Thank You, Father, for Your Word that shows us the way to find our way into Your presence. May our motives be pure and our lives sincere. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Who may stand in his holy place? Only those whose hands and hearts are pure. Psalm 24:3-4

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 20 of 95

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 Princess Prom (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
06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
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
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 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
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

Drought conditions may impact Missouri Basin management

By RANDY DOCKENDORF Yankton Press and Dakotan

YANKTON, S.D. (AP) — Because of prolonged drought, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers said it may consider water conservation measures later this year in the Missouri River basin.

At this point, the Corps doesn't anticipate the need to take such measures, according to John Remus, chief of the Missouri River Basin water management division in Omaha.

In contrast to 2019 flooding, most of the basin — including the Yankton region — is now classified as abnormally dry or in moderate or severe drought. An area northeast of Yankton is listed as being in extreme drought.

The latest 2021 Spring Outlook suggests that odds favor slightly drier-than-normal conditions across much of the Missouri Basin, the Yankton Press and Dakotan reported.

"At this point, the basin is much drier than in the current past," Remus said during a conference call. "As of now, the reservoir storage is in very good shape from the standpoint of flood control and flow support for navigation. But if the dry conditions persist or worsen, we may be in for water conservation measures later this year."

The Gavins Point Dam releases near Yankton averaged 18,300 cubic feet per second (cfs) during the past month. Gavins Point currently releases 17,000 cfs, which will be increased around March 19 to provide full-service navigation flow support on the lower Missouri River.

Fort Randall Dam releases at Pickstown averaged 15,100 cfs during the past month. Releases will be adjusted as necessary to maintain the desired reservoir elevation at Gavins Point and to back up Gavins Point releases.

Remus said he wasn't seeking to alarm anyone because the basin currently contains adequate water. However, he wanted to provide advance notice of possible changes in releases should drought conditions persist.

"If we have a really dry spring and summer, and we get down to a minimum flow of 12,000 cfs, it can be problematic for water intakes," he said.

Now is a good time for intake operators to review or update their needed measures in case of low releases and water conservation measures, Remus said. "They may need to dust off their contingency plans," he said.

Any water conservation plans, if necessary, wouldn't be taken until this summer, he added.

"We wouldn't implement anything until July 1, when we do our storage checks," he said. "Those storage checks are based on the total amount of water stored in the system."

Because of the drought conditions, inflows in the Missouri River basin above Sioux City were well-below average in February. The 2021 calendar year runoff forecast for the upper basin remains below average.

February runoff in the upper Basin was 0.8 million acre-feet, 70% of average. The 2021 calendar year runoff forecast for the upper Basin is 21.8 MAF, 84% of average.

The Corps has evacuated all of the flood water in the Missouri River reservoirs in preparation for the 2021 runoff season. System storage is currently 55.6 MAF, 0.5 MAF below the base of the annual flood control zone.

The mountain snowpack ranges in the normal to below normal category, according Kevin Low, the Missouri River Basin forecast center hydrologist. By this point, the mountains have usually accumulated 80% of its snow water equivalent (swe).

The March 1 mountain snowpack in the Fort Peck and the Fort Peck to Garrison reaches was 94% of average. Mountain snowpack normally peaks near April 15. Currently, plains snowpack in the upper basin remains light.

The plains snowpack is non-existent, and the soils are extremely dry. The river ice threats are limited to

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 22 of 95

the northern tier, Low added.

During the past several years, the focus has been on the evacuation of stored flood water, he said. Moving the water supply hasn't been an issue this year.

Those sentiments were echoed by Doug Kluck, the NOAA Central Regional Climate Services director in Kansas City.

"We have no plains snowpack, especially Montana, North Dakota and South Dakota this time of year," he said, noting the unusual conditions.

The next week doesn't contain any forecast of major precipitation, Kluck said. However, any moisture could provide relief with dry conditions and wildfires in parts of the basin, he said.

"Later in the seven-day period, there is another (weather) system across the northern part of the basin but nothing to write home about," he said. "We hope this accumulates in the mountains and we can tamp down the dust and wildfires in the dry areas where they desperately need something before it gets too warm.

The 8- to 14-day outlook calls for below-normal precipitation in Montana, Wyoming and the plains. Looking ahead to March-May, much of the basin could continue seeing above-average temperatures. He foresees a fading of the La Nina weather pattern, which generally favors cool and wet weather.

"We're trying to avoid going into spring, and especially summer, with this kind of pattern. The only thing summer does is dry things out more, and summer is hotter," he said.

"We're hoping for a good spring and a wet season across the Missouri Basin, especially the upper basin and Colorado. But the drought outlook isn't favorable. The precipitation folks are saying there isn't going to be a lot of change through the end of May."

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

02-24-25-31-65, Mega Ball: 18

(two, twenty-four, twenty-five, thirty-one, sixty-five; Mega Ball: eighteen)

Estimated jackpot: \$79 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$169 million

Friday's Scores

By The Associated Press

GIRLS BASKETBALL=

Consolation Semifinal=

State Tournament=

Class AA=

Harrisburg 46, Aberdeen Central 41

Mitchell 48, Rapid City Central 40

Class A=

Dakota Valley 66, Belle Fourche 63

Sioux Falls Christian 56, McCook Central/Montrose 45

Class B=

Herreid/Selby Area 60, Viborg-Hurley 46

Waverly-South Shore 51, Hanson 45

Championship Semifinal=

State Tournament=

Class AA=

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 23 of 95

Rapid City Stevens 51, Brandon Valley 45
Sioux Falls Washington 55, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 49
Class A=
Aberdeen Roncalli 36, St. Thomas More 35
Hamlin 43, Winner 37
Class B=
Castlewood 55, Ethan 41
White River 52, Corsica-Stickney 50

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

South Dakota AG pleads not guilty in fatal crash hearing

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Attorney General Jason Ravensborg pleaded not guilty in an initial court hearing Friday for three misdemeanor charges he is facing for striking and killing a man with his car last summer.

The Republican attorney general did not appear at the courthouse in Pierre, South Dakota, but his lawyer Tim Rensch made the plea on his behalf. The prosecutor noted that it is typical for defendants to plead not guilty at this point in the case before defense lawyers have a chance to look at the evidence.

Besides the misdemeanor charges, the state's top law enforcement officer is facing calls for his resignation from Republican Gov. Kristi Noem and law enforcement groups.

But Ravensborg has said he will not step down and —for now— maintains he is not guilty of breaking the law on the night of Sept. 12 when he struck a man walking on the shoulder of a rural highway. However, he could face up to 30 days in jail and up to a \$500 fine on each misdemeanor charge: careless driving, driving out of his lane and operating a motor vehicle while on his phone. Though prosecutors said he was not using his phone at the time of the crash, he had been using it while driving about one minute before the crash occurred.

Rensch requested 60 days to look over the evidence in the case, to which the judge and prosecutors agreed.

"In some cases, there is a mountain of discovery," Rensch told the judge. "In this case, there is a mountain range of discovery."

He declined to comment further to reporters.

Ravensborg, who was elected to his first term in 2018, initially told authorities he thought he had struck a deer or another large animal as he drove home to Pierre from a Republican fundraiser. He said he had searched the unlit area with a cellphone flashlight and didn't realize he had killed a man —55-year-old Joseph Boever— until the next day when he returned to the crash scene on U.S. 14 near Highmore in South Dakota.

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 such as vehicular homicide or manslaughter, which could have meant years of prison time.

Boever's family members, including his widow Jenny Boever and his mother, traveled to Pierre for the hearing, which lasted less than 10 minutes. But for several minutes on Friday, the normally sleepy courthouse was crowded with lawyers, reporters and Boever's family members. His widow is planning to file a civil wrongful death lawsuit against Ravensborg for her late husband's death.

"Jenny, the widow, just wants to make a presence," said Boever's cousin, Nick Nemec, who has been outspoken in questioning the attorney general's account of the crash.

Nemec called Ravensborg's decision not to plead guilty at the outset of the case "troubling."

"He was obviously outside of his lane. The skid marks on Highway 14 are still visible," he said. "I think he's just as guilty as can be."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 24 of 95

Emily Sovell, the Hyde County Deputy State's Attorney who is the lead prosecutor, said "it is not uncommon at all" for defendants to initially plead not guilty before viewing the evidence.

Prosecutors declined to discuss details of the crash further, noting they are under a gag order from Retired Sixth Circuit Judge John Brown.

Brown made that order last month at the attorney general's request after Noem released videos of investigators questioning Ravensborg on two separate occasions after the crash. Detectives were incredulous that Ravensborg did not realize he had struck a man, telling him that Boever's face had smashed through his windshield and Boever's glasses had been found in his Ford Taurus after the crash.

House lawmakers had moved to begin impeachment proceedings against the attorney general last month, but took a step back after the judge's order.

Lawmakers have said they will consider whether Ravensborg should be impeached after the criminal case concludes.

This story was corrected to show that Friday's initial hearing was not part of a trial.

Park service denies 2021 fireworks at Mount Rushmore

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The National Park Service has denied South Dakota officials' request to shoot off fireworks over Mount Rushmore again this year.

Fireworks returned to Mount Rushmore last year for a Fourth of July celebration that included a campaign stop by then-President Donald Trump. It was the first time Mount Rushmore has hosted a fireworks show since 2009.

But NPS Regional Director Herbert Frost wrote a letter to state tourism officials on Thursday saying the NPS would not grant their request for fireworks again this year, KOTA-TV reported on Friday. The denial was first reported by political website The Hill.

Frost said the parks service is still evaluating the risks from the 2020 show and he's concerned about both the park and employees' safety. He added that the service's tribal partners expressly oppose fireworks at the monument and the large crowds such an event would draw would make social distancing difficult if not impossible.

Gov. Kristi Noem tweeted in response that the best place to celebrate America's birthday is Mount Rushmore.

Woman arrested for allegedly hitting boyfriend with car

MITCHELL, S.D. (AP) — A Mitchell woman has been arrested after she allegedly hit her boyfriend with her car and left him bleeding in a ditch.

Police arrested the 32-year-old woman late Wednesday afternoon in Mitchell, the Argus Leader reported. According to court documents, authorities earlier that morning had followed multiple pools of blood to a ditch where they discovered her 25-year-old boyfriend.

He was missing his shirt and pants and had been in the ditch for hours. He was airlifted to a hospital with life-threatening injuries.

The woman told police that she and her boyfriend had gone to a friend's house the night before to buy marijuana. When she left she didn't know where he was. As she was driving away she hit something. She pulled over but didn't see anything and drove off.

Police found the woman's car at the boyfriend's residence. The front bumper was damaged and the windshield had a crack with hair in it.

High court orders full disability for worker whose lost limb

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Supreme Court has ordered the state to grant a man whose lower leg was amputated as a result of a work injury permanent and total disability benefits.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 25 of 95

Steven Billman was working at Clarke Machine when he cut his foot on a metal shaving in February 2015. His foot became infected and surgeons at Avera Hospital in Sioux Falls had to amputate his right leg just below the knee.

Billman is 64 and has multiple medical conditions, including diabetes. The state Department of Labor and Regulation granted Billman partial disability payments for 2 1/2 years. In 2018, Billman argued that he deserved permanent, total disability benefits, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The department said that while Billman did have some disabilities, he could still do some physical work, has the ability to adapt and learn new technology, and that his age doesn't prevent him from finding work.

Billman appealed to the Hughes County Court where Judge Christina Klinger upheld that he was not unemployable and inappropriately limited the geographical size of his work search.

The justices this week concluded the department's determination that Billman is not unemployable" is clearly erroneous."

Warp-speed spending and other surreal stats of COVID times

By CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. effort in World War II was off the charts. Battles spread over three continents and four years, 16 million served in uniform and the government shoved levers of the economy full force into defeating Nazi Germany and imperial Japan.

All of that was cheaper for American taxpayers than this pandemic.

The \$1,400 federal payments going into millions of people's bank accounts are but one slice of a nearly \$2 trillion relief package made law this past week. With that, the United States has spent or committed to spend nearly \$6 trillion to crush the coronavirus, recover economically and take a bite out of child poverty.

Set in motion over one year, that's warp-speed spending in a capital known for gridlock, ugly argument and now an episode of violent insurrection.

For a year now, Americans have grappled with numbers beyond ordinary comprehension: some 30 million infected, more than half a million dead, millions of jobs lost, vast sums of money sloshing through government pipelines to try to set things right.

How high can you count? At one turn after another, that may be the rhetorical question of these COVID-19 times.

THE TOLL

Once, the attack on Pearl Harbor was the modern marker for national trauma. About 2,400 Americans died in the assault on the naval base in Hawaii that drew the United States into the Pacific war. The nearly 3,000 dead from the terrorist attacks Sept. 11, 2001, became the new point of comparison as the ravages of COVID-19 grew.

The U.S. reached a total of 3,000 COVID-19 deaths even before March 2020 was out. By December, the country was experiencing the toll of 9/11 day after day after day. In that time, COVID-19 was killing more Americans than any other disease, any other single cause.

"COVID-19 now is the leading cause of death, surpassing heart disease," Dr. Robert Redfield, then leading the Centers for Disease and Prevention, said Dec. 10. Looking to the weeks ahead, he said "it's going to be the most difficult time in the public health history of this nation."

So it was, even with the vaccine rollout five days later.

With deaths now moderating — so that a 9/11 toll comes cumulatively every few days — the U.S. death toll now has surpassed 530,000, exceeding U.S. combat deaths of all of the last century's wars.

A new marker looms: the estimated 675,000 Americans who died in the 1918-19 pandemic misnamed the Spanish flu.

That milestone may not be reached, if worst-case scenarios are avoided. Yet this much is clear — the United States has taken a proportionally worse hit in this pandemic.

The U.S. has experienced 1 in 5 deaths worldwide, compared with 1 in 75 deaths globally by the rough estimates of the pandemic a century ago.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 26 of 95

THE RESPONSE

The blame game is on, exacerbated by the record of a president, Donald Trump, who rarely acknowledged the gravity of the crisis and routinely distorted it. He told Americans in March 2020 the country would be “just raring to go by Easter” and declared on the cusp of soaring infections that the U.S. was “rounding the final turn” on the virus.

“We were hit with a virus that was met with silence and spread unchecked,” President Joe Biden said in his prime-time address Thursday. “Denials for days, weeks, then months.”

But while Trump persisted in sunny side up, he also opened the coffers on vaccine development and pandemic relief, backing \$4 trillion in aid, equal to 20% of the U.S. economy.

And he pulled together a Star Wars-sounding effort that pretty much lived up to the hyperbole of its name. By the usual yearslong lag in coming up with a vaccine, the authorization to release two vaccines — now three — proved something of an Operation Warp Speed.

The Trump administration’s striking success in backing the invention of coronavirus vaccines through direct spending or advance purchase commitments has been followed by the Biden administration’s nascent success in spurring the production and delivery of those shots.

On this Trump-Biden continuum, shots have risen from 48,757 the first day, Dec. 15, to an average of 1.5 million to 2 million per day the first week of March, raising hope that a persistent bottleneck and vaccine shortages can be overcome. More than 100 million doses have been administered; 35 million people have been fully vaccinated.

The bill for it all is stratospheric.

Back in February 2020, when the financial markets showed strain from the pandemic and oil prices started to plunge, many economists began to predict that the U.S. government would need to borrow sums unimaginable to older generations.

Now that’s reality.

Biden’s \$1.9 trillion package follows five others in the past year, altogether worth almost \$6 trillion. That’s about \$1 trillion more than U.S. military expenditures in World War II, all in today’s dollars. It’s more than the government’s entire budget just two years ago, \$4.4 trillion.

About two-thirds of the money in Biden’s plan is to be spent in one year, a hefty infusion that has some economists worried about inflation.

How can the U.S. possibly afford this?

At least for now, debt is cheap.

The cost of servicing the debt last year was only 1.6% of the gross domestic product — a bargain compared with the 1990s, when the total debt was much lower. Back then, the federal government spent about 3% of GDP on net interest costs.

Bargain, of course, is relative. Debt is historically high, up 130% over 10 years even before the latest relief package, a burden made manageable by historically low interest rates. Big-ticket plans on infrastructure and more are still to come.

And they are bound to come with 12 zeroes. It’s a world of trillions now.

Associated Press writers Alan Fram and Josh Boak contributed to this report.

4 killed as Myanmar forces continue crackdown on protesters

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — Security forces in Myanmar on Saturday again met protests against last month’s military takeover with lethal force, killing at least four people by shooting live ammunition at demonstrators.

Three deaths were reported in Mandalay, the country’s second-biggest city, and one in Pyay, a town in south-central Myanmar. There were multiple reports on social media of the deaths, along with photos of dead and wounded people in both locations.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 27 of 95

The independent U.N. human rights expert for Myanmar, Tom Andrews, said Thursday that "credible reports" indicated security forces in the Southeast Asian nation had so far killed at least 70 people, and cited growing evidence of crimes against humanity since the military ousted the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Reports on social media also said three people were shot dead Friday night in Yangon, Myanmar's largest city, where residents for the past week have been defying an 8 p.m. curfew to come out on the streets.

Two deaths by gunfire were reported in Yangon's Thaketa township, where a protest being held outside a police station was dispersed. A crowd had gathered there to demand the release of three young men who were seized from their home earlier Friday night. Photos said to be of the bodies of two dead protesters were posted online. The other reported fatality Friday night was of a 19-year-old man shot in Hlaing township.

The nighttime protests may reflect a more aggressive approach to self-defense that has been advocated by some protesters. Police had been aggressively patrolling residential neighborhoods at night, firing into the air and setting off stun grenades in an effort at intimidation. They have also been carrying out targeted raids, taking people from their homes with minimal resistance. In at least two known cases, the detainees died in custody within hours of being taken away.

Another possible indication of heightened resistance emerged Saturday with photos posted online of a railway bridge said to have been damaged by an explosive charge.

The bridge was described in multiple accounts as being on the rail line from Mandalay to Myitkyina, the capital of the northern state of Kachin. The photos show damage to part of a concrete support.

No one took responsibility for the action, but it could serve a two-fold purpose.

It could be seen as support for the nationwide strike of state railway workers, who are part of the civil disobedience movement against the coup.

At the same time, it could be aimed as disrupting the ability of the junta to reinforce its troops in Kachin, a state whose residents have long been at odds with the central government. The Kachin ethnic minority fields its own well-trained and equipped guerrilla force, and there has been outrage in Myitkyina at security forces' killing of anti-coup protesters there.

The prospect of sabotage has been openly discussed by some protesters, who warn that they could blow up a pipeline supplying natural gas to China. They see China as being the junta's main supporter, even though Beijing has been mildly critical of the coup in its public comments.

In Washington on Friday, the Biden administration announced it is offering temporary legal residency to people from Myanmar, citing the military's takeover and ongoing deadly force against civilians.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said the designation of temporary protected status for people from Myanmar would last for 18 months. The offer of temporary legal residency applies to people already in the United States. Mayorkas said in a statement that worsening conditions in Myanmar would make it difficult for those people to safely return home.

The Feb. 1 coup reversed years of slow progress toward democracy in Myanmar, which for five decades had languished under strict military rule that led to international isolation and sanctions.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party led a return to civilian rule with a landslide election victory in 2015, and an even greater margin of votes last year. It would have been installed for a second five-year term last month, but instead Suu Kyi and President Win Myint and other members of the government were placed in military detention.

After long pandemic year, a changed New York shows renewal

By DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Pamela Puchalski still remembers how frightening it felt when the coronavirus up-ended life in her New York City neighborhood last March.

With terrifying swiftness came the first infections, the first restrictions and the first deaths. There were no answers to be found, only dire warnings: Stay away from work, from school, from restaurants and

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 28 of 95

bars, from shops and theaters — and especially from each other.

“It was that feeling ... like you can’t trust your neighbor,” Puchalski said.

A year later, the nation’s largest metropolis — with a lifeblood based on round-the-clock hustle and bustle, push and pull — is adapting and showing new life. The renewal is evident in the stream of customers waiting across the Plexiglas-covered counter at Artuso pastry shop in the Bronx; in laughter wafting from outdoor dining sheds built on the streets in front of restaurants; in the parks filled with picnics, birthday gatherings and dance parties, despite the winter chill.

“What is the alternative? Just close the doors and stay home?” asked Gloribelle Perez, who opened a restaurant with her husband in East Harlem only months before the pandemic hit.

For weeks after the virus descended on New York, the strictest warnings held sway. Businesses shuttered. Thousands of people fled. The only sounds in the streets were wailing ambulance sirens. Many saw it as a death knell for the city, a tearing of fabric that might not be repaired.

It’s still quiet, borderline moribund, in some neighborhoods, especially tourist-dependent locales in mid-town Manhattan and in the financial district, where companies have made a wholesale shift to remote work. For-lease signs and boarded-up storefronts scar commercial strips all over the five boroughs.

But New York is no “ghost town,” as former President Donald Trump called it in October.

On multitudes of front stoops and sidewalks, people now lounge with friends, masked and 6 feet apart. Businesses are welcoming customers back after putting up sheets of plastic to protect cashiers and laying tape on the floor to keep patrons socially distant.

The just-passed \$1.9 trillion federal COVID relief package gives reason for hope, too, with city officials saying it will offer almost \$6 billion in direct aid to New York, as well as money for public transportation systems and funding to help restaurants survive.

Perez and her husband have scrambled to keep their Latin- and Mediterranean-inspired restaurant, Barcha, afloat by cutting staff and changing the menu to make the kitchen more efficient. They’re also hustling a few extra dollars by offering pandemic necessities like disinfecting sprays, wipes and toilet paper for sale along with dinner deliveries.

“I didn’t get this far, just to get this far,” Perez said. “I didn’t, and so we’re just going to keep going until the wheels fall off.”

Not even snow on the ground has kept Zeynep Catay away from the weekly dance session she now holds outdoors in a Brooklyn park.

The clinical psychologist and dance movement therapist started the sessions in the warmer summer months simply as a way to meet up with a friend and get some physical activity. The gatherings grew and became a way to mark the passage of time, distorted by the endlessness and isolation of the pandemic that has killed more than 530,000 people in the U.S.

“It never occurs to you that one can endure all of these conditions,” she said with a laugh. “I think this is what New York is about ... really creative solutions” and “the freedom in a way of thinking about these possibilities.”

The city began passing a number of grim anniversaries this week.

Friday marked one year since Broadway theaters closed and mass gatherings were banned. The city’s roughly 30,000 pandemic victims will be memorialized Sunday in a virtual ceremony marking a year since New York’s first known COVID-19 death. Tuesday marks a year since public schools closed. They have since reopened, but with a majority of children still learning remotely from home.

There are still new coronavirus cases, about 2,500 per day on average, and about 2,900 COVID-19 patients are currently in the hospital. But it’s nothing like that first terrifying surge in April, when more than 12,000 people were hospitalized and 3,100 in intensive care on the worst days. During a 10-day stretch last April, the city averaged 750 deaths per day. This week it has averaged 61 deaths per day.

The city’s cultural institutions and organizations sought solutions as the pandemic disrupted a year’s worth of concerts, festivals, performances and special events.

Puchalski joined the effort, as the executive director of Open House New York, which normally offers tours of landmarks and other behind-the-scenes looks at city architecture.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 29 of 95

They shifted to virtual tours, which had the benefit of allowing people outside New York City to take part, and added events like scavenger hunts, to give people an experience they could do themselves and be socially distanced.

"We have learned to adapt," she said. "I don't feel that threat that I felt last year."

The shift to virtual activities helped in some way, but it clearly wasn't enough, said Theodora Boguszewski, co-producer at Porch Stomp, an organization that promotes American folk music through an annual music festival and other events.

When it came time for their annual event in June, the usual venue of Governor's Island was unavailable, so the group shifted performances to the front stoops and porches of people's homes.

"We really, really felt kind of a sense among our community, this need for live in-person events," she said.

That's the draw of New York City, she said, and part of the reason New Yorkers have tried so hard to adapt, to find the ways forward.

"There's something about that energy and the intersection of different types of people coming together, and that's why I'm here," she said. And "if that's the reason why I'm here, I feel like I'd have to keep doing it in whatever way I can."

Hajela has covered New York for The Associated Press for more than 20 years. Follow her on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/dhajela>.

Bolivia arrests ex leader in crackdown on opposition

By CARLOS VALDEZ Associated Press

LA PAZ, Bolivia (AP) — The conservative interim president who led Bolivia for a year was arrested Saturday as officials of the restored leftist government pursue those involved in the 2019 ouster of socialist leader Evo Morales, which they regard as a coup, and the administration that followed.

Jeanine Áñez was detained in the early morning in her hometown of Trinidad and was flown to the capital, Las Paz. She had earlier warned that officials were searching her, terming it "abuse and persecution" in Twitter posts.

The arrest of Áñez and warrants against numerous other former officials further worsened political tensions in a South American country already torn by a cascade of perceived wrongs suffered by both sides. Those include complaints that Morales had grown more authoritarian with nearly 13 years in office; that he illegally ran for a fourth reelection and then allegedly rigged the outcome, that right-wing forces led violent protests that prompted security forces to push him into resigning and then cracked down on his followers, who themselves protested the alleged coup.

Dozens of people were killed in a series of demonstrations against and then for Morales.

"This is not justice," said former President Carlos Mesa, who has since lost several elections to Morales. "They are seeking to decapitate an opposition by creating a false narrative of a coup to distract from a fraud."

Other arrest warrants were issued for more than a dozen other former officials. Those include several ex-cabinet ministers, as well as former military leader William Kaliman and the police chief who had urged Morales to resign in November 2019 after the country was swept by protests against the country's first Indigenous president.

After Morales resigned — or was pushed — and flew abroad, many of his key supporters also resigned. Áñez, a legislator who had been several rungs down the ladder of presidential succession, was vaulted into the interim presidency.

Once there, she abruptly wrenched Bolivia's policies to the right and her administration tried to prosecute Morales and an array of his supporters on terrorism and sedition charges, alleging election rigging and oppression of protests.

But Morales Movement Toward Socialism remained popular. It won last year's elections with 55% of the

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 30 of 95

vote under Morales' chosen candidate Luis Arce, who took the presidency in November. Añez had dropped out after plunging in the polls.

Two ministers in Añez's government were also arrested on Friday, including former Justice Minister Alvaro Coimbra, who had helped lead the prosecution of Morales' aides. A former defense minister and others also have been accused.

New Justice Minister Iván Lima said that Añez, 53, faces charges related to her actions as an opposition senators, not as former president.

Interior Minister Eduardo del Castillo denied it was an act of persecution, saying the case arose from a criminal complaint of conspiracy and sedition filed against her in November, the month she left office.

The Americas director of Human Rights Watch, José Miguel Vivanco, said from Washington that the arrest warrants against Añez and her ministers "contain no evidence whatsoever that they have committed the crime of terrorism."

Medically vulnerable in US put near end of vaccine line

By BRYAN ANDERSON Associated Press/Report for America

RALEIGH, N.C. (AP) — When Ann Camden learned last month that her 17-year-old daughter got exposed to the coronavirus at school and was being sent home, she packed her belongings, jumped in the car and made the two-hour drive to the coast to stay with her recently vaccinated parents.

The 50-year-old mother had been diagnosed with stage IV breast cancer and could not afford to become infected. She also was not yet eligible under North Carolina's rules to receive a COVID-19 vaccine. So she left her twin daughters with her husband and fled for safety.

Across the United States, millions of medically vulnerable people who initially were cited as a top vaccination priority group got slowly bumped down the list as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention modified its guidelines to favor the elderly, regardless of their physical condition, and workers in a wide range of job sectors.

North Carolina is one of 24 states that currently places people under 65 with "underlying medical conditions" near the bottom of the pack to receive the vaccine, according to Jen Kates, senior vice president and director of global health and HIV policy at the Kaiser Family Foundation. A report she wrote for the foundation last month listed Pennsylvania as the lone state making vaccines available to the medically vulnerable during its first phase of distribution.

When North Carolina unveiled its initial guidance in October, it placed people with multiple chronic conditions near the top of the list. In response to December recommendations from the CDC to prioritize people 75 and older, however, it dropped those with chronic conditions to Phase 2. When the guidance changed again to expand eligibility to those 65 and up, medically vulnerable residents learned in January they would be dropped to Phase 4 — to be vaccinated after "frontline essential workers" but before "everyone."

"When they slid us to group 4, it was very quiet," Camden said. "It was like, 'We don't want to talk about it. We're just gonna kind of tuck you over there.' That in itself was kind of insulting."

The state's top public health official, Dr. Mandy Cohen, said residents under 65 with chronic conditions were moved down the list after health officials received data showing elderly residents are far more likely to die of COVID-19, though she acknowledged "age is not a perfect proxy for risk."

Camden decided not to wait for the state to qualify her. Just two days after she arrived at her parents' house, a friend connected her with a CVS pharmacist in Wilmington who had spare doses of the vaccine about to go to waste. Camden received a Moderna shot in the pharmacist's dining room on Feb. 21.

"It's incumbent on all of us to take it when we can get it," Camden said. "I don't want to feel guilty or embarrassed because I was gonna get it whenever I could."

Jon D'Angelo, a 32-year-old Carteret County resident who suffers from spinal muscular atrophy, didn't qualify for a vaccine since he doesn't live in a long-term care facility. He said he jumped the line, but declined to describe where and how he got the vaccine. After a minute-long pause when asked how he justified his actions, he replied, "Justice is more important."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 31 of 95

Responding to the frustrations of people like Camden and D'Angelo, states are now revising their guidelines again. As of Monday, 28 states, including North Carolina, had at least partially opened up vaccine eligibility statewide to those with high-risk medical conditions, Kates said. Four additional states are making the vaccine available to medically vulnerable residents living in certain counties.

North Carolina announced this week that it would start vaccinating people 16 years or older with at least one of 18 at-risk conditions on March 17. And last week, the state expanded its eligibility guidelines to include people like D'Angelo who receive at-home care. D'Angelo is now retroactively eligible under Phase 1, which launched in December.

"I'm glad they did it, but the fact that it took three months to correct is outrageous," D'Angelo said.

On Monday, South Carolina expanded eligibility to disabled and at-risk people, and Michigan did so for medically vulnerable residents 50 and older. California is opening up vaccinations to the disabled and at-risk on March 15.

In Georgia, the governor announced this week that those 16 or older with serious health conditions will be eligible starting March 15. Shana Frentz, a 36-year-old with two autoimmune conditions, said she secured an appointment at a Georgia pharmacy that began signing up people a day before the announcement. Before that, she had explored the possibility of going to a neighboring state. During the months it took before she became eligible in Georgia, she said she and others like her felt "kind of tossed aside."

Maura Wozniak, a 42-year-old Charlotte-area resident, has cystic fibrosis and will wait until it's her turn to get vaccinated. Wozniak was furious with North Carolina's decision to push her back in line, as it meant a lengthier delay for her kids to get back to the classroom. But after learning on social media that she'd soon become eligible, she cried in relief.

"They were able to hear the pleas from high-risk individuals in the state," Wozniak said. "The fact that they gave us a date was promising. Is everything gonna be perfect? No. But at least there's a certain window now."

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

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

Follow Anderson on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/BryanRAnderson>.

Anderson is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

For Biden, there's no place like a weekend home in Delaware

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — As he stood in the Rose Garden celebrating his first big legislative win, President Joe Biden gestured to the White House and said it's a "magnificent building" to live in.

Except during the weekend.

Of the eight weekends since Biden took office, he has spent three at his longtime home outside Wilmington, Delaware, including this weekend. Tentative plans for another weekend visit were scrubbed due to Senate action on Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan.

Biden also spent a weekend at the Camp David presidential retreat in Maryland.

Many presidents have complained at one point or another about feeling confined in the White House. Biden already has echoed earlier presidents in comparing the experience to living in a "gilded cage."

So trading the 132-room executive mansion for a less confining, more relaxing weekend hangout can help presidents unwind, said University of Chicago political scientist William Howell.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 32 of 95

"What he wanted to be was president," Howell said. "It is not the White House per se that is the draw."

The White House defends Biden's leisure travel at a time when both he and federal health officials have been pleading with the public to take the coronavirus pandemic seriously, including by avoiding unnecessary travel.

"The president lives in Wilmington. It's his home. That's where he's lived for many, many years," press secretary Jen Psaki said recently. "And as you know, as any president of the United States does, he takes a private airplane called Air Force One to travel there."

"I think most Americans would also see that as a unique circumstance," she said of the government aircraft available to Biden.

No president travels alone, though, no matter how private the plane. It requires that lots of other people travel as well. And the costs mount quickly.

Besides the Air Force flight crew, a president's travel party includes Secret Service agents, White House staff, journalists and family. Depending on the destination and purpose of the trip, lawmakers, Cabinet secretaries or other guests may fly with the president.

Biden occasionally brought some of his six grandchildren on trips when he was vice president, as well as during last year's presidential campaign.

Presidential travel doesn't come cheap.

Federal agencies spent an estimated \$13.6 million on four trips that then-President Donald Trump took to his waterfront Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida, in February and March of 2017, the Government Accountability Office reported in 2019.

The figure includes \$10.6 million to operate government aircraft and boats, and \$3 million for transportation, lodging, meals and other expenses for government personnel supporting the president on the road, the report said.

But not all presidential travel is the same.

Trump took the more familiar version of Air Force One, a modified 747, on the two-hour-plus flight to the commercial airport in West Palm Beach, Florida. Biden has flown a smaller version of the aircraft for the roughly half-hour flight to the Delaware Air National Guard Base. He made this weekend's trip on the Marine One presidential helicopter.

Trump's Florida home is on the water, which required the addition of Coast Guard security patrols.

Biden goes back to his longtime home near Wilmington. It's where he watched Tom Brady, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers' new quarterback, win a record seventh Super Bowl ring in February. While there, he often meets with advisers, attends church and enjoys Sunday dinner with the family.

"We try to keep the Sunday night dinners," Jill Biden recently told TV talk-show host Kelly Clarkson. "I mean, it's been a little busy lately. We still do it, and the kids look forward to it."

Biden owns a second home in the beach community of Rehoboth, Delaware. He has yet to visit it since becoming president but it could see more action as the weather warms up.

During a tearful farewell in January as he left Wilmington for Washington, Biden credited the state with helping shape his values, character and world view. "It all comes from Delaware," he said.

Biden lived the majority of his 78 years in Wilmington after his parents relocated from Scranton, Pennsylvania, when he was a boy. He represented Delaware in the U.S. Senate for 36 years, and was a regular passenger on the Amtrak train to and from Washington.

"Getting out of the White House was more cumbersome than it is now," said Doug Wead, a former White House aide and author of books about presidents and their families.

Early presidents were consigned to bumpy trains, he said. But motorcades, Air Force One and Marine One all help to ease a modern president's path out of the nation's capital.

But there is no presidential playbook for how and where to spend the weekend.

Trump spent many weekends at Mar-a-Lago or his Trump golf club in central New Jersey, leading critics to accuse him of trying to profit off the presidency.

Barack Obama spent most Saturdays and Sundays in Washington because his young daughters belonged

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 33 of 95

to weekend soccer and basketball leagues.

George W. Bush had his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

Howell said Biden — who has cultivated his image as a “regular Joe” — has strong connections to his family, many of whom are in Delaware, that he wants to maintain.

The president’s first wife, Neilia, and their baby daughter, Naomi, who were killed in a 1972 car accident, and their son Beau, who died of brain cancer in 2015 at age 46, are buried in a cemetery at the church where Biden attends services.

People close to Biden also note the strong affection he has for Delaware.

As he left the state in January, Biden, who is of Irish descent, alluded to an Irish poet who is believed to have said Dublin will be written on his heart when he dies.

Overcome with emotion, Biden said, “when I die, Delaware will be written on my heart.”

How Cuomo investigation, possible impeachment could play out

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and MARINA VILLENEUVE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Gov. Andrew Cuomo has urged New Yorkers to “wait for the facts.”

Patience, though, has grown thin. The state’s two U.S. senators, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, and most of the other 29 members of New York’s congressional delegation have called for his resignation. While in the state legislature, more than 120 lawmakers have called on the Democrat to quit.

Leaders in the state Assembly on Thursday announced an impeachment investigation, a first step toward potentially removing Cuomo from office.

Cuomo has rebuffed calls to resign and staked his political future on the outcome of an independent investigation by Attorney General Letitia James, who is examining allegations that the governor sexually harassed or inappropriately touched several female aides.

Here’s a look at the next steps on a possible road to impeachment:

ATTORNEY GENERAL’S INVESTIGATION

James, an independently elected Democrat, hired former Acting U.S. Attorney Joon Kim and employment discrimination attorney Anne Clark to lead her inquiry into the governor’s workplace conduct.

The investigative team will have the power to subpoena documents and interview witnesses. Its findings will go in a public report.

Cuomo has since said that he will “fully cooperate.”

James lacks power to unilaterally remove Cuomo from office, but any findings corroborating the allegations could sway potential impeachment proceedings — or add pressure for Cuomo to leave voluntarily.

Kim and Clark may choose to limit their scope to allegations that are already public, or broaden it to look for other women who might have complaints about Cuomo’s behavior.

James’ office sent a letter last week instructing the governor’s office to preserve all evidence related to the harassment allegations. That could include documents and emails to and from Cuomo’s staff, calendar entries and communications involving the transfer of one of his accusers to another office.

There is no deadline for completing the investigation and James hasn’t said how long she expects it to take. A 2010 investigation that Cuomo oversaw as attorney general into his predecessor, Gov. David Paterson, lasted about five months.

Andrew G. Celli Jr., who was chief of the civil rights bureau in the office of attorney general from 1999 to 2003, said that while James is a Democrat, her independence would allow her to “do what she thinks is in the best interest of all the people, even if that means an adverse finding to the governor.”

THE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE

The Assembly’s Judiciary Committee will also have power to subpoena documents and witness testimony. It could rely on work done by the attorney general’s team of investigators, or gather its own evidence.

The scope of its inquiry might go beyond Cuomo’s conduct with women. The governor is also under fire for his handling of the COVID-19 crisis in the state’s nursing homes.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 34 of 95

Many lawmakers have been outraged that the Cuomo administration declined, for months, to release the full number of nursing home patients killed by the virus.

The governor's office said some of the data, related to deaths of nursing home patients who had been transferred to hospitals, was unreliable. But in a recorded conference call with lawmakers, Cuomo's top aide said the administration withheld the data in late summer because it was afraid the fatality numbers could be "used against us."

The committee's work could result in the drafting of articles of impeachment against Cuomo, though that outcome is far from certain.

One of the women who has reportedly accused Cuomo of groping her has not spoken publicly about what happened and it is unclear whether she would be willing to offer public testimony in an impeachment trial.

THE IMPEACHMENT PROCESS

New York's process for impeaching and removing a governor from office has some parallels — and some important differences — to the process the U.S. Congress uses for impeaching presidents.

Like at the federal level, New York impeachments starts in lower house of the legislature — in this case, the Assembly. If a majority of members vote to impeach Cuomo, a trial on his removal from office would be held in what's known as the Impeachment Court.

The court consists not only of members of the state Senate, but also judges of the state's highest court, the Court of Appeals, who would also cast votes. There are seven appeals court judges and 63 senators, though not all would serve on the impeachment court.

Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul (HOH-kull) and Senate Majority Leader Andrea Stewart-Cousins are also members, but they are excluded when a governor is on trial. At least two-thirds of the jurors must vote to convict in order to remove Cuomo.

Democrats control both chambers of the Legislature. Many have joined Republicans in calling for Cuomo's resignation or impeachment in recent days. Cuomo has appointed all seven members of the Court of Appeals.

New York has only impeached a governor once, in 1913, when Gov. William Sulzer was bounced after 289 days in office in what he claimed was retribution for turning his back on the powerful Tammany Hall Democratic machine.

Sulzer, accused of failing to report thousands of dollars in campaign contributions and commingling campaign funds with personal funds, blasted the court's secret deliberations, complaining: "A horse thief in frontier days would have received a squarer deal."

SIDELINING CUOMO

If Cuomo were impeached by the Assembly, state law might force him to step aside immediately — a dramatic difference from what happens when the U.S. president is impeached.

A section of the state's judicial code regarding impeachment states: "No officer shall exercise his office, after articles of impeachment against him shall have been delivered to the senate, until he is acquitted."

According to the state constitution, the lieutenant governor would then take over.

"In case the governor is impeached, is absent from the state or is otherwise unable to discharge the powers and duties of the office of governor, the lieutenant-governor shall act as governor until the inability shall cease or until the term of the governor shall expire," the constitution states.

When Sulzer was impeached, Lt. Gov. Martin Glynn was appointed acting governor.

If Cuomo were to be acquitted in an impeachment court, he would return to office. If the Impeachment Court were to remove him from office, Hochul would serve out the remainder of Cuomo's term — through the end of 2022. The court could also opt to disqualify him from holding office in the future, on top of removing him.

Villeneuve reported from Albany, New York.

On Twitter, follow Michael Sisak at twitter.com/mikesisak and Marina Villeneuve at <https://twitter.com/reporter marina>.

Police detain participants in Russian opposition forum

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian police on Saturday detained about 200 participants at a forum of independent members of municipal councils, an action that comes amid the authorities' multi-pronged crackdown on dissent.

Police showed up at the gathering in Moscow shortly after it opened, saying that all those present would be detained for taking part in an event organized by an "undesirable" organization. A police officer leading the raid said the detainees would be taken to police precincts and charged with administrative violations.

Moscow police said in a statement that they moved to stop the meeting because it violated coronavirus restrictions with many participants failing to wear masks. Police said they detained about 200 participants, some of whom were members of an unspecified "undesirable" organization.

OVD-Info, an independent group monitoring arrests and political repression, posted a list of more than 170 people who were detained. They included Ilya Yashin, an opposition politician who leads one of Moscow's municipal districts; former mayor of Yekaterinburg Yevgeny Roizman; and Moscow's municipal council member Yulia Galyamina.

"Their goal was to scare people away from engaging in politics," Andrei Pivovarov, a politician who helped organize the forum, said in a video from a police van.

Pivovarov has played a leading role in Open Russia, a group funded by self-exiled Russian tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Khodorkovsky moved to London after spending 10 years in prison in Russia on charges widely seen as political revenge for challenging President Vladimir Putin's rule.

A 2015 law introduced criminal punishment for membership in "undesirable" organizations. The government has used the law to ban about 30 groups, including Open Russia.

An earlier law obliged non-governmental organizations that receive foreign funding and engage in activities loosely described as political to register as "foreign agents."

The laws have been widely criticized as part of the Kremlin's efforts to stifle dissent, but the Russian authorities have described them as a fit response to alleged Western efforts to undermine the country.

The police crackdown on Saturday's forum follows the arrest and imprisonment of Russian opposition leader, Alexei Navalny.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's most determined political foe was arrested on Jan. 17 upon returning from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusation.

Last month, Navalny was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for violating the terms of his probation while convalescing in Germany — charges he dismissed as a Kremlin vendetta. His arrest and imprisonment triggered a wave of protests across Russia, to which the authorities responded with a massive crackdown.

The government has intensified its crackdown on the opposition ahead of parliamentary elections set for September as the popularity of the main Kremlin-backed party, United Russia, has dwindled.

Democrats finding support for Biden in small-city America

By THOMAS BEAUMONT Associated Press

MANKATO, Minnesota (AP) — Mary McGaw grew up in a Republican home on the rural prairie of south central Minnesota. But as she moved from her tiny town of Amboy to the nearest city of Mankato to study nursing, her politics migrated too.

McGaw was moved by the plight of underinsured and became concerned about the viability of safety programs. She cast her vote for Democrat Joe Biden in November, and nearly three months later, she is pleased with how hard the new president is fighting for his priorities.

"He's trying to get something done, even though there's pushback from all sides," said the 37-year-old registered nurse, who now works at a Mankato branch of the Mayo Clinic.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 36 of 95

McGaw's transformation is driving Democrats' hopes as they charge into what the party considers its new frontier: small-city America.

As Democrats continue to lose votes in small towns, they've seen clear gains in regional hubs that dot stretches of rural America. Biden carried roughly 60 counties President Donald Trump won in 2016, many were places anchored by a midsize or small city that is trending Democratic. They include places like Grand Rapids, Michigan; Wilmington, North Carolina; Dayton, Ohio and Mankato's Blue Earth County.

Their similarities are striking: Most include universities or, like Mankato, large medical centers that draw educated and racially diverse newcomers. Their economies are better than average. And in 2020, their voters showed a bipartisan streak — voting for Biden for president and Republicans down-ballot in large numbers.

"These voters are in line with Biden's personal brand," said Robert Griffin, research director for the Democracy Fund Voter Study Group, a bipartisan demographic and public opinion team. "He's pegged as a moderate Democrat, rightly. But he's also making sure there's room for moderation in the party."

Biden won Blue Earth County by 4.5 percentage points, about the same percentage Democrat Hillary Clinton lost it by in 2016. In November, voters in the area dumped 30-year Democratic Rep. Collin Peterson, arguably the most conservative Democrat in Congress, but reelected two Democratic state lawmakers.

Interviews with voters around Mankato help make sense of this partisan zigzagging. While there remains robust support for Trump, voters stress that action carries more weight than ideological purity. Even devout Democratic activists who wish the new \$1.9 trillion coronavirus aid package — Biden's chief legislative accomplishment so far — contained more aren't frustrated.

"Sure, I wish it had contained the \$15 minimum wage," said Jim Hepworth, the area's Democratic chairman. "But we can have that fight another day."

Blue Earth County has long swung back and forth in presidential elections. But the demographic trends are steady in Democrats' favor.

The expansion of the Mayo Clinic to Mankato from nearby Rochester in 1996 increased the supply of medical professionals from around the country and the world. Since 2010, health care jobs have increased in the county by roughly 70%. About 40% of Mankato residents have college degrees— a key indicator of Democratic voting — compared with 33% nationwide.

Racial diversity has accelerated — another boost for Democrats. Minnesota State University, Mankato, has drawn more international students to its expanded health care programs. And manufacturing and food-processing plants on the city's outskirts have attracted immigrants from North Africa and Latin America.

The transition has not been without tension, but the area has come a long way since Abdi Sabrie, a Somali-American member of the Mankato School Board, arrived in 2009.

Then, his two daughters were the only students of North African descent in their elementary school. Today, 28% of Mankato's enrollment are students of color.

The changes are welcome, but Sabrie gets frustrated.

"Sometimes I want Democrats to use their control to the max, regardless of the other side," he said. "But this diversity shows me we can bring back the politics of collaboration."

Annual household income in Blue Earth rose by roughly \$20,000 over the past decade to nearly \$60,000 in February, still below the state average of \$71,300. Blue Earth housing, too, has jumped from an average home price of roughly \$140,000 to \$226,000. Buoyed by health care, unemployment was 3.2% in January, up slightly from 2.6% a year ago. The state's was 4.5% in January.

Signs of changes are easy to find.

A decade ago, hijabs were forbidden for Mayo employees. Today, the colored head coverings worn by some Muslim women are common on campus. The nation's racial reckoning has played out in a debate over whether to rename Sibley Park, whose namesake is a general who ordered the hangings of 38 Dakota warriors in 1862, the largest mass execution in U.S. history.

From near that solemn spot along the Minnesota River, Mankato grew east to its wooded bluffs. Along the river, brick hulls of grain exchanges still stand but now so does Karshe, an East African tea shop, and

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 37 of 95

the arty Fillin' Station coffee house, among used bookstores, spas and brewpubs.

Midway up the slope, Mayo's campus sits among the tidy, middle-class homes that made the difference for Biden. In that precinct, Biden netted 500 more votes than Clinton did in 2016, a third of his winning margin in the county.

Fetching her children from school, McGaw says she and her husband, a Spanish-language medical interpreter, felt Biden was more task-oriented and less "about himself" than Trump. She voted straight-ticket, but groused Peterson had become too conservative for the district.

McGaw said her family has lived modestly during the COVID-19 pandemic. They qualify for \$2,800 in household aid, and another \$2,800 in child tax credits. McGaw sees others are more needy.

"We've been doing OK," she said. "I was never nervous about my job security. In fact, I was always asked to work more. Do we need the money? Honestly, we can do without it."

McGaw isn't necessarily typical. Nationally, 53% of Democrats say they have experienced at least one form of income loss during the pandemic, slightly more than the 43% of Republicans, according to a March poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

A few blocks away, retired office administrator Jaci Lageson said she was pleased with Biden's compromise with Senate moderates who wanted to lower the income threshold for those receiving the checks.

"It gets money in the pockets of people who need it to survive," said Lageson, a 67-year-old former Republican who has voted Democratic over the past 20 years. Lageson's 73-year-old husband, Larry, a devoted Trump supporter, called Biden a pawn of Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

The number of counties Biden flipped in November is well short of the 206 Trump flipped from Barack Obama in 2016 — proof partisanship has hardened across the U.S. But the Democratic trend in these smaller, well-educated pockets looks sustainable, researcher Griffin said.

"It's not surprising to have higher-education areas shifting back to the Democrats, given that educational polarization has increased," he said.

Though Mankato remains among the smaller cities in this class, it has grown by 35% since 2000 to about 44,000.

The growth has turned this sleepy rural college island into a microcosm of Democratic America, mixed with pragmatic sensibility reflected in Elizabeth Van Slyke, "a progressive willing to compromise."

"I'm not so dead set in my ways," the 57-year-old marketing executive said. "Some progress in the right direction is better than no progress."

Emily Swanson, director of public opinion research at The Associated Press, contributed from Washington.

One very jumbled year: Glimpses of AP's pandemic journalism

By AYA ELAMROUSSI Associated Press

Hugging loved ones. Shaking hands. Going to school. Grabbing dinner at a restaurant. Visiting elderly family members.

Most Americans didn't know this week last year was their last chance at normalcy. And while people have learned to adjust, the coronavirus pandemic has upended — and taken — millions of lives across the globe. Add the upheaval of a nation's reckoning with racism and injustice along with a historic presidential election, and the pandemic year becomes more than about the virus. It's also the year racial, socioeconomic and health care issues have demanded attention.

The Associated Press was there — for all of it. From the day the World Health Organization officially declared the coronavirus a pandemic to the first clinical trial of a vaccine and chronicling the path to a new normal, here is a taste of AP's storytelling about every corner of the world as a jumbled, sometimes wrenching, year unfolded.

THE ECONOMY

From India to Argentina, untold millions who were already struggling to get by on the economic margins had their lives made even harder by pandemic lockdowns, layoffs and the loss of a chance to earn from

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 38 of 95

a hard day's work. Uncertainty became the order of the day.

In America, the most heavily hit were the front line workers who pack and deliver supplies, care for the sick and elderly, and keep streets and buildings clean. They are mostly women, people of color and more likely to be immigrants. Mothers, in particular, have been disproportionately pushed out of the workforce in the U.S. as the pandemic leaves parents with fewer child care options and the added burden of navigating distance learning.

Meanwhile, small businesses around the world have been fighting for survival amid the economic fallout from the pandemic. AP journalists told the stories of those struggling businesses, which help define and sustain neighborhoods. The stakes for their survival are high: The U.N. estimated that businesses with fewer than 250 workers account for two-thirds of employment worldwide.

In the U.S., millions fell into poverty and faced a holiday season with little money to buy gifts, cook large festive meals or pay all their bills. The struggles of low-income workers and the unemployed contributed to a weak holiday shopping season that dragged on the overall economy. By late last year, the economy had shed a shocking 22 million jobs after the pandemic struck.

The pandemic has also tested entrepreneurship and taught valuable lessons about surviving and innovating, whether it's doing more business remotely, grabbing the opportunity to make a new product or sacrificing some business to cut costs.

Meanwhile, creatives in New York City, one of America's first virus hotspots, risked losing their restaurant jobs, which were a fallback given the city's pre-pandemic vibrant restaurant scene. As the city managed to reopen, AP told the stories of those who were awakening to navigate a strange new normal.

The AP also examined the cruel paradox behind containing the outbreak: Quarantines, travel restrictions and business closures have brought everyday business to a halt, shoving the U.S. economy into recession for the first time since 2009.

INEQUALITY AND INJUSTICE

As the coronavirus tightened its grip across the country, it cut a particularly devastating swath through an already vulnerable population: Black Americans.

It became evident in just weeks after the pandemic hit the U.S. that Black people were bearing the brunt of the virus, on health and economic fronts. A history of systemic racism and inequity in access to health care and economic opportunity made many Black Americans far more vulnerable to the virus.

The killing of George Floyd, a Black man, at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020 sparked protests against racial injustice. The nationwide unrest ignited by Floyd's killing underscored the glaring injustice Black people experience in America: The virus and police were killing them at disproportionate rates.

Racial inequality underlies rage and despair, especially because the unrest coincides with an economic and health calamity, one that's falling hardest on Black Americans — who are far more likely than white people to die of COVID-19. They work disproportionately in low-paying service jobs, which were slashed when restaurants and movie theaters closed as a health precaution and customers stayed away from hotels and airports.

The job cuts resulting from the pandemic recession have fallen heavily on lower-income workers across the service sector, while employees in higher-paying industries have gained jobs as well as income since early last year.

Meanwhile, bigotry toward Asian Americans in the U.S. was fueled by the news that COVID-19 first appeared in China. It spurred racist memes on social media that portrayed Chinese people as bat eaters responsible for spreading the virus and reviving century-old tropes about Asian food being dirty. And it didn't help that former President Donald Trump repeatedly called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus."

HEALTH AND SCIENCE

Amid the chaos of the pandemic's early days, doctors who faced the first coronavirus onslaught reached across oceans and language barriers in an unprecedented effort to advise colleagues trying to save lives in the dark. YouTube videos describing autopsy findings and X-rays swapped on Twitter and WhatsApp spontaneously filled the gaps, documenting the oral history of Italy's outbreak as it unfolded.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 39 of 95

As the virus continued to spread around the world, researchers exposed the frightening likelihood of silent spread of the virus by asymptomatic and presymptomatic carriers. The coronavirus is invisible to the naked eye, yet it is seemingly everywhere.

All the while, as deaths from the coronavirus relentlessly mounted into the hundreds of thousands, tens of thousands of doctors and patients rushed to use drugs before they could be proved safe or effective. It wasn't until mid-June — nearly six months in — when the first evidence came that a drug could improve survival.

In Bronx, New York, almost no place has been hit as hard as Co-op City, the largest single residential development in the U.S. It houses one of the largest elderly communities in the nation and has a population that is more than 92% nonwhite.

Around the globe, teams of researchers raced to study the places and species from which the next pandemic may emerge. Companies also tested drugs that mimic the way the body fights COVID-19, hoping they can fill a key gap as vaccines remain months off for most people.

The U.S. mental health system was no exception to the outbreak as many providers struggled to continue treating patients amid the restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the coronavirus. Residents at isolation hotels in New York were drained by the solitude, with one guest recovering from COVID-19 describing the loneliness as “crippling.”

In March 2020, an AP exclusive showed U.S. researchers in Seattle giving the first shots in the first test of an experimental coronavirus vaccine, leading off a worldwide hunt for protection even as the pandemic surged. The milestone marked just the beginning of a series of studies in people needed to prove whether the shots are safe and could work.

Today, more than 65 million people in the U.S. have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, while nearly 35 million people have completed their vaccination, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

Questions arose early on about the nation's ability to adequately test for the virus and trace the contacts of those infected with it. AP found that most states were not meeting the minimum level of coronavirus testing suggested by the U.S. government, that the turn-around time to get test results was exceeding federal guidelines and that local health departments didn't have enough staffing to do adequate contact tracing.

Reporting from AP statehouses revealed that at least two-thirds of states were sharing the addresses of those who tested positive for the coronavirus with police and other first responders, and some of those were sharing the names. That created a potential chilling effect on people wanting to get tested.

As billions in federal money flowed to the states, AP found that some of the least-populated states with relatively few coronavirus cases were receiving an outsized share, even though the funding was designed to address virus-related expenses. In a federal loan program intended to help small businesses survive, AP found that large chains and franchises were poised to grab much of the money as soon as the program opened, previewing what actually happened.

Statehouse reporters also revealed that many governors' own businesses were among the beneficiaries of the loan program. Meanwhile, AP reporting showed that hundreds of thousands of low-wage workers who had lost jobs during the pandemic fell through a gap in the government's jobless aid formula and found themselves ineligible for a crucial unemployment benefit.

The pandemic also affected how people cast ballots during a presidential election. Even as more states adopted voting by mail, AP reporting showed the process is viewed skeptically by Black voters because of historical disenfranchisement and distrust of government institutions.

Pandemic-related job losses and a rapidly spreading virus also were hurting voter registration efforts aimed at Latinos. Fears of the virus raised worries that local polling places would not have enough poll workers on Election Day. Amid concerns about Postal Service delivery of mailed ballots, AP obtained agency data showing some key presidential battleground regions had some of the slowest mail delivery

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 40 of 95

in the country.

LIFE, BUT CHANGED

The pandemic cut a swath through the daily life of many human beings, changing everything from the way Muslims marked Ramadan — in the United States and across the world — to the methods that those left behind by COVID-19 deaths dealt with grief, with saying goodbye and with the notion of mortality.

Among the hardest-hit places of all was New York City, where AP journalists documented a 24-hour period during the metropolis' worst moments — in every corner of town.

Faces disappeared as protective masks went up — and quickly became a divisive political issue. Almost every corner of life took on a new, more fraught feeling, from the venerable U.S. Postal Service to how Halloween was perceived to the simple way that people connected. Even cash became something viewed with suspicion. Before anyone knew it, a dizzying pandemic spring had crossed an unsettling year and a pandemic winter was at hand — and still will be for more than a week.

In a world where suddenly less was happening in public, AP's visual journalists captured the imagery of a pandemic — somber, harrowing and sometimes utterly empty:

—Wuhan, China, where the outbreak began, reopened after authorities locked down the city for 76 days to stop the spread.

—An AP photojournalist captured the coronavirus' hefty toll on Manaus, one of the hardest hit cities in Brazil.

—The passage of time took a toll on doctors and nurses who have been on the front lines of Italy's coronavirus battle since the start.

—AP visited the homes of 12 veteran families struggling to honor spouses, parents and siblings during a lockdown that has sidelined many funeral traditions.

—Haunting images of New York City's almost entirely empty streets were captured from the back of a motorcycle.

—The pandemic heightened the fragility of Barcelona's elderly working-class Poble Sec neighborhood.

—Peru experienced what officials called the most devastating hit to the country since 1492, when Europeans brought diseases like smallpox and measles to the Americas.

—The AP spent several days in the coronavirus unit at St. Jude's Medical Center in California and followed four nurses and their families after their shifts were over.

AND FINALLY: A GLOBAL PANDEMIC JOURNAL

From Saudi Arabia to New York to London, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe, AP staffers reported from across the world on how the pandemic affected them in AP's yearlong Virus Diary series.

And around the world, as the pandemic's second year unfolds with trepidation and more than a little bit of hope, the coverage continues.

Follow Associated Press journalist Aya Elamroussi on Twitter at http://twitter.com/aya_elamroussi

Black scholar: It's time France confronts its colonial past

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — A Black French scholar and expert on U.S. minority rights movements who's taking charge of France's state-run immigration museum says it's "vital" for his country to confront its colonial past so that it can conquer present racial injustice.

"The French are highly reluctant to look at the dark dimensions of their own history," Pap Ndiaye told The Associated Press in his museum, initially built to display colonial exploits but now meant to showcase the role of immigration in shaping modern France.

Ndiaye was named to head France's National Museum of the History of Immigration at a crucial time, as his country is under pressure to reassess its colonial history and offer better opportunities for its citizens of color, in the wake of Black Lives Matter and other racial justice movements.

Following George Floyd's death in the U.S. last year, thousands took to the streets in Paris and across

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 41 of 95

the country expressing anger at racism and discrimination in French society, particularly toward people from the country's former colonies in Africa.

What happened in the U.S. "echoes the French situation," Ndiaye said.

The upcoming trial of a former police officer charged in Floyd's death will be closely monitored in France, Ndiaye said, because "it tells about the reality of police violence, and we would like very much for this reality of police violence to be discussed the same way in France."

Many young French are increasingly pushing back against a national doctrine of colorblindness, which aims at encouraging equality by ignoring race altogether — but has failed to eradicate discrimination.

They "are disappointed in many ways in the French promise of equality and opportunities for all," Ndiaye said. "We must go beyond the official discourse and acknowledge reality."

These issues "have to be discussed. They have to be measured also through the use of statistics," Ndiaye said, also urging "more effective policies" targeting discrimination in the job and housing markets.

These are bold statements for a top government-appointed official in France, where collecting data based on race or ethnicity is frowned upon, and where the far-right has brought anti-immigrant rhetoric to the mainstream. President Emmanuel Macron has promised more steps to fight discrimination and has treaded carefully on how to address colonial wrongs.

Ndiaye, who was born and raised in France, described his stay in the U.S. from 1991 to 1996 to study as "a personal revelation." Born to a French mother and Senegalese father, he said his U.S. experience "helped me integrate that Black part of me I had put aside a little bit to make it a source of pride."

Coming back to France, he specialized on the history of minorities in both countries, and his publication in 2008 of the book "The Black Condition" made him a precursor of Black Studies in France.

From his new post at the immigration museum, Ndiaye hopes to contribute to opening up the debate needed so the French confront their collective memories.

"I know many French people would say that slavery is something that happened in the United States when slavery did not really happen in France or on a much smaller scale — which is not the case. The main difference between France and the U.S. is that slavery was overseas (in French colonies), very far from the mainland."

France and the U.S. have different histories, but they've been facing "similar issues, issues of racial domination ... issues of racial injustice," Ndiaye stressed.

The Palais de la Porte Doree, which houses the museum in the east of Paris, is in itself a strong testimony from France's colonial era.

Built for the Paris Colonial Exposition of 1931, it aimed to present the French colonies in a favorable light.

Amid other propaganda, Ndiaye said, a monumental fresco in the main hall of the museum was meant to convince the public "that colonization is good for the colonized themselves, that they enjoy being colonized by the French because of the civilizing mission of the French Empire."

The fresco still stands, as a reminder. Visitors will be able to "measure the gap between the official discourse on colonization at that time... and the reality," he said. "A reality of violence, a reality of oppression, a reality of domination."

The immigration museum, inaugurated in 2007, is now closed to the public amid the virus crisis and in full renovation, with a reopening expected next year.

It will propose a new approach to the history of immigration to ensure that it is "not a footnote" in France's history, Ndiaye said. "Immigration is presented in a positive manner of course when we know that one French out of four has at least one grandparent who came from elsewhere."

The permanent exhibition will start from 1685, when King Louis XIV passed the Code Noir, or Black Code, legislation meant to regulate the conditions of slavery in French colonies. It legalized the brutal treatment of slaves and foresaw capital punishment for offences including striking a "master."

The display will focus on France's colonial Empire that once included a large part of northern and western Africa and other territories in the Caribbean, the Middle East and south-east Asia.

The exhibition will end with the migrant crisis that shook Europe in 2015, when more than 1 million people crossed by land and by sea to reach the continent.

With a growing non-white French population with ancestors coming from colonized areas, Ndiaye said people want “their history, the history of their family, to be better integrated within the general master narrative of French history.”

Kuwait’s #MeToo moment: Women denounce harassment, violence

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Abrar Zenkawi was cruising toward the beach in Kuwait City when she saw a man waving and smiling in her rearview mirror.

Elsewhere, this may have been a benign highway flirtation. But in Kuwait, it’s a haunting routine that often turns dangerous. The man pulled up beside her, inched closer and finally drove into her. Zenkawi’s car, carrying her toddler nieces, sister and friend, flipped six times.

“It’s considered normal here. Men always drive way too close to scare girls, chase them to their homes, follow them to work, just for fun,” said Zenkawi, 34, who spent months in the hospital with a shattered spine. “They don’t think about the consequences.”

But that may be changing as women are increasingly challenging Kuwait’s deeply patriarchal society. In recent weeks, a growing number of women have broken taboos to speak out about the scourge of harassment and violence that plagues the Gulf nation’s streets, highways and malls, in an echo of the global #MeToo movement.

An Instagram page has led to an outpouring of testimony from women fed up with being intimidated or attacked in a country where the criminal code doesn’t define sexual harassment and lays out few repercussions for men who kill female relatives for actions they consider immoral. A wide variety of news and talk shows have taken up the subject of harassment for the first time. And one journalist used a hidden camera to document how women are treated in the streets.

The spark may have come from fashion blogger Ascia al-Faraj, who vented in January on Snapchat to her millions of followers after being hounded by a man in a speeding car. In such episodes, men often try to “bump” a woman’s car, but many serious accidents result, as in Zenkawi’s case.

“It’s terrifying, all the time you’re feeling so unsafe in your own skin,” al-Faraj told The Associated Press. “The responsibility is always on us. ... We must have had our music too loud or our windows down.”

Shayma Shamo, a 27-year-old doctor, sought to seize the momentum of al-Faraj’s viral video, creating an Instagram page called “Lan Asket,” Arabic for “I will not be silent.”

Shamo’s rage had been building for weeks. In December, a female employee of Kuwait’s Parliament was stabbed to death by her 17-year-old brother, reportedly because he didn’t want her working as a security guard. It was the third such case — described as “honor killings” — to make headlines in as many months. The National Assembly, all-male despite a record number of female candidates in the recent election, offered none of the customary condolences.

“The silence was deafening,” Shamo said. “I thought, OK, that could happen to me, and anyone could get away with it.”

Kuwait, unlike other oil-rich Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, has a legislature with genuine power and some tolerance for political dissent. But restrictions to slow the the spread of the coronavirus prevented Shamo from staging a protest and forced her to take her grievances online, as women in the region’s more repressive countries have done recently.

The Lan Asket account thrust sexual harassment, long shrouded in shame, into the limelight.

From there, the conversation moved to traditional media. A well-known female journalist at state-linked al-Qabas newspaper went out at night with a hidden camera and captured motorbike riders recklessly trying to catch her attention, men yelling sexual slurs on the street and strangers pulling the hair of female passersby — offering proof to millions in Kuwait of the harassment women were describing.

“It seems rudimentary, but we’ve never had these discussions before,” said Najeeba Hayat, who helped organize the Lan Asket campaign, which is also training bus drivers to report harassment, organizing an

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 43 of 95

ad campaign to raise awareness and creating an app that allows women to anonymously report abuse to police. "Every single girl has kept this in her chest for so long."

As the movement gained steam, lawmakers scrambled to respond. Seven politicians, from conservative Islamists to stalwart liberals, submitted amendments to the penal code last month that would define and punish sexual harassment, including one that called for a \$10,000 fine and one-year prison sentence.

"The Kuwaiti penal code doesn't cover harassment, there are just some laws that cover immorality that are so vague that women can't go and report to the local police," said Abdulaziz al-Saqabi, a conservative who was among those who drafted amendments.

But women's rights activists, whose input the lawmakers did not solicit, are skeptical that the proposals will result in significant change, especially with the nation in the midst of a financial crisis and with Parliament now suspended because of a political standoff.

The frustration is familiar for activist Nour al-Mukhled. For years, she and other women have struggled to abolish a law that classifies the killing of adulterous women by their fathers, brothers or husbands as a misdemeanor and sets the maximum penalty at three years in prison. Such leniency remains common across the Gulf, although the United Arab Emirates criminalized "honor killings" last fall.

Kuwait also has statutes that let kidnappers evade punishment by marrying their victims and empower men to "discipline" their female relatives with assault.

"In Kuwait, there can be no legal change without cultural change, and this is still culturally acceptable," al-Mukhled said. Only in August did Parliament pass a law that opened shelters for victims of domestic abuse.

But progress is happening outside of official circles, activists say. In recent weeks, a growing number of female collectives have sprung up, in homes and on Zoom — a mirror to the custom of the "diwanyia," gentlemen's clubs that often vault men to top jobs. Women also have turned to Clubhouse, the buzzy app that lets people gather in audio chat rooms, to hold discussions of sexual assault and harassment.

The horizon for equality may be far off, but campaigners say their ambitions are modest in the short term.

"Right now, attempted murder is considered 'flirting,'" said Hayat, one of the organizers of the Lan Asket campaign. "We just want to be treated like human beings, not as aliens and not as prey."

Democratic push to revive earmarks divides Republicans

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Can lawmakers bring home the bacon without it being pork?

It's a question that's vexing Republicans as they consider whether to join a Democratic push to revive earmarks, the much-maligned practice where lawmakers direct federal spending to a specific project or institution back home. Examples include a new bridge, community library or university research program.

Earmarking was linked to corruption in the 2000s, leading to an outcry and their banishment in both the House and Senate. But many in Congress say the ban has gone too far, ceding the "power of the purse" to party leaders and the executive branch and giving lawmakers less incentive to work with members of the other party on major legislation.

Democratic appropriators in the House see a solution and are proposing a revamped process allowing lawmakers to submit public requests for "community project funding" in federal spending bills. To guard against graft, the process includes safeguards to prevent conflicts of interest.

Whether earmarking becomes bipartisan could have enormous implications not only for the allocation of spending across the country, but for President Joe Biden, who is gearing up for a massive infrastructure push that he hopes will attract significant Republican support. With earmarking in place, bipartisanship could prove easier to achieve, as lawmakers on both sides of the aisle could have reason to support bills they would otherwise oppose.

"This is a matter of allowing members to serve their own constituents," said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla. "Somebody is going to be making these decisions — and I don't want to bash federal bureaucrats — but somebody who has never been to my district probably doesn't know the needs as well as I do."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 44 of 95

With Congress having allocated nearly \$6 trillion responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, some conservatives are aghast at the prospect of Republicans participating in a Democratic spending spree. They say their party should resist earmarking, not revive it.

"This is not the time to fall into the swamp, or into the dark hole of earmarks," said Rep. Ted Budd, R-N.C. "We've got to draw a bright line between Republicans and Democrats right now."

For now, the debate over earmarks is taking place mostly behind the scenes, with House Republican leadership holding a listening session on the issue Monday night.

"It really feels like a jump ball," Budd said. "Some are adamantly opposed, as am I. The older members who have been here a lot longer, they tend to be for it."

Worried about what's ahead, Republican members in both chambers of Congress have sponsored legislation this year to prohibit earmarks. Eleven Republicans have added their name to a bill sponsored by Sen. Steve Daines, R-Mont., and 10 Republicans have signed onto a House version from Rep. Ralph Norman, R-S.C.

About three dozen lawmakers also signed onto a letter Wednesday urging the leaders of the Appropriations committees in both chambers to avoid a return to earmarking. Budd spearheaded the effort and said he's telling groups outside the Beltway and inside to contact their members and let them know "how precarious this is."

The end of earmarking came swiftly a decade ago, when House Republicans took the majority and quickly banned the practice. President Barack Obama pledged during a State of the Union address that "if a bill comes to my desk with earmarks inside, I will veto it." The Senate Appropriations Committee soon followed up with a moratorium of its own.

It was a popular move after headlines focusing the nation's attention on Alaska's \$223 million "bridge to nowhere" and Rep. Randy "Duke" Cunningham's guilty plea to accepting bribes from companies in exchange for steering government contracts their way. President Donald Trump pardoned the eight-term GOP congressman earlier this year as he was exiting the White House.

Over the years, the moratorium has been enforced by party rules and committee protocols. It does not exist in House or Senate rules, or by force of law.

In late February, as Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., took charge of the powerful Appropriations Committee, she said it was time for a change. Done properly, she and other Democrats say a defined process for funding requests can make lawmakers more responsive to their constituents.

She has spelled out several requirements that must be met for lawmakers to request funding, including;

- All requests must be made online.
- Members must certify that they and their family have no financial interest in the projects they request.
- Members may request funding for state or local government grantees and for nonprofits, but not to help for-profit corporations. A maximum of 10 requests will be considered per member.
- The overall amount of spending on projects must not exceed 1% of discretionary spending. Such spending doesn't include entitlement programs such as Medicare and Social Security, or the cost of financing the federal debt.

Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, a veteran member of the Appropriations committee, said he supports "limited fashion earmarks."

"As long as they're transparent and I have to put my name by them that I requested this stuff," Simpson said. "I'm not gonna be asking for anything that's stupid, that people are going to beat me up on. I'm going to say the city of Boise requested this stuff because they needed help in this area."

Rep. Peter DeFazio, the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, also announced he would allow earmarks in the next roads and transit infrastructure bill being drawn up in the committee. He said requests should include, among other things, letters of support, sources of funding for the full cost of the project, the status of the project, and a description of opportunities for the public to comment.

The ranking Republican on the committee, Rep. Sam Graves of Missouri, said earmarks would not increase the amount of money spent in a bill. They just spend that money differently.

"It just changes who makes the decision. And when you have bureaucrats who are not elected and don't

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 45 of 95

have to withstand scrutiny for their decisions, then you don't have any accountability on how those dollars are spent," Graves said. "That's something I feel pretty strongly about."

Norman worries that earmarks would be used to entice Republicans to vote for bills with expensive price tags.

"In your family budget you have priorities," Norman said. "And the priority of this country today is to get on a firm financial basis. Will earmarks do that? I would make the argument they will not."

The Senate appears less further along in its earmark planning, but Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said Wednesday he expects to allow lawmakers to request what he called "designated spending."

"I'm perfectly willing to divide it equally between Republicans and Democrats. And so it will be up to them if they want it. If they don't, we'll just have it on the Democratic side," Leahy said.

UN urges Somalia to organize elections without delay

By EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — The U.N. Security Council urged Somalia's government on Friday to organize elections "without delay" in a resolution that stressed the pressing threat to the country's security from al-Shabab and armed opposition groups.

The resolution, which was adopted unanimously, authorized the African Union to maintain its nearly 20,000-strong force in Somalia until the end of the year with a mandate to reduce the threat from the extremist groups to enable "a stable, federal, sovereign and united Somalia."

The U.N.'s most powerful body said its objective is to transfer security to Somali authorities, with the aim of Somalia taking the lead in 2021, and achieving full responsibility by the end of 2023.

It emphasizes the importance of building the capacity of Somali forces and institutions so they are able to manage current and future threats, and authorizes the AU force, known as AMISOM, to support the transfer of its security responsibilities to the government.

The resolution's adoption came amid growing pressure on Somalia's President Mohamed Abdullahi Mohamed after scheduled elections on Feb. 8 failed to take place because of the lack of agreement on how the vote should be carried out. Two regional states have said they would not take part without a deal.

Critics accuse Mohamed, who is seeking a second four-year term, of delaying the election to extend his current mandate. The president has blamed unnamed foreign interventions.

The Security Council expressed concern at the delays in finalizing arrangements for elections this year. It urged the federal government and regional states "to organize free, fair, credible and inclusive elections" in line with a Sept. 17, 2020, agreement.

Three decades of chaos, from warlords to al-Qaida affiliate al-Shabab to the emergence of an Islamic State-linked group, have ripped apart the country that only in the past few years has begun to find its footing.

The Security Council welcomed "progress achieved so far" but also stressed the immediate threat from al-Shabab and other extremist groups. It condemned their attacks in Somalia and beyond "in the strongest possible terms."

Council members welcomed the government's commitment to conduct joint operations with AMISOM "in order to become the primary security provide in Somalia."

But they said "Somalia is not yet in a position to take full responsibility for its own security and that degrading al-Shabab and armed opposition groups and building and sustaining peace will therefore require continued regional and international collaboration and support."

While the British-drafted resolution was adopted unanimously, the council's three African members -- Niger, Tunisia and Kenya -- and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines objected to the way negotiations were conducted, saying they weren't properly consulted.

Niger's U.N. Ambassador Abdou Abarry said "the African Union must play a leadership role in determining the future of its mission to Somalia throughout the transition."

"It is our sincere hope that the implementation of this resolution will be marked by meaningful participation, cooperation and collaboration between the council, the AU and other partners in the common

endeavor to stabilize Somalia by systematically degrading terrorist groups to allow peace and security to the people of Somalia," Abarry said.

Biden played 'sheriff' on '09 aid, now salesman on COVID law

By JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In 2009, then-Vice President Joe Biden was "Sheriff Joe," the enforcer making sure federal dollars from a massive economic aid package were getting to the right places and quickly.

This time, President Biden's role is different: He's lead salesman for the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 aid package, eager to score political points as Americans begin to reap benefits from the massive government relief effort.

Biden signed the bill into law Thursday and then extolled it in a prime-time address to the nation that night. On Friday, he celebrated the package again, this time with Democratic lawmakers in his first Rose Garden event as president.

Biden said Friday that he would draw on his experiences in 2009, saying he worked four to five hours daily for six months to ensure that the stimulus succeeded. That same type of focus will be needed for coronavirus relief.

"The devil is in the details," the president said. "It's one thing to pass the American Rescue Plan. It's going to be another thing to implement it. It's going to require fastidious oversight to make sure there's no waste or fraud and the law does what it's designed to do. And I mean it. We have to get this right."

The White House has plotted an ambitious campaign to showcase the law's contents while looking to build momentum for future, more difficult parts of the president's sweeping agenda. Biden will travel to the battleground states of Pennsylvania and Georgia next week to talk it up and other top administration officials will fan out around the country to do likewise.

West Wing aides say there is a determination to avoid the mistakes of more than a decade earlier, when President Barack Obama's administration didn't do enough to promote its own economic recovery plan. But Biden gets a measure of credit for the successful implementation of the plan itself, according to veterans of the Obama administration.

Biden wound up with oversight of the government's mammoth \$787 billion stimulus plan after he wrote Obama a memo about how it should be run, and he savored his role as the program's top cop. He said he had not "yet" looked at his vice president, Kamala Harris, to play the same role on COVID-19 aid.

Back then, Biden held weekly conference calls with mayors, governors and others to press for wise use of the money. He estimated that he spoke with over 160 mayors and every governor but one — Alaska Republican Sarah Palin, who was the vice presidential nominee in the 2008 election.

Biden also called regular Cabinet meetings to keep the Washington end of the program on track. At one 2009 Cabinet meeting, Biden pressed federal officials to give him a quick heads-up when projects fell behind schedule, saying, "You've gotta give me more ammo so I can pick up the phone and be the sheriff."

Biden used his role as "Sheriff Joe" to cut red tape and "get the stimulus itself into the economy," said Robert Gibbs, who was Obama's press secretary at the time. He predicted that Biden would be equally relentless in selling the relief package this time.

"I would be surprised if two days passed in the next four years when you don't hear discussion about the legislation," Gibbs said. "This is so important that it is literally something you say during the last rally of your reelection campaign."

Biden is expected to appoint someone to oversee implementation of the COVID-19 relief plan. And while Biden himself will not be as in-the-weeds this time, aides still expect to get plenty of questions from him about exactly where and when the money is moving.

"He will play a different role: He is also the commander-in-chief and overseeing an economic recovery, overcoming the pandemic and addressing a range of crises," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki. "But in his soul, he is a details guy and he will want to roll up his sleeves and call the local mayor, governor, school district to make sure the money gets out the door."

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 47 of 95

There are challenges that lie ahead for Biden, although White House aides point to polling that shows the package is popular with Republican voters even though not a single GOP lawmaker voted for it. No Republicans attended the Rose Garden victory lap.

Biden's White House has embraced the strategy of under-promising and then over-delivering, allowing it to frequently beat target dates and goals on, for instance, vaccine distribution.

But in his speech Thursday night, Biden laid out an ambitious timeline for all adult Americans to be eligible for the vaccine by May 1 and dangled the prospects of life getting closer to normal by July 4. And while he attached caveats about a possible virus surge, Biden's new timeline generated pressure to meet the bold headlines it produced.

Republicans, who are trying to label the COVID-19 relief bill as partisan, believe that they will be able to mount a far more effective pushback to the Biden administration when the president moves into more polarizing parts of his agenda such as immigration, climate change and voting rights.

"Less than two months into his presidency, and Biden is showing he never truly meant his promises of bipartisanship and unity," said GOP chairwoman Ronna McDaniel. "Instead of working on meaningfully targeted relief legislation with Republicans, he chose a hyper-partisan bill full of pork."

The Obama bill faced headwinds because it followed the bailout of the banks, engineered under President George W. Bush, and came as the economy remained stagnant. This time, Americans will start seeing the impact much sooner — some will even see their \$1,400 stimulus check deposited this weekend.

Economic forecasts also project a robust recovery by year's end, and Biden should be able to point to concrete job growth, making it an easier victory to sell than the one in 2009.

Jennifer Palmieri, former communications director in the Obama White House, said Obama had to make the case that "things are still bad but would be worse than they are if we had not passed this." In contrast, she said, Biden is able to tell Americans "there are signs of life and hope and growth."

She added: "The White House should feel empowered: The message to be drawn from the COVID bill is that Republicans in D.C. are out of touch with the rest of the country. Time to step on the gas."

Associated Press writer Nancy Benac contributed.

Biden boosts US vaccine stockpile as world waits

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has directed his administration to order another 100 million doses of the Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine, growing a likely U.S. surplus of doses later this year while much of the rest of the world struggles with deep shortages.

Even before Wednesday's order, the U.S. was to have enough approved vaccine delivered by mid-May to cover every adult and enough for 400 million people total by the end of July. Enough doses to cover 200 million more people are on order should vaccines from AstraZeneca and Novavax receive approval from the Food and Drug Administration. The new J&J doses, which would cover another 100 million people, are expected to be delivered in the latter half of the year.

White House aides said Biden's first priority is ensuring that Americans are vaccinated before considering distributing doses elsewhere.

"We want to be oversupplied and overprepared," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday, saying Biden wanted contingencies in the event of any unforeseen issues with the existing production timeline.

"We still don't know which vaccine will be most effective on kids," she added. "We still don't know the impact of variants or the need for booster shots. And these doses can be used for booster shots as well as needed. Obviously that's still being studied by the FDA but again we want to be over-prepared as I noted earlier."

Biden's announcement comes as the White House has rebuffed requests from U.S. allies, including Mexico, Canada and the European Union, for vaccine doses produced in the United States, where months

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 48 of 95

of production runs have produced vaccine solely for use in the country.

Meanwhile, Russia and China, whose leaders don't face voters in free and fair elections, have used their domestically produced shots for strategic leverage.

China has pledged roughly half a billion doses of its vaccines to more than 45 countries, according to a country-by-country tally by The Associated Press. Four of China's many vaccine makers are claiming they will be able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year.

Russia has sent millions of doses of its Sputnik V vaccine to countries around the world, even as it vaccinates its own population. Analysts say a goal of this vaccine diplomacy is to bolster Russia's image as a scientific, technological and benevolent power, especially as other countries encounter shortages of COVID-19 vaccines because richer nations are scooping up the Western-made versions.

Israel, which has vaccinated more than half of its population with Pfizer vaccines produced in Europe, has also attempted to use vaccine diplomacy to reward allies.

Biden did move to have the U.S. contribute financially to the United Nations and World Health Organization-backed COVAX alliance, which will help share vaccine with more than 90 countries with lower and middle-income nations, but it has yet to commit to sharing any doses.

Biden's purchasing strategy has come under criticism from nongovernmental organizations who have encouraged the White House to develop clear plans and thresholds for sharing vaccine with the world.

"The only way to defeat this virus for good is to defeat it everywhere — and that requires an immediate plan for sharing excess vaccine doses globally," said Sarah Swinehart, senior director for communications at The ONE Campaign.

Asked about the surplus Wednesday, Biden told reporters that "if we have a surplus, we're going to share it with the rest of the world."

"This is not something that can be stopped by a fence no matter how high you build a fence or a wall. So we're not going to be ultimately safe until the world is safe," acknowledged Biden. "So, we're going to start off making sure Americans are taken care of first, but we're then going to try to help the rest of the world."

Stay or go? Fence, Guard pose Capitol security questions

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nobody, it seems, wants to keep the security fence around the U.S. Capitol anymore — except the police who fought off the horrific attack on Jan. 6.

Lawmakers call the razor-topped fencing "ghastly," too militarized and, with the armed National Guard troops still stationed at the Capitol since a pro-Trump mob laid siege, not at all representative of the world's leading icon of democracy.

"All you have to do is to see the fencing around the Capitol to be shocked," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., said in an interview Friday.

How to protect lawmakers, while keeping the bucolic Capitol grounds open to visitors has emerged as one of the more daunting, wrenching questions from deadly riot. Not since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has security been so elevated, and the next steps so uncertain, for the Capitol complex.

Five people died after the mob stormed the building trying to stop Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's election over Republican Donald Trump. The former president was impeached by the House for inciting the insurrection, and acquitted by the Senate.

The U.S. Capitol Police has asked for the fencing and the National Guard to remain, for now.

Police officers are working grueling round-the-clock overtime shifts after being overrun that day, engaging at times in hand-to-hand combat with rioters outfitted in combat gear and armed with bats, poles and other weaponry. One woman was shot and killed by police and an officer died later, among scores of police injured in what officials have said appeared to be a planned and coordinated assault.

With warnings of another attack in early March by pro-Trump militants and threats on lawmakers that have nearly doubled since the start of 2021, the police, the Pentagon and lawmakers themselves are

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 49 of 95

wrestling with how best to secure what has been a sprawling campus mostly open to visiting tourists and neighborhood dog walkers alike.

"The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th forever changed how we look at the 'People's House,'" acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said in written testimony before Congress in February.

She said that even before the 9/11 attacks, security experts, including former chiefs of police, argued that more needed to be done to protect the Capitol complex. "The Capitol's security infrastructure must change," Pittman testified.

While some lawmakers say privately they appreciate the heightened security, taking down the protective perimeter and easing the National Guard's presence is the one issue that appears to be uniting both Democrats and Republicans in the toxic political environment on Capitol Hill since the deadly riot.

One option that has emerged is for a mobile, retractable barrier that could be put up as needed.

"What we have now, that's just unacceptable to me," Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Democratic majority whip, told reporters. "It's just ghastly, it's an embarrassment. If there's a better way to protect us, I want to see it. I want to work to get it."

Lawmakers described their unease at arriving for work each day in what can feel like a war zone. The absence of tourists snapping photos of the Capitol dome or constituents meeting with representatives is an emotional loss on top of COVID-19 restrictions, they said. The security perimeter extends far beyond the Capitol itself through neighboring parks and office buildings.

The Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, compared it to a combat zone in Afghanistan.

"I think we are way overreacting," he said at a press conference.

As of Friday there were about 4,300 Guard troops in the city. This week, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin formally approved the Capitol Police request to extend the deployment of nearly 2,300 Guard members for about two more months.

The pushback from Capitol Hill was immediate and bipartisan.

Top Republican senators on the Senate Armed Services, Homeland Security, Intelligence and other committees downplayed the potential threats to the Capitol, especially weighed against the drain on National Guard troops serving far from their homes.

"Our National Guard troops, who serve with great honor and distinction, are not law enforcement officers, and we will not abide the continued militarization of Capitol complex security," wrote Sens. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, Rob Portman of Ohio, Marco Rubio of Florida and others.

"We are deeply troubled by the current level of security around the United States Capitol," wrote the House Armed Services Committee's Democratic Chairman Adam Smith of Washington and Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the top Republican in a joint statement.

They said while there is no doubt "some level" of support from the National Guard should remain in the region to respond to threats, "the present security posture is not warranted at this time."

Still, other lawmakers say privately they are comfortable keeping security high, for now, as the country tries to ease back to a sense of normalcy after the devastating attack on the seat of government.

A sweeping security review conducted in the aftermath of the riot by a task force led by retired Army Lt. Gen. Russel Honoré recommended eventually replacing the barrier with mobile fencing and "an integrated, retractable fencing system" that could be deployed as needed.

Coupled with the hiring of 350 additional officers, the report also recommends establishing a permanent "quick response force" within the Capitol Police but also at the National Guard in D.C. for emergencies. There was a marked delay in sending the Guard to the Capitol on Jan. 6.

A supplemental spending request for security is expected to be considered by Congress in April.

New Zealand marks 2 years since Christchurch mosque killings

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — New Zealand on Saturday marked the second anniversary of one of its most traumatic days, when 51 worshippers were killed at two Christchurch mosques by a white

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 50 of 95

supremacist gunman.

Several hundred people gathered at the Christchurch Arena for the remembrance service, which was also livestreamed. A similar service planned for last year was canceled at short notice due to the sudden spread of the coronavirus.

Kiran Munir, whose husband Haroon Mahmood was killed in the attacks, told the crowd she had lost the love of her life and her soulmate. She said her husband was a loving father of their two children. He'd just finished a doctoral degree and was looking forward to his graduation ceremony when she last saw his smiling face.

"Little did I know that the next time I would see him the body and soul would not be together," she said. "Little did I know that the darkest day in New Zealand's history had dawned. That day my heart broke into a thousand pieces, just like the hearts of the 50 other families."

Temel Atacocugu, who survived being shot nine times during the attack on the Al Noor mosque, said the slaughter was caused by racism and ignorance.

"They were attacks on all of humanity," he said.

He said the survivors would never be able to erase the pain in their hearts and would never be the same.

"However, the future is in our hands," he said. "We will go on and we will be positive together."

In the March 15, 2019, attacks, Australian Brenton Tarrant killed 44 people at the Al Noor mosque during Friday prayers before driving to the Linwood mosque, where he killed seven more.

Last year Tarrant, 30, pleaded guilty to 51 counts of murder, 40 counts of attempted murder and one count of terrorism. He was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

After the attacks, New Zealand quickly passed new laws banning the deadliest types of semiautomatic weapons.

During the service, the names of each of the 51 people who were killed were read out. The efforts of first responders, including police and medics, were also acknowledged.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern told the crowd that when preparing her speech, she had been at a loss for what to say because words would never change what happened.

"But while words cannot perform miracles, they do have the power to heal," she said.

The Muslim community had experienced hatred and racism even before the attacks, she said, and words should be used for change.

"There will be an unquestionable legacy from March 15," Ardern said. "Much of it will be heartbreaking. But it is never too early or too late for the legacy to be a more inclusive nation."

Top Dems call on Cuomo to resign amid harassment allegations

By MARINA VILLENEUVE, STEVE PEOPLES and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo confronted a stunning series of defections Friday amid allegations of sexual harassment that left the high-profile Democrat fighting for his political survival, angry and alone.

By day's end, the three-term governor had lost the support of almost the entire 29-member New York congressional delegation and a majority of Democrats in the state legislature. None of the desertions hurt more than those of New York's two U.S. senators, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer and Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand.

"Due to the multiple, credible sexual harassment and misconduct allegations, it is clear that Governor Cuomo has lost the confidence of his governing partners and the people of New York," the Democratic senators wrote in a joint statement. "Governor Cuomo should resign."

The escalating political crisis has spawned an impeachment inquiry in an overwhelmingly Democratic state, and threatens to cast a cloud over President Joe Biden's early days in office. Republicans have seized on the scandal to try to distract from Biden's success tackling the coronavirus pandemic and challenge his party's well-established advantage with female voters.

Biden, a longtime ally of Cuomo and his father, former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, has avoided directly

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 51 of 95

addressing the controversy, although it's becoming increasingly difficult.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Friday declined to say whether Biden believes Cuomo should resign. She said every woman who has come forth "deserves to have her voice heard, should be treated with respect and should be able to tell her story."

The senators' statement, which cited the pandemic as a reason for needing "sure and steady leadership," came shortly after Schumer stood alongside Biden at a Rose Garden ceremony celebrating the passage of the Democrat-backed \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill.

A defiant Cuomo earlier in the day insisted he would not step down and condemned his Democratic detractors as "reckless and dangerous."

"I did not do what has been alleged. Period," he said, before evoking a favorite grievance of former President Donald Trump. "People know the difference between playing politics, bowing to cancel culture and the truth."

Never before has the brash, 63-year-old Democratic governor, who had been expected to run for a fourth term in 2022, been more politically isolated.

Some in Cuomo's party had already turned against him for his administration's move to keep secret how many nursing home residents died of COVID-19 for months, and the latest wave of defections signaled a possible tipping point.

Cuomo's coalition of critics has expanded geographically and politically, now covering virtually every region in the state and the political power centers of New York City and Washington. Among them are New York City progressive U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez; the leader of the House Democratic campaign arm, U.S. Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney; Buffalo-based U.S. Rep. Brian Higgins; and a group of Long Island-based state lawmakers who had been Cuomo loyalists.

"The victims of sexual assault concern me more than politics or other narrow considerations, and I believe Governor Cuomo must step aside," Maloney said.

Ocasio-Cortez, in a joint statement with U.S. Rep. Jamaal Bowman, said that after a new groping allegation against the governor, she was concerned about the safety and well-being of the governor's staff.

"We believe these women," they said.

Cuomo on Friday insisted that he never touched anyone inappropriately, and said again that he's sorry if he ever made anyone uncomfortable. He declined to answer a direct question about whether he's had a consensual romantic relationship with any of the accusers.

"I have not had a sexual relationship that was inappropriate, period," he said.

The state Assembly greenlit an impeachment investigation Thursday as lawmakers investigate whether there are grounds for Cuomo's forcible removal from office. The state attorney general is also leading a probe into his workplace conduct.

The firestorm around the governor grew after the Times Union of Albany reported Wednesday that an unidentified aide told a supervisor Cuomo reached under her shirt and fondled her at his official residence late last year.

The woman hasn't filed a criminal complaint, but a lawyer for the governor said Thursday that the state reported the allegation to Albany police after the woman declined to do so herself.

Additionally, Cuomo is facing multiple allegations of sexually suggestive remarks and behavior toward women, including female aides. One aide said he asked her if she would ever have sex with an older man. And another aide said the governor once kissed her without consent, and said governor's aides publicly smeared her after she accused him of sexual harassment.

Rarely in the modern era has a leading elected official survived such a political backlash from his own party, but there is precedent.

Former South Carolina Gov. Mark Sanford, a Republican, refused to resign in 2009 after a scandal involving an extramarital affair. He would go on to serve in Congress. And in 2019, Virginia's Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam resisted sweeping calls for his resignation after a blackface photo in an old yearbook emerged. Northam is still in office.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 52 of 95

Cuomo said Friday he'd still be able to govern despite the growing list of elected officials who have demanded that he quit.

He didn't address the reality of an increasingly untenable position: Cuomo is still managing the state's pandemic response and negotiating a state budget with lawmakers who've lost confidence in his leadership. More than 120 members of the state legislature called on him to quit earlier this week, a majority of them Democrats.

The defections of virtually the entire congressional delegation raised the prospect of further erosion of support.

Showing no signs of bowing to the pressure, Cuomo raised new questions about the motives of the accusers.

"I won't speculate about people's possible motives," he said Friday. "But I can tell you as a former attorney general who has gone through this situation many times, there are often many motivations for making an allegation. And that is why you need to know the facts before you make a decision."

"Serious allegations should be weighed seriously, right?" he added. "That's why they are called serious."

Peoples reported from New York City. Associated Press writer Josh Boak in Washington contributed.

IRS says new round of COVID relief payments on the way

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Along with daylight saving time, this weekend could bring some Americans fatter bank balances.

Officials at the Treasury Department and Internal Revenue Service said Friday that processing of the new round of stimulus payments has already begun, with the aim of having the first payments start showing up in bank accounts this weekend.

President Joe Biden signed the new \$1.9 trillion rescue package on Thursday, the day after it won final passage in the House. The measure provides for payments to qualifying individuals of up to \$1,400, with payments to a qualifying family of four of \$5,600.

"The payments will be delivered automatically to taxpayers even as the IRS continues delivering regular tax refunds," IRS Commissioner Chuck Rettig said in a statement.

It is estimated that 85% of Americans will be eligible for the payments and the goal is to have millions of the payments disbursed in the next few weeks.

The relief measure, which passed on party-line votes in both the House and Senate, contains the third round of economic-impact payments. The first round passed last spring provided up to \$1,200 per individual, and a second round of payments in December provided up to \$600 per individual.

The latest package passed with no votes from Republicans, who objected to the size of the measure and argued it was not necessary given signs that the economy is beginning to recover.

Then-President Donald Trump called the payments in the \$900 billion relief bill passed in December too small and Biden agreed, pushing the total for an individual up to \$1,400 in the new package.

The latest round of relief payments will provide households with \$1,400 for each adult, child and adult dependent, such as college students or elderly relatives. Adult dependents were not eligible to receive payments in the previous two rounds of payments.

The payments start declining for an individual once adjusted gross income exceeds \$75,000 and go to zero once income hits \$80,000. The payment starts declining for married couples when income exceeds \$150,000 and goes to zero at \$160,000.

Officials said that beginning on Monday, people can check the "Get My Payment" tool on the IRS.gov website to track their own payments.

Taxpayers who have provided bank information with the IRS will receive the direct-deposit payments, while others will get paper checks or debit cards mailed to them.

Officials said in the interest of speeding up the relief payments, the IRS will use the latest tax return

available, either the 2019 return filed last year or the 2020 return that is due by April 15.

If a person's job situation changed last year because of the pandemic, which led to millions of people losing jobs or being forced to work reduced hours, officials said that the IRS will adjust the size of the new impact payments after the 2020 return has been filed and provide a supplemental payment if that is called for. Officials said those adjustments will be made automatically by the IRS for people who have already filed their 2020 returns.

Officials said they wanted to handle the payments this way rather than waiting for the 2020 tax return to be filed in the interest of speeding payments to taxpayers.

This story has been corrected to show that individuals received up to \$1,200 in the first round of stimulus payments, not \$2,000.

'Gonna be sore!' La. troopers boasted of beating Black man

By JIM MUSTIAN Associated Press

Louisiana State Police troopers joked in a group text about beating a Black man after a high-speed chase last year, saying the "whoopin" would give the man "nightmares for a long time," according to new court filings.

"He gonna be sore tomorrow for sure," Trooper Jacob Brown, who was charged in the case and resigned Wednesday, texted three of his colleagues. "Warms my heart knowing we could educate that young man."

The May arrest of 29-year-old Antonio Harris — who authorities say was beaten by troopers even after he "immediately surrendered" — bears a strong resemblance to the State Police pursuit a year earlier that ended in the still-unexplained death of another Black motorist, Ronald Greene.

Greene's death was captured on body-worn camera footage the agency refuses to release and remains the subject of a federal civil rights investigation.

Brown, 30, who faces charges in two other excessive-force cases, had pulled Harris over for a minor traffic violation on Interstate 20 in Richland Parish when Harris reentered his vehicle and fled, State Police said.

The ensuing chase spanned 29 miles (47 kilometers), reached speeds of 150 mph (240 km/h) and ended only after deputy sheriffs deployed a "tire deflation device" that caused Harris to drive into a ditch, the court records show.

An internal investigation found the responding troopers, who are white, attacked Harris even though he had surrendered and "laid face down (prone) on the ground and extended his arms away from his body and his legs spread apart."

The first arriving trooper, Dakota DeMoss, "delivered a knee strike" to Harris and slapped him in the face with an open palm before powering off his body-worn camera, the court records show. DeMoss, 28, also initiated Greene's arrest in May 2019, though State Police have not provided any details about his involvement.

Another trooper, George Harper, 26, punched Harris in the head several times with a fist "reinforced" by a flashlight and threatened to "punish" Harris, while Brown pulled the man's hair.

"At no time did Harris resist arrest," the State Police internal investigation concluded.

The troopers produced "wholly untrue" reports saying Harris was resisting and continuing to flee, the filings say, and they sought to conceal from investigators that there was bodycam video. They also exchanged 14 text messages peppered with "lol" and "haha" responses in which they boasted about the beating and mocked Harris.

"BET he wont run from a full grown bear again," Brown wrote.

"Bet he don't even cross into LA anymore," DeMoss responded, who earlier jeered that Harris was "still digesting that ass whoopin."

"He gonna spread the word that's for damn sure," Harper texted back.

DeMoss and Harper also are charged in Harris' arrest and were placed on administrative leave after the internal investigation.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 54 of 95

The filings show DeMoss originally received only counseling for his role in Harris' beating, admonished for turning his FM radio up "extremely loud" during the chase and switching stations "in order to find the right song."

A message sent to the attorney for the other troopers was not immediately returned. Brown's attorney declined to comment.

Efforts to reach Harris, who appears to be from Mississippi, were not immediately successful.

The new court filings were first reported by Sound Off Louisiana, a local blog.

Harris' arrest drew new attention after a monthslong internal investigation into use-of-force incidents in the northern part of the state — a probe begun amid mounting scrutiny of the agency's Troop F, which patrols the Monroe area and the surrounding parishes.

Brown and another trooper, Randall Dickerson, 34, are also charged in a July 2019 drug arrest of another Black man after a traffic stop on Interstate 20 in Ouachita Parish. Body-worn camera captured Dickerson striking the man five times "towards his head and administering a knee strike to his body," according to court records.

Brown also was arrested in December on battery and malfeasance charges in another incident involving a man who says authorities followed him to his house, dragged him from his car and beat and kicked him, breaking his ribs.

Federal authorities separately are investigating troopers from the same troop in the death of Greene. Troopers initially blamed 49-year-old's death on a crash at the end of a high-speed chase. But photos of Greene's car showed little damage and his family's attorney says bodycam footage shows troopers choking and beating the man, repeatedly jolting him with stun guns and dragging him face-down across the pavement.

J-Rod done: Lopez, Rodriguez call off 2-year engagement

LOS ANGELES (AP) — J-Rod has split.

Jennifer Lopez and Alex Rodriguez called off their two-year engagement, according to multiple reports based on anonymous sources. The former slugger proposed to the actor a couple years ago after the celebrity couple started dating in early 2017.

The New York Post's Page Six was the first to report on the couple's breakup. A representative for Lopez did not return an email request for comment.

The last time Lopez and Rodriguez posted a photo together was last month in the Dominican Republic.

The couple was given the nickname, J-Rod, three years ago after they landed on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine.

In 2019, Rodriguez said he and Lopez had similar backgrounds and her latest film "Second Act" reflected the ties that drew them together.

This story has been corrected to remove an inaccurate reference to Rodriguez's position on a baseball team.

Probe faults mayor, officials for keeping Prude death secret

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — An investigation into the official response to Daniel Prude's police suffocation death last year in Rochester, New York, is faulting the city's mayor and former police chief for keeping critical details of the case secret for months and lying to the public about what they knew.

The report, commissioned by Rochester's city council and made public Friday, said Mayor Lovely Warren lied at a September press conference when she said it wasn't until August that she learned officers had physically restrained Prude during the March 23, 2020, arrest that led to his death.

Warren was told that very day that officers had used physical restraint, the report said, and by mid-April she, then-Police Chief La'Ron Singletary and other officials were aware Prude had died as a result and the

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 55 of 95

officers were under criminal investigation.

"In the final analysis, the decision not to publicly disclose these facts rested with Mayor Warren, as the elected mayor of the city of Rochester," said the report, written by New York City-based lawyer Andrew G. Celli Jr. "But Mayor Warren alone is not responsible for the suppression of the circumstances of the Prude arrest and Mr. Prude's death."

Warren said in a statement that she welcomed the report "because it allows our community to move forward."

"Throughout city government, we have acknowledged our responsibility, recognized that changes are necessary and taken action," she said, citing various measures on police practices and discipline.

In her statement, Warren didn't address the report's specific assessments of her own conduct.

A special counsel to the city administration disputed claims that Warren had lied.

The mayor spoke based on the facts known to her at the time and if what she said wasn't true it was because Singletary had misled her, Carrie Cohen said.

The report said Singletary told the mayor the officers restrained Prude, but the chief "consistently deemphasized" the role of restraints in Prude's death, and his statements to officials didn't "capture the disturbing tenor of the entire encounter."

Singletary's characterization "likely impacted" how city officials viewed the matter, the report said.

A lawyer for Singletary said, under a first review of the report, Singletary "was truthful in his statements" to Warren and other city officials.

"He never participated in any cover-up nor did he intentionally downplay the circumstances" around Prude's death, Michael Tallon said in a statement.

"When asked by the mayor to lie, he declined and he announced his retirement the next day," he added.

Warren told the public Singletary initially told her Prude's death was a "drug overdose," but Friday's report said he never told her that. Singletary, meanwhile, made "untrue statements by omission" when he failed to correct Warren's claim during a September news conference that she was not informed Prude's death had been ruled a homicide, the report said. It said Singletary told her of the finding on April 13.

Additionally, the report said, a city lawyer in August discouraged Warren from publicly disclosing Prude's arrest or commencing disciplinary action against the officers after she viewed body camera video of the encounter for the first time.

The lawyer incorrectly stated that the city was barred from taking action against the officers while the state attorney general's office was investigating Prude's death, the report said.

"There are no surprises in there. It confirms most of what I already knew," said attorney Elliot Shields, who represents Prude's brother, Joe.

"What it shows me on a larger scale is the systemic failures of the city," he said.

The body camera video, made public by Prude's family in early September, shows Prude handcuffed and naked with a spit hood over his head as an officer pushes his face against the ground, while another officer presses a knee to his back. The officers held him down for about two minutes until he stopped breathing. He was taken off life support a week later.

A grand jury last month declined to indict the officers involved.

Lawyers for the seven police officers suspended over Prude's death have said the officers were strictly following their training that night, employing a restraining technique known as "segmenting." They claimed Prude's use of PCP, which caused irrational behavior, was "the root cause" of his death.

Rochester's city council authorized the independent investigation into the handling of Prude's death within days of the video being made public and voted to give investigators the power to subpoena city departments.

Celli, in the report, noted that the decision to inform the public of a significant event "is a policy judgment, and a political one, not a legal one," and that there are no written rules or standards in Rochester governing the mayor or other officials in such matters.

"It is not for the special council investigator to pass judgment on whether the decisions by Rochester

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 56 of 95

officials not to disclose the arrest and death of Daniel Prude were right or wrong," Celli wrote. "The judges of that question are the citizens of the city of Rochester and the public at large."

The report also confirms that Rochester police commanders urged city officials to hold off on publicly releasing the body camera footage of Prude's suffocation death because they feared violent blowback if it came out during protests over the May 25 police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

In a June 4 email, Deputy Chief Mark Simmons cited the "current climate" in the city and the nation and advised Singletary to press the city's lawyers to deny a Prude family lawyer's public records request for the footage of the encounter that led to his death.

"We certainly do not want people to misinterpret the officers' actions and conflate this incident with any recent killings of unarmed Black men by law enforcement nationally," Simmons wrote. "That would simply be a false narrative, and could create animosity and potentially violent blow back in this community as a result."

"Totally agree," Singletary replied, according to the emails.

Rochester officials released the emails last fall, along with police reports and other documents. Warren fired Singletary and suspended the city lawyer, Corporation Counsel Tim Curtin, and communications director Justin Roj without pay for 30 days in response to fallout over the case.

Prude's death sparked several weeks of nightly protests and calls for Warren's resignation. His family has filed a federal lawsuit alleging the police department sought to cover up the true nature of Prude's death.

Associated Press writers Jennifer Peltz in New York and Carolyn Thompson in Buffalo contributed.

Positive COVID-19 tests derail Kansas, Virginia tourney runs

By AARON BEARD AP Basketball Writer

A year to the day after COVID-19 brought the college basketball postseason to a halt, the pandemic continues to disrupt the sport, with three premier programs forced to abandon their conference tournaments because of positive coronavirus tests.

No. 16 Virginia — the most recent national champion — and No. 11 Kansas were forced out of the semifinals of their tournaments on Friday, a day after Duke also dropped out, ending a disappointing season for coach Mike Krzyzewski's storied program.

There's no guarantee that Kansas or Virginia will be back for the NCAA Tournament, potentially depriving the sport's annual showcase of two title contenders as well as the five-time national champion Blue Devils, who were unlikely to make this year's field.

Although the Atlantic Coast Conference and Big 12 tournaments continued without the virus-affected schools, Friday's developments were an eerie reminder of of March 12, 2020, when both leagues ended their tournaments as teams were warming up for the first of a full day's worth of games. That day turned out to be the end of the college basketball season.

The ACC announced the positive test and subsequent contact tracing and quarantining in Virginia's program less than 12 hours before the Cavaliers were set to play Georgia Tech in the first of two semifinal games. The Yellow Jackets advanced to the finals, where they await the winner of the North Carolina-Florida State matchup.

Hours later, Kansas announced its withdrawal from the Big 12 Tournament, leading to the cancellation of its semifinal matchup with No. 13 Texas. The Longhorns will play either No. 2 Baylor or No. 12 Oklahoma State for the title. The Jayhawks said in a statement they would continue preparing for the NCAA Tournament, which starts Thursday.

Cavaliers coach Tony Bennett described the outcome of the tests as a "gut punch."

"I'm hurting for our players, especially our seniors," Bennett said in a statement. "I told our young men they have every reason to be disappointed, but it is still very important how they choose to respond. We are exhausting all options to participate in the NCAA Tournament."

Virginia athletic director Carla Williams said in the statement the school was "in communication with the

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 57 of 95

appropriate officials regarding our participation" in the NCAA Tournament.

Duke withdrew from the ACC Tournament and ended its season amid its own positive test before facing the 15th-ranked Seminoles in the quarterfinals.

The Jayhawks learned earlier this week they would be without center David McCormack and backup forward Tristan Enaruna due to COVID-19 protocols. They beat No. 25 Oklahoma 69-62 in the quarterfinals without them, and had gone the entire season without an outbreak that forced a cancellation or postponement.

"Obviously we are disappointed and our players are disappointed that they can't continue to compete for the Big 12 championship," coach Bill Self said in a statement. "While we have been fortunate to avoid this throughout the season, there are daily risks with this virus that everybody participating is trying to avoid.

"We have followed the daily testing and additional protocols that have been setup for us, unfortunately we caught a bad break at the wrong time. I look forward to preparing my team in probably a unique way for next week's NCAA Tournament."

NCAA spokeswoman Stacey Osburn declined to comment Friday on the Virginia and Kansas cancellations.

Georgia Tech coach Josh Pastner said on a Zoom call with reporters that the ACC should not cancel the rest of the tournament, even though the three teams left are already almost certain to be invited to the NCAA Tournament.

"We want to go win that game and put our name in the record book," Pastner said, adding that he hopes the Cavaliers also get to compete next week.

"They're the defending national champions. They're our league champions," he said.

ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips said in a statement that he was "heartbroken" for the players, coaches and support staff at Duke and Virginia and that the league will follow the lead of "our medical personnel."

The NCAA Tournament will be held entirely in the state of Indiana to create what NCAA senior vice president of basketball Dan Gavitt has called a "controlled environment" instead of a bubble.

The tournament protocols include requiring each member of a team's travel party to complete seven negative COVID-19 tests before leaving for Indianapolis. Gavitt has said a team can continue to play if it has five players available through those safety protocols.

"This whole year has been a lot different for everyone with the testing protocols, socially distancing, wearing masks, making sure you're not seeing people outside of your bubble really," Virginia guard Sam Hauser said after Thursday's win against Syracuse on a last-second shot.

"Pretty proud of our guys. We were very disciplined throughout the year and continue to be, especially this time of the year when if you get a COVID bug like that, it could end your season. ... We're just going to continue to take the right protocols, and we should be all right."

AP Sports Writer Hank Kurz Jr., in Virginia, and AP Basketball Writer Dave Skretta in Kansas City, Missouri, contributed to this report.

Follow Aaron Beard on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/aaronbeardap>

More AP college basketball: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Most of California to reopen as vaccine eligibility expands

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Most of California's 40 million residents will be able to enjoy limited indoor activities such as dining inside or watching a movie at a theater by mid-week as coronavirus case rates continue to stay low, state officials said Friday.

Officials said that 13 counties, including Los Angeles, would be able to open restaurants, gyms and museums at limited capacity on Sunday, the result of the state hitting a 2 million equity metric aimed at getting more vaccines into low-income communities. Another 13 counties are expected to reopen Wednesday under a different metric.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 58 of 95

Also next week, the state expands eligibility for the still-scarce vaccine.

WHICH COUNTIES CAN REOPEN SUNDAY AND WHY?

Gov. Gavin Newsom announced last week that he would set aside 40% of vaccine for residents of about 400 ZIP codes the state deems most vulnerable based on metrics such as household income, access to health care and education levels.

The point is to tie reopening standards to ensuring that the people most affected by the pandemic are protected against the virus, he said. Once the state reaches 2 million doses administered in those ZIP codes, which it did Friday, the threshold for moving out of the most restrictive tier in a color-coded, four-tier system the state adopted in August relaxes.

Previously, counties could move from the purple tier to the lower red tier based on metrics that include the number of new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 people per day over a period of several weeks. The threshold for entering the red tier now moves from 7 cases per 100,000 residents to 10 cases.

The counties eligible to reopen within 48 hours — Sunday — include Contra Costa and Sonoma in the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles. San Bernardino and Orange said it would do so Sunday, although LA County officials said they would wait until Monday.

WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER COUNTIES?

San Diego, Sacramento, Riverside and Ventura are among 13 additional counties expected to reopen Wednesday via the normal reassignment process that occurs every Tuesday.

San Joaquin and Santa Barbara are in this category. The hard-hit counties of Kern and Fresno in the central valley remain in the most restrictive tier.

WHO BECOMES ELIGIBLE FOR VACCINE MONDAY?

The state is opening up vaccinations to an estimated 4.4 million people ages 16-64 with disabilities and certain health conditions, including severe obesity, type 2 diabetes, chronic kidney disease at stage four or above and Down syndrome.

California's guidelines do not call for medical documentation; instead, people will have to attest that they are eligible. This reduces barriers to access, but it also opens up a loophole for determined line jumpers.

San Francisco is going a step further than the state, broadening the allowed categories and adding people who are deaf, HIV positive or who have behavioral health disabilities, including severe mental health or substance use disorders, to get vaccinated.

Dr. Paul Simon, LA County's chief science officer, said people will be asked to sign an attestation if they can't provide documentation. "We certainly hope people won't try to take advantage of the situation and will be honest," Simon said.

The state is also expanding eligibility to transit workers and residents and workers of homeless shelters, jails and detention centers. They join teachers, food and agriculture workers, health care employees and seniors 65 and older in being eligible for vaccine.

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF CALIFORNIA'S NEW VACCINE SYSTEM?

In late January, Newsom announced insurer Blue Shield would set up and administer a new vaccine tracking and delivery system. The state's 58 counties and three cities with public health departments would be required to use the state's My Turn system to make appointments.

Blue Shield is expected to take control by March 31. But Santa Clara County has refused to sign a contract with the insurer, saying it can better vaccinate its residents with an appointment system that is superior to the state's system.

Blue Shield CEO Paul Markovich said Friday that more than half of local health jurisdictions have switched to My Turn or will switch soon, he said.

My Turn is great for scheduling appointments at mass vaccination sites, but it is not so good at carving out slots for vulnerable populations at smaller clinics, said Joe Prado, Fresno County's community health division manager. He expects the state online portal to improve.

"We're going to live with these two systems a little while longer," he said.

Associated Press writer Stefanie Dazio contributed from Los Angeles.

Governors applaud Biden's vaccine timeline, but need supply

By KATHLEEN RONAYNE Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — Governors largely cheered President Joe Biden's declaration that all adults should be eligible for coronavirus vaccinations by May 1, but the goal will require a shift for states that have been methodical in how they roll out the shots.

The top health official in California said the nation's most populous state will need to work harder in the coming weeks to ensure the most vulnerable people get vaccines before they have to compete with the general public. Oregon planned to make essential workers and younger adults with disabilities eligible by May 1, not the broader population, and said Friday it wouldn't change that timeline without firmer supply commitments.

Alaska, meanwhile, is already allowing all adults to sign up for a shot. Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis said before Biden spoke Thursday night that wide eligibility could come by next month, while Colorado Gov. Jared Polis announced Friday that it would happen by mid-April. In Virginia, state vaccine coordinator Dr. Danny Avula said the state could hit Biden's goal earlier.

Governors in Wisconsin, Louisiana, North Carolina, Kansas and Vermont said they're ready to open the floodgates on May 1.

But several governors cautioned it must come with a dramatic increase in vaccine supply.

"In order for widespread and comprehensive vaccination to work, the federal government will need to come through with increased doses and infrastructure," Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said in a statement.

Jeffrey Zients, the White House's coronavirus coordinator, told reporters Friday that May 1 is an "absolute deadline" and that the nation will have enough supply between the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines to give shots to all adults by the end of that month. Now, an average of 2.2 million doses are being administered per day.

As long as supply ramps up, the goal seems reasonable, said Jennifer Nuzzo, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security and an epidemiology professor. But she warned it could create challenges around equity and set unrealistic expectations among Americans that they will immediately be vaccinated come May.

Some states may not have the infrastructure to quickly ramp up doses for such a broad pool.

"It could be a delay for people to actually get a vaccine because of the operational constraints," she said.

Supply was a sticking point in Oregon. Health officials say they won't change a plan to allow the general public to be vaccinated starting July 1 until they're sure more doses are coming.

"Until we get more clarity, we need to keep our current timelines in place. We can't disappoint people who eagerly want a vaccine," said Pat Allen, director of the Oregon Health Authority. "Right now, no one in the federal government has given us hard numbers on what we can expect and when."

California's health secretary, Dr. Mark Ghaly, said the state must focus on ensuring those most at risk of serious illness get shots before broad eligibility. People with disabilities and certain health conditions join the list Monday, and California doesn't plan to add any other groups before May 1.

"If I want to see us do anything over the next six to seven weeks before May 1, (it's) to make sure we get into the communities that have been hardest hit," he said Friday.

The state says it has the capacity to vaccinate 3 million per week but is getting about half that number of doses. By April 30, the state has set a goal of being able to give 4 million doses weekly.

Tim Jin, a 46-year-old Orange County resident with cerebral palsy, said he understands Biden's desire to get the country back to normal. But opening up vaccinations to all adults in May will crowd out people with disabilities, who are just becoming eligible for the vaccine in California, he said.

"The first thing that I thought about was how much harder it's going to be for people with disabilities to get the vaccine because they are pretty much eliminating the priority list for us," Jin said.

Kiran Savage-Sangwan, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network and a member

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 60 of 95

of the state's vaccine advisory committee, said Biden's plan should not undercut California's equity goals as long as the state maintains its commitments, such as sending more doses to underserved areas.

California is dedicating at least 40% of its doses to people in roughly 400 low-income ZIP codes.

"Having more vaccine is absolutely what we want and what we need, and if we still don't have enough to meet the demand, then we still need to prioritize," she said.

Elsewhere, governors met Biden's goal with enthusiasm.

West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice said the state "will absolutely step up" to hit the goal. About 13% of residents are fully vaccinated, according to state data, among the highest rates in the country.

Now, all West Virginia residents 50 and over are eligible for the vaccine. The state's coronavirus czar, Dr. Clay Marsh, said officials may be able to expand eligibility to everyone earlier than May.

"But we want to maintain our commitment to discipline and to make sure that we're immunizing the people most likely to be hospitalized or to die first," he said.

Associated Press journalists Janie Har in San Francisco; Cuneyt Dil in Charleston, West Virginia; Sara Cline in Portland, Oregon; Sarah Rankin in Richmond, Virginia; Patty Nieberg in Denver and Rachel La Corte in Olympia, Washington, contributed. Cline and Nieberg are corps members for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative.

This story has been corrected to show that California wants to have capacity to vaccinate 4 million people per week by April 30, not April 1.

US resumes aid to Yemen's rebel north as famine threatens

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

The United States announced a resumption of aid to Yemen's rebel-held north on Friday to fight a looming famine as the country's nearly six-year-old war grinds on. U.N. officials warned that a blockade of fuel deliveries to a main port was heightening the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The aid concern came as President Joe Biden's envoy to Yemen expressed frustration at the country's Houthi rebels, saying they were focusing on fighting to capture more territory while an international and regional diplomatic push was underway to end the conflict.

"Tragically, and somewhat confusingly for me, it appears that the Houthis are prioritizing a military campaign" to seize central Marib province, envoy Tim Lenderking said. He spoke in an online event sponsored by the Atlantic Council think tank, after his more than two-week trip in the region to push for a cease-fire and ultimately a peace deal.

The developments deepen the challenges for the Biden administration as it goes out on a limb to try to end the Yemen war through diplomacy, reversing previous U.S. administrations' support for an inconclusive Saudi-led military offensive that tried to roll back the Iran-allied Houthi rebels. The rebels have shown no sign of relenting despite Biden's diplomatic overtures, adding to tensions between the U.S. and its strategic partner Saudi Arabia.

Lenderking said the Houthis have had a cease-fire proposal before them for a "number of days" and urged them to respond positively.

He gave no details, including whether the proposal was new or an updated version of a nationwide cease-fire plan that U.N. special envoy Martin Griffiths announced last year.

Fighting and massive displacement of people, crippling fuel shortages and rising food prices have 50,000 Yemenis already caught up in famine and 5 million more a step away from it, the United Nations says. It projects 400,000 Yemeni children under 5 are at risk of dying this year from malnutrition.

The war began when the Houthi rebels seized the capital, Sanaa, and much of the north in 2014. Saudi Arabia has led an unsuccessful air campaign since 2015 to try to dislodge the rebels, while rival Iran has consolidated its support for the Houthis.

Biden has reversed Obama and Trump administration policy in the conflict by pulling U.S. support for the

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 61 of 95

Saudi-led offensive. Biden's six-week-old administration is reviving U.S. diplomatic efforts to end the conflict.

Friday's announcement on renewed U.S. humanitarian support for the north comes about a year after the Trump administration stopped some aid on the grounds that Houthis were diverting the foreign assistance for themselves. The Trump administration move affected about \$50 million in aid, out of more than \$1.5 billion in humanitarian assistance the U.S. has provided Yemen since 2019, the U.S. Agency for International Development said.

The Biden administration as of Friday will "cautiously resume" support to humanitarian groups working in Yemen's north, said Sarah Charles, a senior official for humanitarian assistance at the U.S. AID.

The resumed U.S. humanitarian support would come with new measures and monitoring to try to make sure the Houthis aren't interfering with the aid, Charles said, speaking at the same virtual forum as Lenderking. The U.S. could suspend support for some programs again if warranted, she said.

The Biden administration last month also lifted the Trump administration's designation of the Houthis as a terrorist organization, saying the prohibitions that went along with the designation interfered with critical aid delivery to civilians in rebel areas.

Critics said the move sent the wrong signal, especially at a time when the Houthis have stepped up cross-border drone and missile attacks into Saudi Arabia and are fighting to seize control of oil-rich Marib province from Yemen's internationally recognized government. Saudi-led warplanes have countered the Houthi advance in Marib, which is sheltering about a million Yemenis who have fled Houthi offensives elsewhere in the country.

Lenderking and U.N. World Food Program executive director David Beasley, speaking separately to reporters about his own talks with the Houthis, U.S. officials and other players in the conflict also pointed to interruptions in fuel deliveries to Yemen. They warned that the disruption is depriving aid convoys, homes, hospitals and businesses of needed fuel.

Beasley earlier described a visit this week to a child-malnutrition ward in a Sanaa hospital, where he saw children wasting away. Many, he said, were on the brink of death from entirely preventable and treatable causes, and they were the lucky ones who were receiving medical care.

The Houthis have demanded Saudis lift a port blockade of rebel areas and cease their military campaign in the country.

At U.N. headquarters in New York on Friday, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters that no commercial fuel imports at all made it through the rebel-held main Hodeida port last month, for the first time since the Saudi-led offensive began.

The fuel shortage was driving up prices of food and other critical goods, Dujarric said. Beasley, the World Food Program chief, said the fuel shortages threatened to undermine what remains of Yemen's private sector and swell the numbers of Yemenis needing aid.

"I expressed to not just the United States but other major players around the world that this fuel blockade is going to create havoc and we need to work through this immediately," Beasley said.

—
Knickmeyer reported from Oklahoma City and Lederer from the United Nations.

Stay or go? Fence, Guard pose Capitol security questions

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — Nobody, it seems, wants to keep the security fence around the U.S. Capitol anymore — except the police who fought off the horrific attack on Jan. 6.

Lawmakers call the razor-topped fencing "ghastly," too militarized and, with the armed National Guard troops still stationed at the Capitol since a pro-Trump mob laid siege, not at all representative of the world's leading icon of democracy.

"All you have to do is to see the fencing around the Capitol to be shocked," Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., said in an interview Friday.

How to protect lawmakers, while keeping the bucolic Capitol grounds open to visitors has emerged as

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 62 of 95

one of the more daunting, wrenching questions from deadly riot. Not since the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, has security been so elevated, and the next steps so uncertain, for the Capitol complex.

Five people died after the mob stormed the building trying to stop Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's election over Republican Donald Trump. The former president was impeached by the House, and acquitted by the Senate, for inciting the insurrection.

The U.S. Capitol Police has asked for the fencing and the National Guard to remain, for now.

Police officers are working grueling round-the-clock overtime shifts after being overrun that day, engaging at times in hand-to-hand combat with rioters outfitted in combat gear and armed with bats, poles and other weaponry. One woman was shot and killed by police and an officer died later, among scores of police injured in what officials have said appeared to be a planned and coordinated assault.

With warnings of another attack in early March by pro-Trump militants and threats on lawmakers that have nearly doubled since the start of 2021, the police, the Pentagon and lawmakers themselves are wrestling with how best to secure what has been a sprawling campus mostly open to visiting tourists and neighborhood dog walkers alike.

"The attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6th forever changed how we look at the 'People's House,'" acting Capitol Police Chief Yogananda Pittman said in written testimony before Congress in February.

She said that even before the 9/11 attacks, security experts, including former chiefs of police, argued that more needed to be done to protect the Capitol complex. "The Capitol's security infrastructure must change," Pittman testified.

While some lawmakers say privately they appreciate the heightened security, taking down the protective perimeter and easing the National Guard's presence is the one issue that appears to be uniting both Democrats and Republicans in the toxic political environment on Capitol Hill since the deadly riot.

One option that has emerged is for a mobile, retractable barrier that could be put up as needed.

"What we have now, that's just unacceptable to me," Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the Democratic majority whip, told reporters. "It's just ghastly, it's an embarrassment. If there's a better way to protect us, I want to see it. I want to work to get it."

Lawmakers described their unease at arriving for work each day in what can feel like a war zone. The absence of tourists snapping photos of the Capitol dome or constituents meeting with representatives is an emotional loss on top of COVID-19 restrictions, they said. The security perimeter extends far beyond the Capitol itself through neighboring parks and office buildings.

The Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, compared it to a combat zone in Afghanistan.

"I think we are way overreacting," he said at a press conference.

As of Friday there were about 4,300 Guard troops in the city. This week, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin formally approved the Capitol Police request to extend the deployment of nearly 2,300 Guard members for about two more months.

The pushback from Capitol Hill was immediate and bipartisan.

Top Republican senators on the Senate Armed Services, Homeland Security, Intelligence and other committees downplayed the potential threats to the Capitol, especially weighed against the drain on National Guard troops serving far from their homes.

"Our National Guard troops, who serve with great honor and distinction, are not law enforcement officers, and we will not abide the continued militarization of Capitol complex security," wrote Sens. James Inhofe of Oklahoma, Rob Portman of Ohio, Marco Rubio of Florida and others.

"We are deeply troubled by the current level of security around the United States Capitol," wrote the House Armed Services Committee's Democratic Chairman Adam Smith of Washington and Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the top Republican in a joint statement.

They said while there is no doubt "some level" of support from the National Guard should remain in the region to respond to threats, "the present security posture is not warranted at this time."

Still, other lawmakers say privately they are comfortable keeping security high, for now, as the country tries to ease back to a sense of normalcy after the devastating attack on the seat of government.

A sweeping security review conducted in the aftermath of the riot by a task force led by retired Army Lt.

Gen. Russel Honoré recommended eventually replacing the barrier with mobile fencing and “an integrated, retractable fencing system” that could be deployed as needed.

Coupled with the hiring of 350 additional officers, the report also recommends establishing a permanent “quick response force” within the Capitol Police but also at the National Guard in D.C. for emergencies. There was a marked delay in sending the Guard to the Capitol on Jan. 6.

A supplemental spending request for security is expected to be considered by Congress in April.

Children packed into Border Patrol tent for days on end

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — Hundreds of immigrant children and teenagers have been detained at a Border Patrol tent facility in packed conditions, with some sleeping on the floor because there aren't enough mats, according to nonprofit lawyers who conduct oversight of immigrant detention centers.

The lawyers interviewed more than a dozen children Thursday in Donna, Texas, where the Border Patrol is holding more than 1,000 people. Some of the youths told the lawyers they had been at the facility for a week or longer, despite the agency's three-day limit for detaining children. Many said they haven't been allowed to phone their parents or other relatives who may be wondering where they are.

Despite concerns about the coronavirus, the children are kept so closely together that they can touch the person next to them, the lawyers said. Some have to wait five days or more to shower, and there isn't always soap available, just shampoo, according to the lawyers.

President Joe Biden's administration denied the lawyers access to the tent facility. During the administration of former President Donald Trump, attorney visits to Border Patrol stations revealed severe problems, including dozens of children held at one rural station without adequate food, water, or soap.

“It is pretty surprising that the administration talks about the importance of transparency and then won't let the attorneys for children set eyes on where they're staying,” said Leecia Welch of the National Center for Youth Law, one of the lawyers. “I find that very disappointing.”

Although none of the children reported situations as severe as during the Trump era, Welch said the lawyers “weren't able to lay eyes on any of it to see for ourselves, so we're just piecing together what they said.”

A 1997 court settlement known as the Flores agreement sets standards for government detention of immigrant children. Lawyers are entitled under Flores to conduct oversight of child detention. The Justice Department declined to comment Thursday on why the lawyers were denied access. The Biden administration has not responded to several requests from The Associated Press seeking access to the tent.

Government figures show a growing crisis as hundreds of children cross the border daily and are taken into custody. The Border Patrol currently has a record high of more than 3,000 children in detention, according to government data obtained by AP. That figure is rising almost daily.

More children are waiting longer in Border Patrol custody because long-term facilities operated by U.S. Health and Human Services have next to no capacity. Hundreds of children are being apprehended daily at far higher rates than HHS is releasing them to parents or sponsors. HHS currently takes an average of 37 days to release a child.

Biden has stopped the Trump-era practice of expelling immigrant children who cross the border alone, but maintained expulsions of immigrant families and single adults. While his administration has tried to deter immigrants from entering the U.S., many believe they have a better chance now. There have also been growing reports of parents sending their children across the border alone while they remain in Mexico or Central America.

Most Border Patrol stations were designed for short-term detention of adults, with cold, concrete cells with the lights always on. The Donna tent has clear partitions and mats for sleeping, according to images the government has released.

Six children died after being detained by border agents during the Trump administration. One died of the flu at the Border Patrol station in Weslaco, Texas, where minors are currently being held.

HHS has told its contractors to lift capacity restrictions enacted during the pandemic and expedite releases by paying for children's airfare instead of charging sponsors.

But experts and lawyers who work with children say the government can do more.

While the majority of youths detained by the government are teenagers, both Border Patrol and HHS are detaining very young children who were in some cases separated from adult caretakers.

The Associated Press this week interviewed the mother of one 4-year-old girl from Guatemala who crossed the border March 5 with her aunt. Border authorities expelled the aunt and labeled the girl unaccompanied by a parent, placing her in the Donna tent.

The girl's parents live in Maryland. Her mother told the AP that she didn't know their daughter's whereabouts until Sunday and didn't speak to her until Monday. According to the mother, the girl was unable to speak in a nearly 20-minute phone call. The AP is not identifying the girl or her mother to protect the child's privacy.

"She cried as if something was going on, as if she was scared," the mother said this week. "I started crying when I heard her that way. It didn't seem right to me."

The parents asked for their daughter to be released to them directly but on Monday she was sent from South Texas to foster care in Michigan.

When she spoke to her mother Tuesday morning, the girl was no longer crying but still wasn't able to speak.

"She didn't say anything," she said. "I tried everything I could, but nothing."

Both Homeland Security and HHS initially said they could not directly release the child to her mother. But after the family's lawyers threatened to sue and following inquiries from AP, the government notified the girl's mother Wednesday that they would expedite her release.

Amy Maldonado, a lawyer for the family, noted that the government's often cumbersome processes and the inadequate spaces to hold children at the border predate the Biden administration.

"I don't hold them accountable for the full history," she said. "But this kid could have been released to her mom, and that is on this administration."

Associated Press journalist Colleen Long in Washington contributed to this report.

Floyd family agrees to \$27M settlement amidst ex-cop's trial

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The city of Minneapolis on Friday agreed to pay \$27 million to settle a civil lawsuit from George Floyd's family over the Black man's death in police custody, as jury selection continued in a former officer's murder trial.

Council members met privately to discuss the settlement, then returned to public session for a unanimous vote in support of the massive payout. It easily surpassed the \$20 million the city approved two years ago to the family of a white woman killed by a police officer.

Floyd family attorney Ben Crump called it the largest pretrial settlement ever for a civil rights claim, and thanked city leaders for "showing you care about George Floyd."

"It's going to be a long journey to justice. This is just one step on the journey to justice," Crump said. "This makes a statement that George Floyd deserved better than what we witnessed on May 25, 2020, that George Floyd's life mattered, and that by extension, Black lives matter."

"Even though my brother is not here, he's here with me in my heart," Philonise Floyd said. "If I could get him back, I would give all this back."

L. Chris Stewart, another attorney who worked with the family, said the size of the settlement "changes evaluations and civil rights for a Black person when they die."

"And what happens is that trickles down to decisions in the communities across this country. When there is a city council or a mayor deciding, 'Oh, should we get rid of no-knock warrants, should we get rid of chokeholds, do we want to change these policies?' They have 27 million reasons now why they should.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 65 of 95

And that will make decisions happen. That will make accountability happen.”

The settlement includes \$500,000 for the south Minneapolis neighborhood that includes the 38th and Chicago intersection that has been blocked by barricades since his death, with a massive metal sculpture and murals in his honor. The city didn't immediately say how that money would be spent.

Floyd was declared dead on May 25 after Derek Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against his neck for about nine minutes. Floyd's death sparked sometimes violent protests in Minneapolis and beyond and led to a national reckoning on racial justice.

City Council President Lisa Bender choked up as she addressed a news conference about the settlement, saying she knew “no amount of money” could bring Floyd back.

“I just want you to know how deeply we are with you,” she said to Floyd's family members.

Floyd's family filed the federal civil rights lawsuit in July against the city, Chauvin and three other fired officers charged in his death. It alleged the officers violated Floyd's rights when they restrained him, and that the city allowed a culture of excessive force, racism and impunity to flourish in its police force.

In 2019, Minneapolis agreed to pay \$20 million to the family of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, an unarmed woman who was shot by an officer after she called 911 to report hearing a possible crime happening behind her home, to settle her family's civil rights lawsuit. Damond was white.

It wasn't immediately clear how the settlement might affect the trial or the jury now being seated to hear it. Crump said the settlement is a way “to help shape what justice looks like” rather than waiting for a result from a legal system that many Blacks distrust.

“The one thing we know as Black people ... is there is no guarantee that a police officer will be convicted for killing a Black person unjustly in our country,” Crump said. “That's what history has taught us.”

Stewart said the civil case “doesn't have anything to do with” the trial.

“Justice doesn't really wait,” he said. “It happens when it happens and it happened today.”

Ted Sampsell-Jones, a criminal law expert at the Mitchell Hamline School of Law, said it's additional pretrial publicity that is “bad for the defense” and could lead some jurors to think guilt has already been decided.

“However, this ultimately should not affect the criminal case,” Sampsell-Jones said. “There has already been a ton of pretrial publicity -- some of it bad for the prosecution, some of it bad for the defense. All we can do is hope that the jurors will follow Judge Cahill's instructions and decide the case based solely on the evidence presented at trial.”

Crump and others at the news conference called for any protests during Chauvin's trial to be peaceful. Minneapolis is on edge for potential violence if Chauvin is acquitted, with concrete barriers, fencing and barbed wire encircling the courthouse and the National Guard already mobilized.

Meanwhile, another potential juror was dismissed Friday after she acknowledged having a negative view of the defendant.

The woman, a recent college graduate, said she had seen bystander video of Floyd's arrest and closely read news coverage of the case. In response to a jury pool questionnaire, she said she had a “somewhat negative” view of Chauvin and that she thought he held his knee to Floyd's neck for too long.

“I could only watch part of the video, and from what I saw as a human, I, that did not give me a good impression,” she said. She said she did not watch the bystander video in its entirety because “I just couldn't watch it anymore.”

The woman repeatedly said she could put aside her opinions and decide the case on the facts, but Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson nonetheless used one of his 15 challenges to dismiss her.

With jury selection in its fourth day, seven people have been seated. Cahill has set aside three weeks for jury selection, with opening statements no sooner than March 29.

Potential jurors' identities are being protected and they are not shown on livestreamed video of the proceedings.

Chauvin and three other officers were fired. The others face an August trial on aiding and abetting charges. The defense hasn't said whether Chauvin will testify in his own defense.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

More than 1,000 Guard troops now leaving DC; others stay on

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — More than 1,000 National Guard members will be leaving Washington, D.C. over the next few days, but several thousand others will stay on for days or weeks, in the ongoing mission to provide security for the U.S. Capitol that has drawn criticism from lawmakers and reluctance from the military.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin earlier this week approved the Capitol Police request to extend the deployment of nearly 2,300 Guard members for about two more months because possible threats of violence remain.

According to the National Guard, troops from some states will stay in Washington for the entire two months. Others will return home but will be replaced by service members from the same state. But some states, such as Michigan, will no longer participate in the mission.

The Capitol Police request for an extension triggered a lengthy debate in the Pentagon, as Army and Guard officials questioned the need, and wanted to know if all other options had been exhausted. Military leaders were also concerned because governors initially expressed reluctance to have their troops stay in the city.

Democratic Gov. Gretchen Whitmer made it clear that she did “not have any intention of agreeing to an extension of this deployment.” Some of the roughly 1,000 Michigan troops that have been in Washington have gone home, and others are leaving this weekend.

Darla Torres, spokeswoman for the National Guard Bureau, said that 11 states have agreed to provide troops for the two-month mission, including three — New Jersey, Washington and Wisconsin — that don’t currently have Guard forces in the city. The other eight — Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Missouri and Ohio — have forces already on Capitol Hill and have agreed to continue. Troops from the District of Columbia Guard will continue in the security mission.

As of Friday there were about 4,300 Guard troops in the city. Military officials are scrambling to juggle the logistical challenge of getting several thousand home over the next two weeks, while others flow in.

The continued deployment drew some criticism from Capitol Hill, where lawmakers expressed frustration at tall black fencing around the building and the troops on the streets, comparing it all to a walled city. But it also underscores concerns about security at the Capitol, two months after rioters breached the building in an attack that left five people dead.

Washington Democratic Rep. Adam Smith, who is chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Alabama, the ranking Republican, said that while some level of support from the Guard is needed, they expressed concerns about the deployment’s long-term effects.

“We cannot ignore the financial costs associated with this prolonged deployment, nor can we turn a blind eye to the effects it will soon have on the National Guard’s overall readiness,” they said in a statement. “It’s time for us to review what level of security is required, so they can return home to their families and communities.”

Many states have been using National Guard to help with COVID-19 vaccinations and other coronavirus missions.

The National Guard Association of the United States also questioned the extension, noting that it was difficult for Guard leaders to find enough volunteers for the mission.

“National Guard soldiers and airmen here in Washington need to return home to their families, civilian employers and regular military obligations,” said Maj. Gen. Michael McGuire, the NGAUS chairman, and retired Brig. Gen. J. Roy Robinson, the NGAUS president. “They have completed their mission. They have made us all proud. It’s time for local law enforcement to take it from here.”

Auto industry urges emissions deal weaker than Obama’s

By HOPE YEN and TOM KRISHER Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 67 of 95

WASHINGTON (AP) — A coalition of automakers has told the Biden administration it would agree to raise mileage standards to reduce tailpipe emissions but with tradeoffs and at rates lower than those brokered by California with five other car manufacturers.

If agreed to, the proposal could give President Joe Biden a quick win by securing cuts in greenhouse gas emissions rather than waiting months, if not years, to legally undo a giant rollback approved when Donald Trump was president.

But environmental groups say the proposal doesn't go far enough to ward off the damaging effects of climate change and automakers are rejecting tougher Obama-era standards that they have the technology to meet.

It also could result in two different sets of standards, one for California and the states that follow its rules, and another for the rest of the country. This could drive up vehicle prices.

Asked Friday about the proposal, the White House said discussions with the auto industry on a fuel emissions standard were still early. It declined to comment on whether the administration would accept an agreement that falls below the California deal or Obama-era standards, stressing that tough requirements would be needed to get popular and less-efficient SUVs off the road.

Under the plan, automakers would agree to stricter standards in exchange for a "multiplier" that would give them additional credit toward meeting the standards if they sell more electric vehicles, three people with knowledge of the talks said. The deal would incentivize automakers to get more electric vehicles on the road, thereby reducing pollution, said the people, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to reveal internal negotiations.

The proposal would raise mileage and reduce greenhouse gas emissions at a rate between Trump's rollback and standards brokered by California in a 2019 agreement with five automakers — Ford, Honda, BMW, Volkswagen and Volvo — that is now followed by 13 states.

Most other automakers, including General Motors, Toyota and Fiat Chrysler (now Stellantis) backed Trump's rollback. They're among the automakers putting forward the new proposal. The companies had no official comment.

The Trump rollback increased mileage requirements by 1.5% per year from the 2021 through 2026 model years. The California deal has 3.7% annual increases, while the Obama standards were about 5% annually.

Under the Obama-era standards, automakers got double credit for fully electric vehicles toward meeting their fuel economy and pollution requirements. That "multiplier" was removed in the Trump rollback.

The Trump administration had blocked California's legal authority to set its own standards under the Clean Air Act. The Biden administration is expected to take steps next month to undo that with a rule that environmental groups hope will pressure automakers to agree to higher standards.

A spokesman for the California Air Resources Board, which regulates pollution, wouldn't comment on the automakers' proposal but said the agency "continues to advocate for the most rigorous vehicle standards possible."

Delaware Sen. Tom Carper, chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee who has met with Biden over efficiency and vehicle emission standards, has said the California agreement is a useful starting point that he believes all automakers should join as the two sides negotiate longer-term standards to go beyond model year 2026 to fulfill the goals of the Paris climate agreement.

Following the roadmap of GM's recently announced goal of making all passenger vehicles electric by 2035, the coalition of automakers is pledging efforts to increase production of electric vehicles and hybrids, the people said.

Automakers argue that it's difficult to reach stricter standards because of continuing consumer demand for less-efficient SUVs and trucks, the top-selling vehicles in the country. By promoting more sales of zero-emission electric vehicles, which accounted for less than 2% of U.S. new vehicle sales last year, the United States can achieve greater emissions reductions down the road.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, whose department is overseeing a rewrite of Trump anti-pollution rules along with the Environmental Protection Agency, has signaled openness to granting industry more credits for EV development.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 68 of 95

The automakers' proposal is being presented in hopes of having a preliminary deal by Earth Day, April 22, when the administration is expected to release broader emissions targets at a U.S.-hosted climate summit. It highlights the obstacles ahead for Biden, who during the campaign promised "ambitious" fuel economy standards that also support job creation. Transportation emissions is the single biggest U.S. contributor to climate change.

The Alliance for Auto Innovation, a large industry trade group, deferred to a February statement saying it wants to work with the administration on making fuel economy improvements soon, while strengthening the economy and benefitting consumers.

The Trump rollback of the Obama-era standards would require a projected 29 miles per gallon in "real world" stop and start driving by 2026. That's well below the requirements of the Obama administration rules that would have increased it to 37 mpg.

The California deal with Ford and the other automakers has vehicles getting about 33 mpg on average, according to environmental groups, after accounting for credits for electric vehicles.

Biden has said he would forcefully address climate change by returning to the Obama-era standards.

"When the previous administration reversed the Obama-Biden vehicle standard and picked Big Oil companies over American workers, the Biden-Harris administration will not only bring those standards back, we'll set new, ambitious ones that our workers are ready to meet," Biden said in late January.

Biden also has made boosting electric vehicles a top priority. He has pledged billions of dollars as part of an upcoming infrastructure and climate spending package to build 550,000 charging stations over the next decade to support such vehicles.

In a letter to the White House late last month, two dozen environmental and green-friendly groups including the Sierra Club and Natural Resources Defense Council urged acceptance of nothing less than the Obama standards as part of a longer-term path to make all new cars and light-duty trucks zero-emission by 2035. They described credits granted to automakers for electric vehicles as "loopholes" that do little to reduce emissions in the short term.

"Not only are the automakers rejecting standards they agreed to 10 years ago, they are even refusing a weaker deal that five carmakers cut with California," said Dan Becker, a director at the Center for Biological Diversity. "The administration should follow the science. We need to have much stronger national rules so we're not guilty of looking global warming in the eye and blinking."

Krisher reported from Detroit. AP writers Kathleen Ronayne in Sacramento, California, and Matthew Daly in Washington contributed to this report.

'Obamacare' boost easy for some, but others face paperwork

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some consumers will find it quick and easy to take advantage of generous health insurance subsidies in the new COVID relief package, but others face extra paperwork and a wait, federal officials said Friday.

The \$1.9 trillion legislation signed by President Joe Biden on Thursday includes among its dozens of provisions the biggest expansion of health insurance tax credits under the Affordable Care Act in a decade. It cements the place of the Obama-era law among government health insurance programs, after four years of fruitless efforts by former President Donald Trump to overturn it.

Biden's "Obamacare" expansion reduces costs for new customers, for those already enrolled in the program, for people who experience unemployment this year, and it may also help many whose incomes were too high to previously qualify for subsidies.

But it affects people in each of those groups in a different way, according to a summary released by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, or CMS. Here's a quick overview:

— Starting April 1, people who sign up at HealthCare.gov under a special enrollment period Biden opened up will automatically get the benefit of the higher subsidies authorized by Congress. The extra

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 69 of 95

taxpayer-provided assistance reduces net costs by an average of \$50 per person per month, CMS said. Think of it as a discount. The special sign-up period ends May 15.

— More than 9 million already enrolled and receiving subsidies for their private health insurance plans also stand to benefit from the boost in aid. But they will have to go back to HealthCare.gov after Apr. 1 to get their discounts. Or they could wait until tax time next year to claim the richer tax credit owed them under the legislation. A CMS official said the agency is working to see if it can automatically provide current customers with their savings later this year.

— People who experience a spell of unemployment this year are entitled to enroll in a standard HealthCare.gov plan at no cost to them. But officials said figuring out how to connect the health insurance program with unemployment assistance databases is going to take time. Nonetheless, CMS is urging unemployed people to enroll for health care now. They would be able to claim their full subsidies later.

— People who previously made too much to get financial help under the “Obamacare” limits have some math to do. Congress not only increased the amount of aid, but changed the income formula so more people in the solid middle class can qualify. However, they’ll have to have a health plan that meets the standards in the Obama health law. That means many may have to switch coverage.

“Changing anything in the health care system takes a lot of time and a lot of effort,” said industry analyst Chris Sloan of the consulting firm Avalere Health.

It’s disappointing that existing customers will have to take extra steps to claim their enhanced subsidies, he added.

“The goal is to stabilize coverage today in the middle of a pandemic, not provide a tax benefit in 2022,” said Sloan, who said he hopes techies at CMS and their health insurance counterparts find a way to automatically provide the savings in coming months.

HealthCare.gov serves 36 states, while others run their own health insurance markets. So different timetables are possible for the rollout of the new benefits.

Despite all the potential complexities, supporters of the Affordable Care Act say it’s notable that the government will start providing consumers the benefits of Biden’s expansion only a few weeks after the president signed the bill.

“I think it’s great that they are going to be able to implement it for people newly coming in as of Apr. 1,” said Judy Solomon of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which advocates on behalf of low-income people.

EXPLAINER: What’s this craze for ‘NFTs’ all about, anyway?

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — A digital art piece, tweaked using cryptocurrency technology to make it one-of-a-kind, sold at auction this week for nearly \$70 million. That transaction made global headlines and buoyed already-mushrooming interest in these kinds of digital objects — known as non-fungible tokens, or NFTs — that have captured the attention of artists and collectors alike.

A NON-WHAT TOKEN?

In economics jargon, a fungible token is an asset that can be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. Think of dollars or bitcoins — each one has the exact same value and can be traded freely. A non-fungible object, by contrast, has its own distinct value, like an old house or a classic car.

Cross this notion with cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain and you get NFTs. These are effectively digital certificates of authenticity that can be attached to digital art or, well, pretty much anything else that comes in digital form — audio files, video clips, animated stickers, this article you’re reading.

NFTs confirm an item’s ownership by recording the details on a digital ledger known as a blockchain, which is public and stored on computers across the internet, making it effectively impossible to lose or destroy.

At the moment, these tokens are white-hot in the collecting world, where they’re being used to solve a problem central to digital collectibles: how to claim ownership of something that can be easily and endlessly duplicated.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 70 of 95

I STILL DON'T GET IT. CAN'T ANYONE JUST COPY DIGITAL STUFF OFF THE INTERNET?

Sure, anyone can download a copy of Beeple's art from his social media feed, print it out, and hang it on the wall. Just like you can take a photo of the Mona Lisa in the Louvre or buy a print from the museum gift shop. But that doesn't mean you own those original artworks.

One purpose of NFTs is that they can be used to trace an object's digital provenance, allowing a select few to prove ownership. In the broader picture, it's a way to create scarcity -- albeit artificial -- so that you can sell something for higher prices thanks to its scarcity.

"All the time, money and effort you spend in your digital life, you can create value for that," said Chicago fund manager Andrew Steinwold, who started an NFT fund in 2019. "You have property rights in the physical world. Why don't we have property rights in the digital world?"

Some NFT issuers give full copyrights to the buyer, though others do not.

SO WHAT'S A BEEPLE?

Beeple is an American digital artist based in South Carolina whose real name is Mike Winkelmann. He's been creating digital sketches using 3D tools on a daily basis for the past 13 years. Auction house Christie's calls his work "abstract, fantastical, grotesque or absurd." He has 1.9 million followers on Instagram.

In December, the first extensive auction of his art brought in \$3.5 million, an eye-catching amount that was surpassed by this week's record-shattering sale of his collage "Everydays: The First 5,000 Days" for nearly \$70 million, paid in a digital currency known as Ethereum.

SO WHO ELSE IS SELLING NFTS?

William Shatner of "Star Trek" fame sold 90,000 virtual trading cards last year for \$1 each. Electronic musician Grimes sold \$6 million worth of her digital art last month, including a video clip featuring winged cherubs floating in pastel dreamscapes that went for \$389,000. Clips of NBA star LeBron James dunking are selling for as much as \$225,000. Actress Lindsey Lohan sold an image of her face. You can also buy virtual land in video games and meme characters like Nyan Cat.

Digital artist Anne Spalter started out as an NFT skeptic but has now sold multiple artworks using the tokens. The latest was a video called "Dark Castles" -- of mysteriously distorted castles generated by artificial intelligence technology -- that sold for \$2,752.

"NFTs have opened up art to a whole bunch of people who never would have gone to a gallery in New York," said Spalter, who pioneered digital fine arts courses at Brown University and the Rhode Island School of Design in the 1990s. "They're investors, they're tech entrepreneurs, they're in that world."

BUT WHO WOULD SPEND \$70 MILLION ON ONE?

Christie's on Friday identified the buyer of Beeple's work as the financier of a digital art fund who goes by the pseudonym Metakovan, an announcement that could fuel concerns of a bubble in the cryptocurrency art market. The buyer founded Metapurse, described as the world's largest NFT fund, which is likely to benefit from the heightened attention.

The British auction house said the purchase makes Beeple's piece the third-most valuable artwork ever sold by a living artist, behind works by Jeff Koons and David Hockney.

Spalter said she expects this bubble to pop, though she still believes NFTs hold promise for artists as a way to reduce fraud and misattribution of works.

"I'm still mystified by the prices and how high they are," she said. "I think there will be a correction."

AP technology writer Matt O'Brien contributed to this report from Providence, Rhode Island. For all of AP's tech coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/apf-technology>

COVID-19 deaths falling but Americans 'must remain vigilant'

By MARION RENAULT Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. deaths from COVID-19 are falling again as the nation continues to recover from the devastating winter surge, a trend that experts are cautiously hopeful will accelerate as more vulnerable people are vaccinated.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 71 of 95

While new coronavirus infections and hospitalizations have plummeted, the decline in deaths from a January peak of about 4,500 hasn't been quite as steep. But, now, after weeks of hovering around 2,000 daily deaths, that figure has dropped to about 1,400 U.S. lives lost each day to coronavirus.

"I am encouraged by these data but we must remain vigilant," Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said at Friday's White House briefing.

Public health experts say it's too soon to say, definitively, what's driving declines since the surge — but they suspect a post-holiday drop in traveling and indoor gatherings, widespread mask wearing and the vaccine rollout have all contributed.

"We're moving in the right direction," said Harvard Medical School researcher Jagpreet Chhatwal. "I think a message of optimism is fair."

Walensky and others worry that a pandemic-weary public will let down its guard too soon. And they're monitoring the spread of worrisome new versions of the virus.

"We're all desperate to get done with this," said Jeff Shaman, who studies infectious disease at Columbia University. "We're not in a place where it's safe as of yet."

Health care workers say they've seen it happen before — a crushing wave of illness and death, momentary relief from a drop in COVID-19 cases, and then, another deadly surge. About 531,000 Americans have died since the pandemic began a year ago.

"Every time you thought you had an end, the number of cases went up," said Dr. Mark Rosenberg, head of emergency medicine at St. Joseph's Health in Paterson, New Jersey.

For now, most forecasts show coronavirus deaths falling further in coming weeks as more people get vaccines. More than 100 million doses have been given out since December, and the pace is picking up.

"We expect it to continue to drive those deaths down even more," said Johns Hopkins infectious disease expert Justin Lessler.

As of this week, 62% of those 65 and older have gotten at least one dose, according to the CDC. That's the age group that's been hit the hardest and still accounts for the vast majority of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S.

Increasingly better treatments for severe COVID-19 will also continue to help, doctors say.

"All of these things are coming together to put a dent in the problem," said Dr. Lewis Nelson, an emergency medicine specialist at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School.

The tally of coronavirus deaths often lags behind new infections and hospitalizations, since it can take a long time for someone to become seriously ill and die after contracting the virus. It can also take weeks for deaths to be added to the national count.

"There's sort of a longer tail, sadly, on death and dying from COVID-19," said Boston College public health expert Dr. Philip J. Landrigan.

That's what happened in the case of Teresa Ciappa, 73, of Amherst, New York, who developed a terrible cough and fever around Thanksgiving. She was admitted to the hospital soon after and died in early January of complications from COVID-19.

"Week after week she just declined and declined," said her daughter, Michelle Ciappa, who lives in Columbus, Ohio.

Her family was there when she was taken off of a ventilator.

"We watched her take her last breath and that was it," Michelle Ciappa said. "I wish people would be patient and take this more seriously."

If states continue lifting restrictions, health experts warn, we could see another deadly wave of illnesses.

On Monday, Wyoming became the latest state in a growing list — including Texas, Mississippi, North Dakota, Iowa, Montana and Alabama — that has pulled mask requirements or plan to do so soon. Governors across the country have also eased restrictions on how many customers can be allowed in bars, restaurants, gyms and movie theaters.

"They're not taking a slow measured approach. They're flipping a switch," Lessler said. "There is the very real possibility of big resurgences."

Experts also worry about unchecked spread of mutated versions of the coronavirus that spread easier and could blunt the effectiveness of certain treatments or vaccines.

"It's still a race against time," said Jaline Gerardin, who studies COVID-19 trends at Northwestern University. "The fear is we won't catch something when we should."

Rosenberg, the ER doctor, said he hopes the public will be encouraged by the pandemic's downward trend to keep wearing masks, washing their hands and staying a safe distance from others.

"We know what worked," he said. "If we're saying we're in the last phase of the battle, don't put your weapons away yet."

AP writers Thalia Beaty in New York and John Seewer in Toledo, Ohio, contributed to this report.

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.

Gunmen abduct 39 students from school in northwest Nigeria

By SAM OLUKOYA Associated Press

LAGOS, Nigeria (AP) — Gunmen have attacked a school in northwestern Nigeria and kidnapped 39 students just weeks after a similar mass abduction in the region, authorities said Friday.

The latest kidnapping took place late Thursday night at the Federal College of Forestry Mechanization, Afaka, in the Igabi local government area of Kaduna state, police said.

"The number of missing students is now confirmed to be 39, comprising 23 females and 16 males," said Samuel Aruwan, Commissioner for Kaduna State Ministry of Internal Security and Home Affairs, said in a statement. Several school staff were also kidnapped, he added.

Aruwan said the attack was carried out by a large group of "armed bandits," adding that the military engaged the attackers and were able to take 180 staff and students to safety.

An unspecified number of the students were injured and are receiving medical attention at a military facility. Security forces "are conducting an operation to track the missing students," Aruwan said.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres strongly condemned the abduction and called for "the immediate and unconditional release of those students that remain in captivity," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

The U.N. chief urged authorities to ensure that schools "remain a safe space for children to learn without fear of violence or kidnapping or any other attacks on them," Dujarric said.

Nigerian authorities also said that "bandits" were behind the earlier abduction of 279 schoolgirls late last month in the northwest, referring to the groups of armed men who kidnap for money or to press for the release of jailed members of their groups. Those girls were later freed following negotiations with the government, and it is not known whether a ransom was paid.

The Islamic extremist group Boko Haram is also known to kidnap young women and force them into marriage, most notably in the 2014 attack on the Chibok secondary school in Borno state. That mass abduction sparked an international outcry and prompted the #BringBackOurGirls campaign. Of the 276 girls taken, more than 100 are still missing nearly seven years later.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

House members were not given bonuses in \$1.9T COVID bill

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 73 of 95

CLAIM: The \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill awards a \$25 million bonus to members of the House of Representatives.

THE FACTS: The "American Rescue Plan Act of 2021," as the bill is titled, contains no allocation for bonuses or raises for House or Senate members. A Facebook post that circulated around the approval of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill Wednesday promoted the false information, stating: "Did you know? Line 17 of the \$1.9 TRILLION CV #Stimulus awards a \$25 MILLION BONUS to House Reps?" It is not clear what "Line 17" means in the post since there's a line 17 on nearly every page of the 628-page bill. There are several passages that cite \$25 million in funding, but no mention of congressional pay raises or bonuses. The sweeping package, approved by a 220-211 party-line vote, would give most Americans \$1,400 checks and billions of dollars would be directed to schools, state and local governments and businesses. "That claim is false. In fact, there is no funding for the House of Representatives or Senate in the bill at all," Evan Hollander, communications director for the House Appropriations Committee, confirmed to The Associated Press in an email. The AP knocked down a similar false claim in March 2020 when a \$2.2 trillion rescue package was passed.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

Social media posts misrepresent bill expanding background checks for firearms

CLAIM: Proposed federal gun legislation expanding background checks for firearms would create a "national registration of firearms" and put gun owners in jail for transferring or handing their gun to someone, even if they are in a dangerous situation.

THE FACTS: The bill, HR 8, prohibits using the legislation to establish a national firearms registry and includes exceptions that allow temporary transfers of firearms between family members, transfers between people for self-defense and for use at a shooting range. The bill, requiring background checks on all gun sales, passed the House this week after stalling in the Senate about two years ago. Democratic Rep. Mike Thompson of California, who chairs the congressional task force on gun violence prevention, is the primary sponsor of the bill. Advocates say the legislation is intended to curb gun violence and keep guns out of the hands of people who are barred from owning firearms. Background checks are in place preventing people with criminal records from purchasing a firearm, but there are loopholes where people can buy guns through private sales, often called a "gun show loophole," said Jake Charles, executive director at the Center for Firearms Law at the Duke University School of Law. Multiple social media posts described the legislation inaccurately, calling it a gun registration bill. Charles said that description is "completely false." Not only does federal law prohibit a national gun registry, the bill clearly states: "Nothing in this Act, or any amendment made by this Act, shall be construed to authorize the establishment, directly or indirectly, of a national firearms registry." One false Facebook post claims: "If enforced to the letter, H.R. 8 could put millions of gun owners in prison by outlawing the transfer of any firearm without a proper Brady Check. The term 'transfer' is nowhere defined, but it's clear from the bill that handing your gun to a neighbor for as little as even one second counts as a 'transfer.' The bill claims to offer some so-called 'exceptions,'" the post continues, "but these will be practically useless to gun owners. For example, if you hand (or 'transfer') a firearm to a friend because you hear a noise in your house in the middle of the night -- and it turns out to be a false alarm -- you're a criminal. Under H.R. 8, since every gun transfer will go through a dealer, every gun owner will have a 4473, setting the stage for a national gun registry." Alex Macfarlane, a spokesperson for Thompson, said several issues raised in the post were incorrect. "H.R. 8 does NOT require background checks to be conducted when a firearm is transferred to a family member," Macfarlane said in an email. "The bill also includes a number of exemptions that would allow the temporary transfer of a gun under a variety of circumstances and purposes including: preventing imminent death or great bodily harm, or activities like hunting, going to a shooting range, or while in the presence of the gun owner."

— Arijeta Lajka

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 74 of 95

Posts misrepresent CDC study on mask mandates

CLAIM: A new study from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that mask mandates have a negligible impact on coronavirus numbers.

AP'S ASSESSMENT: The study found that mask mandates were associated with statistically significant decreases in county-level daily COVID-19 case and death growth rates. Social media users and conservative websites this week shared a recent report from the CDC with false claims that it shows mask mandates don't stem the spread of the coronavirus. "Here is your proof from the CDC itself that masks don't work," one Facebook user wrote. "Study released on Friday says masks resulted in only 1-2% spread reduction over 100 days. Basically useless." The conservative television network One America News reported that the study showed masks have "negligible impact" and mask mandates "do not make any statistical difference." Those claims distort the findings, according to CDC scientist Gery Guy Jr., the study's lead author. While the changes in daily COVID-19 case and death growth rates in the report may seem small, they were statistically significant, he said. The CDC researchers examined U.S. counties placed under state-issued mask mandates, looking at data from March through December of last year. They found that within the first 20 days of implementation, mask mandates were associated with a 0.5 percentage point decrease in daily COVID-19 case growth rates. As time went on, reductions in growth rates increased to nearly 2 percentage points. Those changes in daily growth rates may sound small, but their magnitude adds up quickly, Guy said. "Each day that growth rate is going down, the cumulative effect — in terms of cases and deaths — adds up to be quite substantial," Guy told the AP in a previous report. Several social media posts also claimed that the results of the study were "inside the margin for statistical error" and therefore not significant. That's false, according to Guy. He said those social media users may have misunderstood a sentence in the study that read, "Daily case and death growth rates before implementation of mask mandates were not statistically different from the reference period." The sentence refers to the period before mask mandates were implemented, not after. Guy said the research team examined this period to help rule out that there was not already a trend in place before mask mandates began.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in Seattle contributed this report.

Apes in San Diego received COVID-19 animal vaccine, not human doses

CLAIM: Great apes at the San Diego Zoo are taking doses of the coronavirus vaccine that could have been used for veterans and senior citizens.

THE FACTS: The apes received an experimental animal vaccine and did not take any doses meant for humans. As the United States attempts to inoculate its population against the coronavirus as quickly as possible, social media users are falsely claiming the government prioritized apes over humans for coveted vaccine doses. "Great Apes in San Diego are getting the China Virus vaccine while veterans and senior citizens who want it aren't," wrote Charlie Kirk, founder of the conservative youth organization Turning Point USA, in a Friday tweet. "Is this what Joe Biden means when he says he has a 'plan' to manage vaccine rollout?" However, while many Americans who are eligible for a coronavirus vaccine are still waiting to get one amid delays and confusing requirements, no immunization that could have gone to humans went to a gorilla at the zoo. After a COVID-19 outbreak at the San Diego Zoo infected eight gorillas in January, zoo officials used an experimental animal vaccine to inoculate four orangutans and five bonobos. Three bonobos and a gorilla also were expected to receive the vaccine, which is experimental. The vaccine was developed by Zoetis Inc., a U.S. firm that produces medicine for animals.

— Ali Swenson

Article makes false claims about mRNA vaccines and cancer

CLAIM: A study by scientists at Sloan Kettering discovered Messenger RNA inactivates tumor suppressing proteins, meaning that COVID-19 mRNA vaccines can cause cancer.

THE FACTS: The 2018 study has no relevance to the COVID-19 mRNA vaccines. Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center confirmed the claim is false and misrepresents the findings of the study. An article in

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 75 of 95

Natural News, which is known for circulating false information about vaccines, is spreading the false claim that COVID-19 vaccines could cause cancer. The claim that vaccines contain cancer causing ingredients has long been pushed by vaccine opponents. The story misrepresents a 2018 study to make the false assertion that the mRNA COVID-19 vaccines are "cancer-driving inoculations that, once the series is complete, will cause cancer tumors in the vaccinated masses who have all rushed out to get the jab out of fear and propaganda influence." The false information was picked up by anti-vaccine websites and shared on Facebook and Reddit. "Looks like the "vaccine" is going to give people cancer according to Scientists at Sloan Kettering," one Reddit user wrote when sharing the article. But the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, which conducted the 2018 study, said there is no truth to the claim. "This article circulating is categorically false, misrepresents the findings of our study and draws incorrect conclusions about vaccine risks," the institute said in a statement. According to the institute, the 2018 study found that changes in certain mRNA molecules can inactivate tumor-suppressing proteins and thereby promote cancer -- but there is no connection to the mRNA used in COVID-19 vaccines. "It's important to note that mRNAs are a normal component of all cells and the specific ones discussed here are not involved in mRNA-based vaccines, like the one developed against SARS-CoV-2," the institute's statement said. Natural News did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

— Associated Press writer Beatrice Dupuy in New York contributed this report.

Maricopa County ballots are secured in a vault, not shredded in trash

CLAIM: Shredded ballots found in a Maricopa County dumpster ahead of a Senate audit appear to be votes from the 2020 election.

THE FACTS: Social media users are falsely suggesting ballots that Arizona state senators asked to audit were shredded in a Maricopa County Elections Department dumpster. The claim follows a legal battle between the state's Republican-controlled Senate and the Republican-dominated Maricopa County board of supervisors over whether the Senate could access the county's 2.1 million ballots and election equipment to directly audit the Nov. 3 election results. Last month, a judge ruled the Senate's subpoena to access the ballots was valid. After winning the ruling, lawyers for the Senate asked that the ballots remain in the county's possession since the Senate did not have a space for them. On March 6, Staci Burk, an Arizona woman who had previously filed an unsuccessful legal challenge to the election, posted photos of a man searching through a dumpster and a yellow plastic bag stuffed with shredded paper inside the dumpster. She also posted photos that showed the materials at a residence, and shredded papers with candidate names from the 2020 election. "Ballots shredded and in dumpsters behind the Maricopa County Ballot tabulation center. Physical evidence collected," Burk posted on Facebook. Burk did not return a request for comment. The conservative site Gateway Pundit picked up the claim, suggesting that someone had attempted to shred ballots before the Senate could audit them. "BALLOTS IN ARIZONA COUNTY FOUND SHREDDED IN DUMPSTER, DAYS BEFORE SENATE AUDIT," said one popular Facebook post. But county election officials say ballots from the election are securely preserved. Megan Gilbertson, the communications director for Maricopa County Elections Department, told The Associated Press that her office readied 2.1 million ballots to transfer to Senate custody and those ballots are still sealed and stored in the county's vault that is monitored by a surveillance camera. "Maricopa County has not, and would never destroy voted ballots until legally authorized to do so after the 24-month retention period," Gilbertson told the AP in a statement. "None of the ballots or other General election materials from the vault were in the garbage, and as a matter of business, the county can and does throw out trash." Maricopa County Recorder Stephen Richer, a Republican, told the AP in a statement: "I can say with 100% certainty that the 2.1 million legally voted ballots from the November General Election are safe and accounted for in the Elections Department vault, under 24/7 surveillance." Richer said his office shreds a variety of non-classified documents, as well as "deceased voter ballots since they could never be legally tabulated." Those ballots were turned in by the relatives of people who died and were shredded if they were not signed before the voter's death. Gilbertson confirmed to the AP that the Election Department preserves all ballots that were part of the

official canvass, including those that were ultimately disqualified.

— Associated Press writer Jude Joffe-Block in Phoenix contributed this report.

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Conflict grows between US and allies over vaccine supply

By ZEKE MILLER, RAF CASERT, and SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration is stockpiling tens of millions of doses of a COVID-19 vaccine whose authorization in the U.S. remains uncertain, frustrating U.S. allies who say those doses should be used now to save lives overseas.

The standoff is part of a growing global debate over who should have access to hundreds of millions of doses of vaccine that pharmaceutical companies are churning out in the U.S. Besides generating ill will, Biden's insistence on an excess supply for America is potentially creating new openings for geopolitical rivals Russia and China.

A two-dose vaccine from AstraZeneca has received emergency clearance from the European Union and World Health Organization but not from the U.S. Now America's partners are prodding Biden to release his supply, noting that the administration has lined up enough doses of three already-authorized vaccines to cover every American adult by the end of May and the entire U.S. population by the end of July.

AstraZeneca says that the U.S.-produced vaccines are "owned" by the U.S. government and that sending them overseas would require White House approval.

"We understand other governments may have reached out to the U.S. government about donation of AstraZeneca doses, and we've asked the U.S. government to give thoughtful consideration to these requests," Gonzalo Viña, a spokesman for AstraZeneca, said in a statement.

Even though the 27-nation European Union is eager to relaunch a more fruitful trans-Atlantic relationship after the bruising Trump presidency, the vaccine issue is proving to be a thorny topic, with some in Europe seeing it as a continuation of former President Donald Trump's "America First" focus.

EU member states' ambassadors discussed the challenge this week. The German government said on Friday it was in contact with U.S. officials about vaccine supplies but stressed that the European Commission has the lead when it comes to procuring shots for member states.

Biden and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen have directed representatives to discuss supply chains in the vaccine production.

"Hopefully, we will be in a position on both sides of the Atlantic to ensure that sufficient quantities of vaccine doses are distributed out in line with the schedule so as to complete the vaccination campaigns," EU commission chief spokesman Eric Mamer said.

Well over 10 million doses of AstraZeneca's vaccine are stockpiled in the U.S. for use here.

"We want to be oversupplied and overprepared," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Friday, so Americans can still be swiftly vaccinated in the event of unforeseen issues with the existing production timeline.

"We have not provided doses from the U.S. government to anyone," she said.

Asked about the stockpiled vaccine, White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said, "We have a small inventory of AstraZeneca so, if approved, we can get that inventory out to the American people as quickly as possible." He said the U.S. was following the same procedure it used for the already-authorized vaccines.

Drug manufacturers that received federal assistance in developing or expanding vaccine manufacturing were required to sell their first doses to the U.S. In the case of AstraZeneca, whose vaccine was initially expected to be the first to receive federal emergency authorization, the government ordered 300 million doses — enough for 150 million Americans — before issues with the vaccine's clinical trial held up clearance..

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 77 of 95

The company said this month it believes it will have roughly 30 million doses available to the U.S. government by the end of March, and an additional 20 million by the end of April.

As foreign regulators have moved ahead with the shot, the U.S. has not dropped its contractual claim on the initial doses produced in America.

That policy has also come under criticism from U.S. neighbors Canada and Mexico, which have been forced to seek vaccine manufactured on a different continent, rather than across the border. Meanwhile, the Biden administration has purchased enough doses of Moderna, Pfizer and Johnson & Johnson to inoculate 150 million more people than the U.S. population by the end of the year.

The U.S. has also ordered 110 million doses of vaccine from Novavax, which is expected to file for emergency authorization as soon as next month.

AstraZeneca's 30,000-person U.S. trial didn't complete enrollment until January. The company hasn't given any hints of when initial results might be ready beyond an executive telling Congress last month he expected it would be "soon."

The European Union, amid its own stumbling vaccine rollout, appears increasingly resigned to the Biden administration retaining control of the U.S. doses.

The EU is at odds with AstraZeneca, too, because the company is delivering far fewer doses to the bloc than it had promised. Of the initial order for 80 million in the first quarter this year, the company will be struggling to deliver half.

Despite shortages at home and often being accused of vaccine protectionism itself, the 27-nation bloc has allowed the export of well over 34 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines in past weeks, including 953,723 to the United States.

Meanwhile, Russia and China have used their domestically produced vaccines for strategic leverage.

China has pledged roughly half a billion doses to more than 45 countries, according to a country-by-country tally by The Associated Press. Four of China's many vaccine makers are claiming they will be able to produce at least 2.6 billion doses this year.

Russia has sent millions of doses of its Sputnik V vaccine to countries around the world, even as it vaccinates its own population. Analysts say a goal of this vaccine diplomacy is to bolster Russia's image as a scientific, technological and benevolent power, especially as other countries encounter shortages of COVID-19 vaccines because richer nations are scooping up the Western-made versions.

Israel, which has vaccinated more than half of its population with Pfizer vaccines produced in Europe, has also attempted to use vaccine diplomacy to reward allies.

Biden did move to have the U.S. contribute financially to the United Nations- and World Health Organization-backed COVAX alliance, which will help share vaccine with more than 90 lower and middle-income nations, but the U.S. has yet to commit to sharing any doses.

Casert and Petrequin reported from Brussels. Danika Kirka in London, Frank Jordans in Berlin and Lauran Neergaard in Washington contributed.

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>

Olympic host Japan will not take part in China vaccine offer

By STEPHEN WADE AP Sports Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Japan will not take part in China's offer — accepted by the International Olympic Committee — to provide vaccines for "participants" in the postponed Tokyo Games and next year's Beijing Winter Games.

Olympic Minister Tamayo Marukawa said Friday that Japan had not been consulted by the IOC about the Chinese vaccines, and that Japanese athletes would not take them. She said the vaccines have not been approved for use in Japan.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 78 of 95

"We have been taking comprehensive anti-infectious disease measures for the Tokyo Games in order to allow participation without vaccinations," Marukawa said. "There is no change to our principle of not making vaccinations a prerequisite."

Announced by IOC President Thomas Bach on Thursday, the surprise deal comes as China faces mounting international pressure over the internment of at least 1 million Muslim Uyghurs, which has been labeled a "genocide" by several governments and human rights bodies.

The IOC has indicated it is a sports body and will not meddle in domestic issues in China.

The IOC initially said it would not require athletes to get vaccines, but only encourage it. The deal with China puts more emphasis on getting vaccines to young, healthy athletes and others.

The IOC has said it will pay for the vaccines but gave no indication of the cost or quantity.

Marukawa pointed out that the Olympics are being held as if vaccines are not available, relying on testing, masks, social distancing and keeping athletes in a "bubble."

Distribution of China's vaccine will be through international agencies or existing vaccine agreements countries have with China, Bach said.

The IOC clarified on Friday that athletes in countries which have not authorized Chinese vaccines for use could not benefit from the program.

"This offer will really only apply to (national Olympic committees) in territories where the Chinese vaccination has been approved by their national health authorities," said James MacLeod, the IOC official who works with those Olympic bodies.

China, where the COVID-19 outbreak emerged in late 2019, has actively engaged in vaccine diplomacy, using doses developed by Sinovac and Sinopharm. Vaccines made by Chinese companies are being used in 25 countries despite a dearth of public data on how well they work and what side effects were encountered in testing.

Bach said Thursday "that a significant number of Olympic teams have already been vaccinated." He did not name the countries.

"The IOC will make every effort to have as many participants in the Olympics and Paralympic Games arriving already vaccinated in Japan this summer," Bach said.

Tokyo organizing committee president Seiko Hashimoto, in a news conference on Friday, said people coming to Japan with vaccinations might help reassure a skeptical public.

About 80% of Japanese in recent polls say the Olympics should be postponed or canceled, and almost as many do not want fans from abroad.

Hashimoto said again that the decision on fans from overseas will be made before the torch relay begins on March 25. Numerous reports in Japan say the decision has already been made to ban foreign visitors.

She also said a decision on venue capacity will be made in April.

"The sooner the better," she said. "At an earlier stage it is better to present the direction. We've been receiving requests to make the decision sooner."

AP Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Faith leaders' year of pandemic: grief, solace, resilience

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO, DAVID CRARY and MARIAM FAM Associated Press

In a pandemic-wracked year, religious leaders and spiritual counselors across the U.S. ministered to the ill, fed the hungry, consoled the bereaved. Some did so while recovering from COVID-19 themselves or mourning the loss of their own family members and friends.

At times, they despaired. So many people got sick, so many died, and these faith leaders couldn't hug the ailing and the grieving, or hold their hands.

For safety's sake, their congregations were kept away from in-person services for months, but the need to minister to them only intensified.

Amid the grief and anxiety, these faith leaders showed resilience and found reasons for hope as they

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 79 of 95

re-imagined their mission. Here are some of their reflections on a trying year.

LOSSES

In the early weeks of the pandemic, the Rev. Joseph Dutan lost his father to the coronavirus. Days earlier Dutan's mentor and friend, 49-year-old Jorge Ortiz-Garay, had become the first Roman Catholic priest in the U.S. to die from COVID-19.

Dutan felt grief, fear, even doubt. He mourned his father while consoling the community of St. Brigid, a Catholic church in an area straddling Brooklyn and Queens that had among the highest infection rates in New York City. His grief, he said, made him better able to help others enduring similar pain.

"When they come in for a funeral Mass of a loved one ... I feel I can relate to them, I can cry with them," Dutan said. "I comfort them and tell them: 'Things are going to be all right. We're not alone; we're in this together.'"

In the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles, Rabbi Noah Farkas said the pandemic's toll has been particularly severe among the many older adults in his Valley Beth Shalom congregation.

He estimated that 25 to 50 of its roughly 5,000 members lost their lives to COVID-19 — and even more died, predominantly older congregants, "because COVID created a life situation that was untenable."

Many were isolated in their rooms at assisted-care facilities, he said. "There was suicide, drug addiction, exhaustion — all the things you can think of when mental health deteriorates."

Farkas conducted 20 funerals in January alone, as California was hit by a wave of infections, always wearing a mask and sometimes a face shield. He was saddened by the inability to hug mourners.

Among the hardest-hit churches has been Saint Peter's Lutheran Church in New York City. Its leaders say more than 60 members of the congregation of about 800 have died of COVID-19. Almost all were part of the community of some 400 who attended services in Spanish.

Bishop Paul Egensteiner, who oversees Saint Peter's and other New York City-area congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, said the emotional toll on pastors has been heavy.

"They couldn't go anywhere, couldn't take vacation," he said. "It's been a great strain — trying to figure out how we're going to keep people connected, how we're going to do worship and hospital visits."

Imam Ahmed Ali of IQRA Masjid Community & Tradition, a mosque and community center in Brooklyn, sprang into action in late March after a funeral home called asking for his help to retrieve from hospitals the bodies of people who died of COVID-19 and give them burial rites. Ali was scared of the fast-spreading virus, like others, but he felt a calling to serve God and his religious duty.

He began putting in volunteer shifts of up to 20 hours transporting bodies, putting them in freezers in the funeral home, washing and enshrouding them in white cloth and taking them to cemeteries for burial.

Typically he performs the janazah, or funeral, prayer only a few times a year. At the height of the crisis in New York City, he was doing as many as 20 in a single day, and over about three months, he oversaw or took part in nearly 300 burials in all.

"It was a really challenging time, and it was a great loss for every community," Ali said. "I pray that we don't have to see that kind of pandemic again."

Friendswood United Methodist Church, in the suburbs of Houston, has been spared a heavy death toll.

But one active member of the 900-strong congregation who did die of COVID-19 was "a pillar of the church" who served on many of its boards and committees and won friends for his good humor and generosity, said Jim Bass, the pastor.

"He was 74 but no underlying health conditions that we knew of," Bass said. "When he became sick, for us in the congregation it really hit home."

ADJUSTMENTS

Like thousands of houses of worship nationwide, Valley Beth Shalom shifted swiftly to online services.

Farkas and his team also launched what they called a "war on isolation," including a new over-the-phone buddy system to connect isolated people starved of human contact. Volunteers selected congregation members whom they called at least once a week, and friendships sprang up between 20-somethings and

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 80 of 95

octogenarians.

With no in-person worship, Farkas encouraged community events respecting health guidelines. For the recent Purim holiday, the congregation staged a drive-through carnival in the parking lot with about 160 families taking part.

"We've learned a bunch," Farkas said, "but if I had to pick one thing, it's that we didn't give up."

Friendswood Methodist spent more than \$20,000 on video equipment last year to provide online worship. In-person services have now resumed, with a quarter of pre-pandemic attendance. Bass said there's enough room in the 1,100-seat sanctuary for adequate social distancing; he encourages worshippers to sing hymns quietly to themselves through their masks.

For Esther Roman, a chaplain at New York's Mount Sinai Morningside hospital, the pandemic has entailed ministering to one grieving family after another.

She recalled sitting 6 feet from one devastated woman, tears rolling down her masked face as she posed an anguished question to Roman: Why did God let her otherwise healthy, vibrant mother die? The chaplain couldn't comfort the woman as she would have done pre-pandemic: by holding and squeezing her hand.

"It was one of those moments that I resent the inability to offer support in the many ways that I used to be able to," Roman said. "I had to try to have my words do the embracing."

She and others have had to learn to transmit love or support via digital screens and through face shields and masks.

"We all rose to the challenge," Roman said. "We were drafted into this war."

SILVER LININGS

Even as the pandemic was subsiding in New York City in January, Saint Peter's suffered a new trauma: Severe flood damage from a ruptured municipal water main.

The Midtown Manhattan parish is known for its Jazz Vespers program, and the badly damaged items included treasured musical instruments and archives of several jazz greats. It further complicated plans to resume in-person worship, for which there is still no date set.

Yet the congregation's president, Christopher Vergara, said the community has grown closer with increased attendance to online services.

"We created a community network so people could check in with others to see how they're doing," Vergara said. "We've created a lot of small online groups — knitting, history, the arts."

"The flood was a bad thing, but we've really clung to each other," he added. "We've gone from surviving to thriving."

Friendswood Methodist also was badly damaged by flooding — in its case, when multiple pipes froze and then burst amid the recent severe storm in Texas.

Bass was astounded when more than 50 congregants responded to his emergency appeal for help, hurrying to the unlit church with push brooms and squeegees and working to clear the water.

"We say the church isn't the building, it's people. And it is true," Bass said. "This has really reminded people of the importance of community."

Christopher Johnson, an assistant pastor of Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church, said his Houston congregation was already suffering from lost social interaction, vanished jobs and food insecurity when it was dealt a new blow in May by the death of his boyhood friend George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis.

Johnson remembered Floyd as a respected community member who helped host a party at the church with free AIDS testing when Houston hosted the Super Bowl in 2017.

Johnson said Floyd's death, which sparked nationwide protests and awakening on racial injustice, had a special impact in part because it occurred amid a pandemic wreaking a disproportionate toll on African Americans.

"People had to take a pause, and it is in that pause that we realized that the world had changed," Johnson said.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 81 of 95

Johnson said his church responded to the pandemic by working with local leaders to provide personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing for the community. They used radio shows to discuss health disparities, vaccinations and the recent lifting of a statewide mask mandate.

The pandemic, Johnson said, "has called us to rethink and re-imagine what our philosophy of ministering really is in the age of COVID."

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

4 people in Michigan won January \$1.05B Mega Millions prize

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — A four-member suburban Detroit lottery club won a \$1.05 billion Mega Millions jackpot and will receive \$557 million after taxes, officials said Friday.

The winners claimed their prize weeks after the Jan. 22 drawing and chose the immediate lump sum option. After taxes, the \$776 million payment was reduced to about \$557 million, the Michigan Lottery said.

The names of the four Oakland County club members were not released. The Wolverine FLL Club had the only jackpot-winning ticket.

"This kind of money will impact the families of our club members for generations to come. We plan to stay humble and pay it forward through charitable giving in southeast Michigan," attorney Kurt Panouses said on behalf of the winners.

The \$1.05 billion jackpot was the largest in Michigan Lottery history and the third-largest in the United States. Mega Millions is played in 45 states as well as Washington, D.C., and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

The winning ticket was purchased almost as an afterthought at a Kroger grocery store in the Detroit suburb of Novi.

"A club member saw a sign that the jackpot was up to \$1 billion and remembered that they hadn't bought their tickets yet so they pulled into the Kroger," Panouses said. "When you play, of course, you dream of winning, but the reality of it has been incredible."

Kroger said it would donate its \$50,000 commission to the Food Bank Council of Michigan.

There was much public speculation immediately after the drawing that a group of Novi teachers had won. David Ascher, principal at Novi Woods Elementary School, shot down the rumors.

"Everyone showed up for work today, which was really good," Escher said two days after the drawing. "I bought them all donuts today which seemed to help, too."

Follow Ed White at <http://twitter.com/edwritez>

A peek behind the masks, precautions at the pandemic Grammys

By MARCELA ISAZA Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — I have covered the Grammy Awards for the Associated Press for 15 years. But this strange year feels like the first time.

Built around performances, full of singing and shouting, and with the biggest crowd of any awards show, the Grammys seem uniquely wrong for a world still in the coronavirus pandemic. But organizers are taking extraordinary measures to pull it off, and the AP was one of just a few media outlets invited inside during the preparations, so long as our reporters took constant COVID-19 tests and observe many other restrictions at the hyper-cautious scene.

For nearly all of my years as an AP video journalist doing interviews on the party-like red carpet at the Grammys, they have been held at Staples Center, a place where the Los Angeles Lakers play basketball and music's biggest superstars perform concerts.

This year there is no red carpet outside, and the ceremony is next door at the Los Angeles Conven-

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 82 of 95

tion Center, a place where the upcoming schedule includes the Bride World Bridal Show & Expo and the American Academy of Otolaryngology's Head & Neck Surgery Annual Meeting.

It's hardly the stuff of show business glitz, though it has significance for me as the place I took the oath to become a U.S. citizen in 1996. And its multiple cavernous halls and spacious walkways are well suited to putting on a pandemic show.

Those halls and walkways are so eerily quiet and empty as you walk them, unlike the buzzy, hectic scene you usually see during the run-up to the Grammys, that it's hard to believe we're just a couple of days from Sunday's telecast. The show will be hosted by Trevor Noah and will include performances by Cardi B, BTS, Doja Cat, Billie Eilish, Megan Thee Stallion, Harry Styles, Taylor Swift and Dua Lipa.

"You know, it's definitely different, but it's been fun to just be in a bubble with my team and my dancers and really just getting ready for the night," Lipa told me as she stood inside the Convention Center on a spaced-out backstage interview-and-photo area that is the only red carpet we have this year. "I'm just really thinking about the performance and I'm just so excited and so grateful to just be on that stage again."

Many cautious performers have stayed private and steered clear of the media area, even with its tight anti-viral protocols. The AP workspace is set off with high, thick black curtains, and they are constantly replenishing us with masks and hand sanitizer. Dropping your mask even for a moment will bring a scolding from security, and we can't bring in any of our own food or water.

We have to keep our distance from the musicians we interview, who are the only people allowed to be mask-less, just long enough to be interviewed. Some request that we also wear plastic face shields.

My camera operator uses a six-foot boom mic to keep his distance.

In a separate, cordoned-off area of the center's biggest hall, performers who would normally be packed together on the Staples Center stage amid a writhing crowd are instead using four separate stages facing each other so artists performing together can stay distant, with virtually no audience.

Outside the sprawling building, carpenters and technicians have been building the stages that will be a hub for Sunday's awards.

The protocol for security and credentials at the Grammys have always been very strict, but they've never before involved mouth swabs and thermometers. By the time Sunday's show starts, I will have had five COVID-19 tests in 11 days. When we get a (fingers crossed) negative result, we get a credential to go in, but still have our temperature taken daily before we enter.

During a normal Grammys week, I'd be all over town covering the crowded events that are part of the ritual, like Clive Davis' annual gala.

Anthony Hamilton, who's performing with Roddy Ricch and DaBaby on the telecast, told me "It's almost like Mardi Gras out in L.A. when it's Grammy time."

"I'm used to everybody being here all at one time," he said as we stood nearly alone in the interview space, "a room full of people, all your peers, every musician you ever wanted to see in the music, in the media room and running into people at the mall, running around with all the different fashion houses and just having a good time, a big party."

AP photographer Christopher Pizzello, and AP Entertainment Writers Andrew Dalton and Jonathan Landrum Jr., contributed to this report.

Netflix tests out a possible password-sharing crackdown

By MAE ANDERSON AP Technology Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Netflix is testing a way to crack down on password sharing.

The popular streaming service has been using popups to ask some users to verify their account via email or text, or to "verify later."

"If you don't live with the owner of this account, you need your own account to keep watching," the screen reads, according to Streamable.com, which first reported the test.

The test comes as streaming services proliferate and more people share passwords and services. Netflix

confirmed the test, but did not say how many people were part of the test or if it was only in the U.S. or elsewhere.

"This test is designed to help ensure that people using Netflix accounts are authorized to do so," the company said in a statement.

On the most basic plan, which costs \$9 monthly, users can only stream on one screen at a time. The most popular plan, which is now \$14 monthly, allows two simultaneous streams; the \$18 premium plan allows 3.

But there has never been a limit on sharing an account when you aren't streaming at the same time.

Competition has definitely heated up in entertainment streaming, with recent entrants running from Disney+ in 2019 to Paramount+ most recently. Still, Netflix remains the one to beat with more than 200 million subscribers globally.

Global rise in childhood mental health issues amid pandemic

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — By the time his parents rushed him to the hospital, 11-year-old Pablo was barely eating and had stopped drinking entirely. Weakened by months of self-privation, his heart had slowed to a crawl and his kidneys were faltering. Medics injected him with fluids and fed him through a tube — first steps toward stitching together yet another child coming apart amid the tumult of the coronavirus crisis.

For doctors who treat them, the pandemic's impact on the mental health of children is increasingly alarming. The Paris pediatric hospital caring for Pablo has seen a doubling in the number of children and young teenagers requiring treatment after attempted suicides since September.

Doctors elsewhere report similar surges, with children — some as young as 8 — deliberately running into traffic, overdosing on pills and otherwise self-harming. In Japan, child and adolescent suicides hit record levels in 2020, according to the Education Ministry.

Pediatric psychiatrists say they're also seeing children with coronavirus-related phobias, tics and eating disorders, obsessing about infection, scrubbing their hands raw, covering their bodies with disinfectant gel and terrified of getting sick from food.

Also increasingly common, doctors say, are children suffering panic attacks, heart palpitations and other symptoms of mental anguish, as well as chronic addictions to mobile devices and computer screens that have become their sitters, teachers and entertainers during lockdowns, curfews and school closures.

"There is no prototype for the child experiencing difficulties," said Dr. Richard Delorme, who heads the psychiatric unit treating Pablo at the giant Robert Debré pediatric hospital, the busiest in France. "This concerns all of us."

Pablo's father, Jerome, is still trying to understand why his son gradually fell sick with a chronic eating disorder as the pandemic took hold, slowly starving himself until the only foods he would eat were small quantities of rice, tuna and cherry tomatoes.

Jerome suspects that disruptions last year to Pablo's routines may have contributed to his illness. Because France was locked down, the boy had no in-school classes for months and couldn't say goodbye to his friends and teacher at the end of the school year.

"It was very tough," Jerome said. "This is a generation that has taken a beating."

Sometimes, other factors pile on misery beyond the burden of the 2.6 million COVID-19 victims who have died in the world's worst health crisis in a century.

Islamic State extremists who killed 130 people in gun and bomb attacks across Paris in 2015, including at a cafe on Pablo's walk to school, also left a searing mark on his childhood. Pablo used to believe that the cafe's dead customers were buried under the sidewalk where he trod.

When he was hospitalized at the end of February, Pablo had lost a third of his previous weight. His heart rate was so slow that medics struggled to find a pulse, and one of his kidneys was failing, said his father, who agreed to talk about his son's illness on condition they not be identified by their surname.

"It is a real nightmare to have a child who is destroying himself," the father said.

Pablo's psychiatrist at the hospital, Dr. Coline Stordeur, says some of her other young patients with eating

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 84 of 95

disorders, mostly aged 8 to 12, told her they began obsessing in lockdown about gaining weight because they couldn't stay active. One boy compensated by running laps in his parents' basement for hours each day, losing weight so precipitously that he had to be hospitalized.

Others told her they gradually restricted their diet: "No more sugar, then no more fat, and eventually no more of anything," she said.

Some children try to keep their mental anguish to themselves, not wanting to further burden the adults in their lives who are perhaps mourning loved ones or jobs lost to the coronavirus. They "try to be children who are forgotten about, who don't add to their parents' problems," Stordeur said.

Children also may lack the vocabulary of mental illness to voice their need for help and to make a connection between their difficulties and the pandemic.

"They don't say, 'Yes, I ended up here because of the coronavirus,'" Delorme said. "But what they tell you about is a chaotic world, of 'Yes, I'm not doing my activities any more,' 'I'm no longer doing my music,' 'Going to school is hard in the mornings,' 'I am having difficulty waking up,' 'I am fed up with the mask.'"

Dr. David Greenhorn said the emergency department at the Bradford Royal Infirmary where he works in northern England used to treat one or two children per week for mental health emergencies, including suicide attempts. The average now is closer to one or two per day, sometimes involving children as young as 8, he said.

"This is an international epidemic, and we are not recognizing it," Greenhorn said in a telephone interview. "In an 8-year-old's life, a year is a really, really, really long time. They are fed up. They can't see an end to it."

At Robert Debré, the psychiatric unit typically used to see about 20 attempted suicide cases per month involving children aged 15 and under. Not only has that number now doubled in some months since September, but some children also seem ever-more determined to end their lives, Delorme said.

"We are very surprised by the intensity of the desire to die among children who may be 12 or 13 years old," he said. "We sometimes have children of 9 who already want to die. And it's not simply a provocation or a blackmail via suicide. It is a genuine wish to end their lives."

"The levels of stress among children are truly massive," he said. "The crisis affects all of us, from age 2 to 99."

AP writer Mari Yamaguchi in Tokyo contributed.

Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at:

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

<https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine>

<https://apnews.com/UnderstandingtheOutbreak>

Biden moves to relieve strain of child border crossings

By JOSH BOAK and ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

BALTIMORE (AP) — The Biden administration hopes to relieve the strain of thousands of unaccompanied children coming to the southern border by ending a Trump-era order that discouraged potential family sponsors from coming forward to care for them.

The 2018 policy called on Health and Human Services to share information about family sponsors with immigration authorities, a move that discouraged parents and other relatives from stepping forward out of fear they would be deported.

A senior administration official said Friday the Department of Health and Human Services was not a law enforcement agency and that the goal of Friday's announcement was to encourage family members and other sponsors to step forward. It comes as U.S. authorities saw a 60% increase in children crossing the southwest border alone between January and February to more than 9,400. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 85 of 95

Much of the policy has already been chipped away at through lawsuits and other directives, but administration officials said its full repeal sends a more forceful message. Government-funded facilities have been constrained because the coronavirus has limited how many beds are available, while the number of children crossing the border has overwhelmed the processing system. Officials say children are staying an average of 37 days at Health and Human Services-sponsored facilities.

The move is another step to repeal policies of former President Donald Trump that discouraged people from seeking refuge in the U.S. after it became the world's most popular destination for asylum-seekers in 2017. Most notably, the Biden administration is unwinding a policy that made asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for court hearings in the United States. About 1,000 people with active cases have been admitted to the U.S. to await the outcome of their claims, with 25,000 or so eligible to come in the coming months.

Earlier this week, the administration announced it was resuming a program that Trump ended that makes it easier for Central American children to join their parents in the United States. Under the Central American minors policy, children can apply for legal status in the United States in their own countries instead of making the dangerous journey to the U.S. border with Mexico.

Spagat reported from San Diego.

No need to lose sleep over shift to daylight saving time

WASHINGTON (AP) — No need to lose sleep over the shift to daylight saving time this weekend.

The sun will still come up, though the dawn's early light will break through later than it has during the months of standard time and the twilight's last gleaming will extend deeper into the evening.

The annual shift comes at 2 a.m. local time Sunday in most of the United States. Don't forget to set your clocks an hour ahead, usually before bed Saturday night, to avoid being late for Sunday morning activities.

No time change is observed in Hawaii, most of Arizona, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam and the Northern Marianas.

Standard time returns Nov. 7.

A poll in 2019 by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 7 in 10 Americans preferred not to switch back and forth to mark daylight saving time. But there was no agreement on which time clocks ought to follow.

AP study: Nearly 90% of esports scholarships going to men

By JAKE SEINER AP Sports Writer

Colleges and universities rushing to invest in the booming arena of varsity esports are overwhelmingly committing opportunities and scholarships to male players, according to data collected by The Associated Press.

Male gamers held 90.4% of roster spots and received 88.5% of scholarship funds in a sample of 27 public American schools surveyed by the AP during this school year. The glaring gender disparity exists even though 41% of U.S. gamers are female, according to the Entertainment Software Association, and in a realm where — unlike traditional sports — there are no physical barriers separating male and female competitors.

"It's tremendously sad and tremendously not surprising," said Grace Collins, an expert on gaming, education and gender.

The AP requested roster and scholarship data from 56 public U.S. schools identified among the 192 participants in the National Association of Collegiate Esports, relying largely on public records requests.

Several schools responded that although their programs compete at the varsity level, they had not been sanctioned varsity status by the school. Their roster data was often incomplete, and those programs were held out of the sample. A handful of other schools either denied the AP's request or did not respond to repeated messages.

The AP's data set covers only a small sample of the landscape. But the overwhelming results confirm

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 86 of 95

what esports coaches, players and experts have identified on their own as a problem since the first varsity program launched in 2014:

As esports are carving out their place on college campuses — and doing so without a central governing body, such as the NCAA — little is being done to ensure resources are spread equally along gender lines.

“The way that these programs have been built out, the games that they select to play, the esports models that they’re looking at, the people that they are staffing, all are replicating an unequal system,” said Collins, CEO of Liminal Esports and a former liaison at the U.S. Department of Education focused on educational technology.

“So often it seems like to me, they’re trying to make another football for universities, and taking with it all of the baggage that is completely unnecessary to pull along with esports.”

Esports’ impact on campuses remains relatively small. The average roster in the AP’s sample included 30 players, but programs ranged from six to 83 gamers. Roughly a quarter of those players received scholarships, and the average payout was around \$1,910.

Participation is sure to rise, though, especially after interest in gaming accelerated globally during the coronavirus pandemic. As people spent unprecedented amounts of time at home, the total esports audience swelled to 495 million last year, according to market research company Newzoo — a nearly 12% bump. That helped the competitive gaming industry surpass \$1 billion in revenue for the first time.

While plenty of women play video games, they remain woefully underrepresented in many esports. There are several reasons for that, including a culture of toxicity and harassment perpetuated by some male gamers who favor the most popular games, like “League of Legends.”

In traditional sports, Title IX has helped ensure athletic departments devote roughly equal resources to male and female students. The law mandates equitable opportunities to participate in sports for men and women, and it requires that scholarships be offered proportionally to participation. It also states that facilities, equipment and other provisions be roughly equal.

Many schools, intentionally or not, have sidestepped those restrictions by housing their esports program outside of the athletic department. Many of the esports scholarships reported to the AP were academic or merit-based funds.

Still, Title IX — which broadly prohibits gender discrimination in any educational program that receives federal funding — could be a tool for addressing esports’ inequity issue, according to Neena Chaudry, general counsel and senior advisor at the National Women’s Law Center.

“If schools are going to be adding esports — and this is true regardless of whether it’s in the athletic program or not — then they need to address barriers such as harassment and other forms of discrimination that women may be facing in esports,” Chaudry said. “Just as they would in any other sport or in the education program in general.”

Collins — who launched the first all-girls varsity esports high school team at a private girls school near Cleveland in 2018 — believes one way to boost female participation would be to expand the selection of games. They compare it to a movie club that only watches “Die Hard” movies and then wonders why only boys or men show up.

“That’s not to say that girls on your campus don’t like to watch movies,” Collins said. “It’s just saying they don’t like to watch ‘Die Hard.’”

“League of Legends” is a staple of collegiate esports programs, as are male-dominated “Madden” and “Call of Duty.” “Overwatch” — a game whose cover character is a gay woman — has a slightly better ratio of women to men and is also popular. Collins would like to see schools try games like “Just Dance,” “Mario Kart” or something from the fighting genre. Girls and women are also more likely to play mobile games.

Boise State was among the more equal schools in the AP’s survey, with 16 male players, five female players and three who identified as nonbinary. Esports coach Doc Haskell has been intentional about diversity — “These teams need to look like us, like our campus community,” he said — and among the pivotal steps he’s taken has been a focus on the way players communicate.

While scouting potential recruits, Haskell believes he places a higher priority relative to other programs on intangible qualities — teamwork in particular — than a player’s current ratings. Once players are in the

program, he closely monitors the language they use in practice and competition, looking for teachable moments that foster inclusion.

"There are things that would be, in previous generations, considered 'locker room talk,'" Haskell said. "The grand truth is that we can hope to avoid these things. We can teach around these things."

The only school in the AP's sample with a 50-50 ratio of men and women was at the University of South Carolina-Sumter, which has eight male and eight female players. The program was the first in the state when it launched six years ago and initially had an all-male roster, but it picked up a couple of women gamers when it added "Overwatch" in its second year. That little bit of representation slowly built on itself.

"I didn't do anything special, like, 'Oh, I need to make sure I meet this quota or anything specific,'" coach Kris Weissman said. "But I made sure that we had an open and appealing program to everyone and anyone."

Giona Mack, a freshman on the USC-Sumter team, had an avid interest in gaming during high school but was hesitant about collegiate esports because she didn't want to be the token woman. Weissman arranged a campus visit for her, and the vibe of the co-ed team helped her believe she could reach her potential there as a gamer.

"I got more nervous when it came to males because I found them more competitive," Mack said. "That was my online experience of games. I thought if I went into an esports team and it was mostly male-dominated, I would just feel overwhelmingly nervous, and the way I performed would reflected that.

"I really wanted to do something like this during college," she added. "Knowing that there were females, just mentally for me was big."

Follow Jake Seiner: https://twitter.com/Jake_Seiner

More AP esports: <https://apnews.com/hub/esports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

AP-NORC poll: People of color bear COVID-19's economic brunt

By AARON MORRISON, KAT STAFFORD and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A year ago, Elvia Banuelos' life was looking up. The 39-year-old mother of two young children said she felt confident about a new management-level job with the U.S. Census Bureau — she would earn money to supplement the child support she receives to keep her children healthy, happy and in day care.

But when the coronavirus was declared a global pandemic last March, forcing hundreds of millions of people into strict lockdown, Banuelos' outlook changed. The new job fell through, the child support payments stopped because of a job loss and she became a stay-at-home mom when day cares shuttered.

"The only thing I could do was make my rent, so everything else was difficult," said Banuelos, of Orland, California.

Millions of Americans have experienced a devastating toll during the yearlong coronavirus pandemic, from lost loved ones to lost jobs. More than 530,000 people have died in the United States. Those losses haven't hit all Americans equally, with communities of color hit especially hard by both the virus and the economic fallout.

A new poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that compared with white Americans, Black and Hispanic Americans are more likely to have experienced job and other income losses during the pandemic, and those who have lost income are more likely to have found themselves in deep financial holes.

That's on top of Black and Hispanic Americans being more likely than white Americans to say they are close to someone who has died from COVID-19 and less likely to have received a vaccination. The pandemic has killed Black and Hispanic Americans at rates disproportionate to their population in the U.S., according to the latest data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Banuelos, who identifies as Latina, said the disparity in pandemic experiences between "the upper class

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 88 of 95

and people who are in a tighter situation” became glaringly clear to her early on in the pandemic. Even after two rounds of federal direct stimulus checks, she felt she was further behind than well-off Americans.

The relief “didn’t last that long,” Banuelos said.

Overall, 62% of Hispanic Americans and 54% of Black Americans have lost some form of household income during the pandemic, including job losses, pay cuts, cuts in hours and unpaid leave, compared with 45% of white Americans.

For other racial and ethnic groups, including Asian Americans and Native Americans, sample sizes are too small to analyze in the AP-NORC poll.

Jeremy Shouse, a restaurant manager from North Carolina, saw his hours greatly reduced during the early months of the pandemic when the small business was forced to shut down. Shouse, a 33-year-old Black man, said the restaurant has since reopened but went from making more than \$5,000 in-house per day prior to the pandemic to only \$200 on some days.

“One year later and things still aren’t the same,” Shouse said, adding his wages have dropped 20%.

About 6 in 10 Hispanics and about half of Black Americans say their households are still facing the impacts of income loss from the pandemic, compared with about 4 in 10 white Americans. Black and Hispanic Americans are also especially likely to say that impact has been a major one.

“We find that systemic racism plays a huge role in this process,” said Rashawn Ray, a fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institute who co-authored a recent report on racial disparities and the pandemic in Detroit. “I think what we’re going to see once the dust settles is that the racial wealth gap has actually increased.”

There have long been racial disparities in how Americans experience economic downturns and recessions. However, following a recovery from the Great Recession and well into the Trump administration, the unemployment gap between Black and white Americans narrowed amid strong job growth and economic activity. But a recent analysis from the Federal Reserve Bank of New York found a gap that had declined to as little as 3 percentage points rose to 5.4 percentage points last August, erasing some of the gains made during the recovery.

The AP-NORC poll also finds Hispanic Americans are especially likely to think it will take a long time to dig their way out of the financial hole. About half of Hispanics say that they are still feeling the effects of income loss and that it will take at least six months to recover financially. About a third of Black Americans say the same, compared with about a quarter of white Americans.

Forty-one percent of Hispanic Americans say their current household income is lower than it was at the start of the pandemic, compared with 29% of Black Americans and 25% of white Americans.

And about 4 in 10 Black and Hispanic Americans have been unable to pay a bill in the last month, compared with about 2 in 10 white Americans.

For people of color, the trauma experienced due to economic turmoil has been compounded by immense personal losses. About 30% of Black and Hispanic Americans say they have a close friend or relative who has died from the coronavirus since last March, compared with 15% of white Americans.

Debra Fraser-Howze, founder of Choose Healthy Life, an initiative working to address public health disparities through the Black church, said she is confident in the Black community’s ability to recover economically and medically.

“The emergency economic situation of the community is dismal,” Fraser-Howze said, “and it’s going to be worse for a long time. But we are a community of survivors — we came through slavery and Jim Crow. We figured out how to stay alive. I do believe and have faith that our community will come back.”

Swanson reported from Washington. Morrison, who reported from New York, and Stafford, who reported from Detroit, are members of the AP’s Race and Ethnicity team.

The AP-NORC poll of 1,434 adults was conducted Feb. 25-March 1 using a sample drawn from NORC’s probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The

margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.4 percentage points.

Memo banning Afghan girls singing prompts #IAmMySong protest

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A memo from Afghanistan's education ministry banning girls 12 years old and older from singing at school functions has been causing a stir on social media, prompting the authorities to say it was a mistake and that its authors had misunderstood the objective.

Still, #IAmMySong is gaining traction on Twitter, with some Afghan girls singing their favorite tunes for the camera and calls popping up for petitions to oppose the directive.

The controversy comes as women's rights activists and civil society groups are fighting to ensure that fragile human rights gains made over the last 20 years in Afghanistan — since the U.S.-led invasion ousted the Taliban regime — take center stage in the peace talks underway with the insurgents. It also shows how the rights of girls and women are under threat from conservatives on both sides of the protracted conflict.

"This is Talibanization from inside the republic," Sima Samar, an Afghan human rights activist of nearly 40 years, said on Friday. When they ruled the country, the Taliban — notorious for their repression of women — denied girls the right to education. Music, except religious songs, was also banned, as was television.

The memo, which went to all school districts in Kabul, was rescinded, said ministry spokeswoman Najiba Arian, insisting that its authors had misunderstood the purpose. A new memo was subsequently sent, saying music groups for both secondary school girls and boys are banned.

The objective was not to ban girls singing but to prevent boys and girls from participating in public events that could spread the coronavirus, she said. Afghanistan has recorded more than 55,000 cases of the virus and 2,451 deaths but testing is inadequate and the real numbers are believed to be far greater.

The hashtag campaign was started by Ahmad Sarmast, the founder of Afghanistan's Institute of Music. It has had over 600,000 clicks, according to Haroon Baluch of BytesforAll, a Pakistan-based rights organization that monitors internet traffic. He also said the trend is building.

Sarmast said he began the #IAmMySong to "let authorities know that the people of Afghanistan oppose this decision and they will stand for the rights of the children, whether boys or girls."

The memo, a copy of which was seen by The Associated Press, does not mention the pandemic or any health concerns. Rather it clearly states that girls older than 12 cannot perform in any public events and that singing at such events is strictly forbidden. It goes on to say that only female teachers can teach music to girls older than 12.

"The education department of Kabul city, all government, private sector and literacy centers are seriously advised not to let female students . . . above 12 years of age participate and sing in any type of events or general programs," it said, with the exception of all-female gatherings.

Samar, who launched Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission in 2002 and served as its head until 2019, said the directive violates basic human rights. It also violates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children, to which Afghanistan is a signatory, she added.

The memo violates both national and international law, Sarmast said. According to one tweet, 100,000 signatures have been collected throughout several Afghan provinces to protest the directive.

After the fiasco of the first memo, a second one went out. It banned both boys and girls older than 12 from singing or performing in public — an even more shocking directive as it takes "the right of choice and freedom of expression away from all students in secondary and high schools," Sarmast said.

The education ministry has had to deal with other missteps recently. In December, it came under attack after suggesting children in first through third grade should be taught in mosques. After a furor erupted, the ministry was forced to correct itself, saying it was referring to rural areas where there are no school buildings so mosques are the only option for some of the country's poorest.

Schools linked to mosques are known as madrassas and are often attended by the country's poorest. The Ministry of Interior was said in January to be preparing to register thousands of madrassas operating in the country.

Focusing mostly on religious education rather than language, liberal arts and science, madrassas are run by hard-line clerics. They have also been accused of propagating jihad or holy war and spreading intolerance between Islam's two major sects, Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

Associated Press writers Tameem Akhgar and Ahmad Seir in Kabul, Afghanistan contributed to this report.

Hungary emerges as an EU vaccination star amid surging cases

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary (AP) — Hungary has emerged as a European Union leader in COVID-19 vaccinations thanks to a strategy that sought shots from Russia and China as well as from inside the bloc, spurring increasing trust in jabs from eastern nations.

But that strategy is up against a skyrocketing rise in new COVID-19 cases and deaths blamed on a more infectious virus variant first found in Britain that is putting an unprecedented strain on Hungary's health care system. A new round of lockdown measures took effect Monday to curb the surge, which saw deaths averaging around 150 per day and hospitalizations and new cases breaking records set during the previous peak in December.

As of Friday, 11.9% of Hungary's adult population had received at least one dose of a vaccine. That is the second-highest rate of vaccination in the 27-member EU after the small island nation of Malta and substantially above the EU average of 7%. With five vaccines approved for use in Hungary, more than in any other EU nation, more than 1.2 million Hungarians have received a jab in the country of fewer than 10 million, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The vaccination campaign is only growing in importance, for Hungary has the 7th worst death rate per 1 million inhabitants in the world, at 16,627 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins.

Dr. Karoly Dery, a general practitioner in Hatvan, a town 35 miles east of Budapest, said the rapid spread of the virus has led to increased acceptance of all vaccines.

"I always tell anti-vaccination people that any vaccine is better than a month on a ventilator and possible death," Dr. Dery told The Associated Press. "There's nothing uglier or more awful than death by suffocation."

Right-wing populist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán broke with the EU's common procurement program to purchase millions of doses from Russia and China that were not approved by the EU's medicines regulator. He has been harshly critical of the speed of the EU's vaccine rollout.

In February, the country became the first in the EU to begin using China's Sinopharm and Russia's Sputnik V vaccines, even as polling showed that public trust in non-EU approved vaccines was low. A January survey of 1,000 people in the capital of Budapest by pollster Median and the 21 Research Center showed that among those willing to be vaccinated, only 27% would take a Chinese vaccine and 43% a Russian vaccine, compared to 84% who would take a jab developed in Western countries.

Dr. Bela Merkely, the rector of Semmelweis Medical University in Budapest, told the AP that Hungary's exceptional performance in vaccinations can be attributed to its purchase of the Russian and Chinese vaccines. He said the initial public distrust is being overtaken by a sense of urgency to bring a devastating third surge of the pandemic under control.

"Hungary has more vaccines because it gave emergency approval to the Sputnik and Sinopharm vaccines," he said, adding that he had received a Sputnik V jab. "(When) people ask which is the best, I always say, 'The best vaccine is the one that's in my arm.' A vaccine that is in transit or is sitting in the refrigerator ... cannot protect a single human life."

Other EU countries are taking notice. Slovakia's prime minister, Igor Matovic, angered members of his governing coalition when he made a secret deal to purchase 2 million doses of Sputnik V this month, while the president of the hard-hit Czech Republic has written to the leaders of Russia and China requesting emergency doses.

Merkely expects Hungary's new lockdown restrictions and increasing vaccination rate to produce results

within three to four weeks and the latest surge to be under control by mid-May. Still, he says, Hungarians won't be safe until all countries in the world have access to vaccines.

"A global pandemic cannot be managed locally," he said. "As long as COVID-19 is still present in the world, then not even vaccinated countries will be safe because a mutation can form at any time."

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

Bread and Cameos — a year without income from Broadway stage

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A year ago, Max Kumangai was dazzling crowds with a jolt of live Broadway excitement. Now he's doing it with his bread.

The triple threat from the musical "Jagged Little Pill" has leaned into a fourth skill as the pandemic marches on: baking and selling his own sourdough.

From his Manhattan apartment, Kumangai delivers \$15 bread loaves or \$8 focaccia slices from his Humpday Dough company on foot or via subway.

"I wanted to make connecting with people — at a time when it was difficult to connect — a part of the business," he says. "It's feeding me figuratively and literally."

With TV and film sets slowly gearing back up a year after COVID-19 hit, Broadway theaters are still shuttered with no end in sight. That means people who make their living in live entertainment have had to be creative.

Out-of-work seamstresses are selling handmade jewelry and plush toys on Etsy, dancers are teaching classes online and actors are doing voiceover work, podcasts or selling video shout-outs on Cameo.

One stage manager launched Stagedoor Candle Company, a line of fragrance products inspired by Broadway musicals. There's an eBay marketplace selling Broadway memorabilia to help artists put something in their pockets.

"This is a paycheck-to-paycheck profession. We are workers," says Laura Benanti, a Tony winner. "It's really deeply upsetting to me that there are so many people suffering, unable to feed themselves. They don't have savings."

According to a new report from the New York State Comptroller, employment for New York City workers in the arts, entertainment and recreation sectors fell 66% during the pandemic.

The drop — from 87,000 jobs in February 2020 to 34,100 jobs just three months later — marks the largest employment decline out of all sectors in the city's economy. It has left Broadway workers, many who have lost health insurance, living on side gigs, stimulus checks and unemployment assistance.

Since March 2020, the national human services group The Actors Fund has distributed more than \$18 million in emergency financial assistance to more than 15,000 people in the entertainment industry.

"I've had a lot of friends who just picked up and relocated and moved to different states because we're staying in one of the most expensive states in the country," says Jawan M. Jackson, a star of "Ain't Too Proud — The Life and Times of The Temptations." He pivoted to putting out a single, filming a movie and got into commercials.

He wished government leaders would do more. "We kind of feel like we are just afterthoughts," he said. "I just wish they would have been a little bit better during the shutdown for us because of the predicament that we're in. But hopefully it's going to change. We'll see."

Others are more blunt: "These artists need to be protected. They need to be supported. This is dire straits right now," said Tom Kitt, a Pulitzer Prize-winning composer. "This is the lifeblood of this city."

Theater work even without a pandemic is usually a piecemeal existence. Shows rarely run for years and workers live a nomadic existence, jumping to new works every few years. These days, they're even more piecemeal since people who make live theater will clearly be the last back at work.

"You pick up things where you can. I know a lot of people that have taken on side gigs when they can.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 92 of 95

A lot of people have gone back to school," said Derek Klena, a Tony-nominee. "You do what you can to get by."

In 2019 according to the comptroller, the average salary among actors in the city was \$65,756, with musicians and singers bringing in \$43,966. Despite the pandemic, New York City remains the second-highest rental market in the United States, with one-bedroom median rent at \$2,460 in March.

Musician Andrew Griffin had landed a great gig playing viola for "Ain't Too Proud" when the pandemic shut down his steady gig. He has cobbled together a few live concerts, composed for a dance company and done some consulting work.

He's seen people selling their instruments and their cars. One woman close to him has even sold her eggs. "It's definitely been very challenging and very stressful in a lot of different ways," he says.

And yet he refuses to let it stop him from making art. He recently teamed up with violinist Danielle Giulini for a video that puts the last year in perspective as they perform Handel-Halvorsen's "Passacaglia." He notes that what has held America together and safe during this lockdown year is art — Netflix, Spotify and all the streaming options. "That is the glue," he says. "So where is the help?"

Some of Broadway's leading men — including Jeremy Jordan, Max von Essen, Corey Cott and Adam Pascal — have turned to Cameo, which pays celebrities to make personalized videos for fans.

"I've clawed my way to paying those bills each month," says Pascal, a Tony-nominee for "Rent" who has made his own rent this year teaching masterclasses and with concerts. "Pivoting in whatever way I'm able to pivot."

Some of Broadway's leading ladies — from Patti Murin, Cassie Levy, Kerry Butler, Lilli Cooper to Ashley Park — have been coaching, singing and answering questions virtually on Broadway Booker, which pivoted from hosting in-person events to online ones. A 30-minute private coaching session from a veteran can start at \$75.

Tony Award-winning Jefferson Mays snagged a part in Hollywood alongside Denzel Washington for Joel Coen's "Macbeth," but he also found himself recording audio books in an "alcove in our house stuffed with pillows and sofa cushions."

Broadway dancer Jen Frankel lost her job but quickly become an employer: She co-founded the virtual dance platform PassDoor, hiring suddenly out-of-work Broadway veterans to teach all skill levels or ages.

"We thought, 'Here's an opportunity for not only us to help the Broadway community, but also to help everybody by giving them a chance to dance with people that they never would have.'"

The teachers — with extensive experience from such musicals as "Frozen," "Tootsie," "Kiss Me Kate" and "Anastasia" — get a base rate per class and a percentage of the gross if they reach a certain number of attendees.

"We wanted to create a model where we were offering something that was accessible to different income demographics and also for dancers who might be not working for an extended period of time," Frankel said.

Bebe Neuwirth, a two-time Tony winner who also starred on "Cheers," works with dancers on career transitions and worries about the losses to her art form from the pandemic.

"I know a lot of dancers are saying, 'OK, I got to get a scholarship and go back to school and do something, because I can't make it work,'" she says. "Who knows what those dancers might have done if they'd stayed?"

Neuwirth points to the devastation to dance and theater wrought by another pandemic — AIDS in the 1980s and '90s. "Did theater suffer for it? Did dance suffer for it? Yes, it did," she says. "We'll never be able to quantify it but we do know that so many really interesting artists are gone."

Kumagai, the Broadway bread maker, doesn't want to give up his side-hustle when Broadway restarts. Baking is a passion and he hopes to continue doing it even with an eight-shows-a-week schedule. He credits making bread for giving him back a sense of joy.

He's also been struck by the warm — virtual, of course — embrace from fellow Broadway workers, who are buying up whatever his apartment oven produces.

"This community is still alive and bubbling, just like my sourdough starter," he says with a laugh. "We're all here for each other."

Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

Biden aims for quicker shots, 'independence from this virus'

By ZEKE MILLER and JONATHAN LEMIRE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — One year after the nation was brought to a near-standstill by the coronavirus, President Joe Biden pledged in his first prime-time address to make all adults eligible for vaccines by May 1 and raised the possibility of beginning to “mark our independence from this virus” by the Fourth of July. He offered Americans fresh hope and appealed anew for their help.

Speaking in the White House East Room Thursday night, Biden honored the “collective suffering” of Americans over the past year in his 24-minute address and then offered them a vision for a return to a modicum of normalcy this summer.

“We are bound together by the loss and the pain of the days that have gone by,” he said. “We are also bound together by the hope and the possibilities in the days in front of us.”

He predicted Americans could safely gather at least in small groups for July Fourth to “make this Independence Day truly special.”

But he also cautioned that this was a “goal” and attaining it depends on people’s cooperation in following public health guidelines and rolling up their sleeves to get vaccinated as soon as eligible. Only that, he said, can bring about an end to a pandemic that has killed more than 530,000 Americans and disrupted the lives of countless more.

“While it was different for everyone, we all lost something,” Biden said of the yearlong-and-counting pandemic.

The speech came just hours after Biden signed into law a \$1.9 trillion relief package that he said will help defeat the virus, nurse the economy back to health and deliver direct aid to Americans struggling to make ends meet.

Some cash distributions could begin arriving in the bank accounts of Americans this weekend.

“This historic legislation is about rebuilding the backbone of this country,” Biden said as he signed the bill in the Oval Office.

Most noticeable to many Americans are provisions providing up to \$1,400 in direct payments and extending \$300 weekly emergency unemployment benefits into early September. Also included are expanded tax credits over the next year for children, child care and family leave — some of them credits that Democrats have signaled they’d like to make permanent — plus spending for renters, food programs and people’s utility bills.

In his Thursday night address, Biden said that as vaccine supplies continue to increase, he will direct states and territories to make all adults eligible for vaccination by May 1. The U.S. is expecting to have enough doses for those 255 million adults by the end of that month, but Biden warned the process of actually administering those doses would take time, even as his administration looks to instill confidence in the safety of the vaccines to overcome hesitance.

“Let me be clear, that doesn’t mean everyone’s going to have that shot immediately, but it means you’ll be able to get in line beginning May 1,” he said.

Biden announced an expansion of other efforts to speed vaccinations, including deploying an additional 4,000 active-duty troops to support vaccination efforts and allowing more people — such as medical students, veterinarians and dentists — to deliver shots. He is also directing more doses toward some 950 community health centers and up to 20,000 retail pharmacies, to make it easier for people to get vaccinated closer to their homes.

Biden added that his administration is planning to launch a nationwide website to help people find doses, saying it would address frustrations so that there would be “no more searching day and night for an appointment.”

Even as he offered optimism, Biden made clear that the July 4 timetable applied only to smaller gather-

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 94 of 95

ings, not larger ones, and requires cooperation from Americans to continue to wear face coverings, maintain social distancing and follow federal guidelines meant to slow the spread of the virus in the near term. He also called on them roll up their sleeves to get vaccinated as soon as they're eligible.

This is "not the time to not stick with the rules," Biden said, warning of the potential for backsliding just as the nation is on the cusp of defeating the virus. "I need you, the American people," he added. "I need you. I need every American to do their part."

The House gave final congressional approval to the sweeping package by a near party line 220-211 vote on Wednesday, seven weeks after Biden entered the White House and four days after the Senate passed the bill. Republicans in both chambers opposed the legislation unanimously, characterizing it as bloated, crammed with liberal policies and heedless of signs the crises are easing.

Biden had originally planned to sign the bill on Friday, but it arrived at the White House more quickly than anticipated.

"We want to move as fast as possible," tweeted chief of staff Ron Klain.

Biden's initial prime-time speech was "a big moment," said presidential historian and Rice University professor Douglas Brinkley. "He's got to win over hearts and minds for people to stay masked and get vaccinated, but also recognize that after the last year, the federal government hasn't forgotten you."

Biden's evening remarks were central to a pivotal week for the president as he addresses the defining challenge of his term: shepherding the nation through the twin public health and economic storms brought about by the virus.

On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released initial guidance for how vaccinated people can resume some normal activities. On Wednesday, Congress approved the president's \$1.9 trillion "American Rescue Plan," aimed at easing the economic impact of the virus on tens of millions of people. And the nation was on pace to administer its 100 millionth dose of vaccine as soon as Thursday.

Almost exactly one year ago, President Donald Trump addressed the nation to mark the WHO's declaration of a global pandemic. He announced travel restrictions and called for Americans to practice good hygiene but displayed little alarm about the forthcoming catastrophe. Trump, it was later revealed, acknowledged that he had been deliberately "playing down" the threat of the virus.

Biden implicitly criticized his predecessor, opening his remarks by referring to "denials for days, weeks, then months that led to more deaths, more infections, more stress, and more loneliness."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, March 13, the 72nd day of 2021. There are 293 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 13, 1933, banks in the U.S. began to reopen after a "holiday" declared by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

On this date:

In 1639, New College was renamed Harvard College for clergyman John Harvard.

In 1781, the seventh planet of the solar system, Uranus, was discovered by Sir William Herschel.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed a measure prohibiting Union military officers from returning fugitive slaves to their owners.

In 1925, the Tennessee General Assembly approved a bill prohibiting the teaching of the theory of evolution. (Gov. Austin Peay (pee) signed the measure on March 21.)

In 1934, a gang that included John Dillinger and "Baby Face" Nelson robbed the First National Bank in Mason City, Iowa, making off with \$52,344.

In 1938, famed attorney Clarence S. Darrow died in Chicago.

In 1947, the Lerner and Loewe musical "Brigadoon," about a Scottish village that magically reappears once every hundred years, opened on Broadway.

Groton Daily Independent

Saturday, March 13, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 250 ~ 95 of 95

In 1954, the Battle of Dien Bien Phu began during the First Indochina War as Viet Minh forces attacked French troops, who were defeated nearly two months later.

In 1969, the Apollo 9 astronauts splashed down, ending a mission that included the successful testing of the Lunar Module.

In 1996, a gunman burst into an elementary school in Dunblane, Scotland, and opened fire, killing 16 children and one teacher before killing himself.

In 2013, Jorge Bergoglio (HOHR'-hay behr-GOHG'-lee-oh) of Argentina was elected pope, choosing the name Francis; he was the first pontiff from the Americas and the first from outside Europe in more than a millennium.

In 2018, President Donald Trump abruptly dumped Secretary of State Rex Tillerson -- via Twitter -- and moved CIA Director Mike Pompeo from the role of America's spy chief to its top diplomat.

Ten years ago: The estimated death toll from Japan's earthquake and tsunami climbed past 10,000 as authorities raced to combat the threat of multiple nuclear reactor meltdowns while hundreds of thousands of people struggled to find food and water. The NCAA men's basketball selection committee released its 68-team draw which included a record 11 teams from the Big East, the deepest conference in the nation.

Five years ago: A Kurdish woman blew herself up in a car at a busy transport hub in Ankara, Turkey, killing 37 people in an attack claimed by TAK, also known as the Kurdish Freedom Falcons.

One year ago: President Donald Trump declared the coronavirus pandemic a national emergency, freeing up money and resources for state and local governments to fight the outbreak. Stocks clawed back some of their losses on Wall Street and in Europe a day after the market's worst session in more than three decades. Delta Air Lines said it would cut its passenger-carrying capacity by 40% to handle an unprecedented drop in air travel demand. Louisiana became the first state to delay a presidential primary because of the virus; the April 4 primary was delayed until June 20. (It was later delayed a second time, to July 11.)

Today's Birthdays: Jazz musician Roy Haynes is 96. Songwriter Mike Stoller (STOH'-ler) is 88. Singer-songwriter Neil Sedaka is 82. R&B/gospel singer Candi Staton is 81. Opera singer Julia Migenes is 72. Actor William H. Macy is 71. Comedian Robin Duke is 67. Actor Dana Delany is 65. Sen. John Hoeven, R-N.D., is 64. Rock musician Adam Clayton (U2) is 61. Jazz musician Terence Blanchard is 59. Actor Christopher Collet is 53. Rock musician Matt McDonough (Mudvayne) is 52. Actor Annabeth Gish is 50. Actor Tracy Wells is 50. Rapper-actor Common is 49. Rapper Khujo (Goodie Mob, The Lumberjacks) is 49. Singer Glenn Lewis is 46. Actor Danny Masterson is 45. Actor Noel Fisher is 37. Singers Natalie and Nicole Albino (Nina Sky) are 37. Actor Emile Hirsch is 36. Olympic gold medal skier Mikaela Shiffrin is 26. Tennis star Coco Gauff is 17.