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Bates Township Road Right of Way Notice

Bates Township Board of Supervisors reminds all landowners and tenants that the road right-of-way extends 33 feet from the center of the township road. This ditch is to be maintained and mowed. Any crops planted in the road right-of-way will be mowed and expenses charged to the landowner.

Landowner is responsible for spraying all noxious weeds.

Bates Township Board of Supervisors

Betty Geist

Township Clerk

Published twice at the total approximate cost of \$12.93. 19835



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Instrumental music position on the chopping block, again

As you can tell on the agenda that there will be discussion on merging the two instrumental positions into one. The positions at risk are Austin Fordham and Desiree Yeigh. This is not the first time that the music department has faced the challenge of a reduction in force.

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

March 22, 2021 – 7:00 PM – Groton Area Elementary Commons

AGENDA:

1. Call to Order with members present. Approve agenda as proposed or amended.

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

CONSENT AGENDA:

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

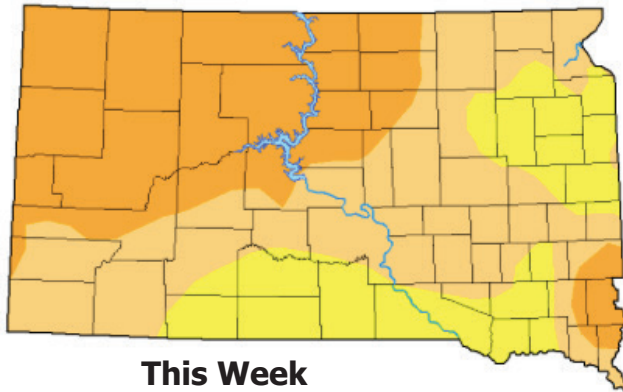
1. Open Forum for Public Participation...in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Discussion/Action on 2021-2022 School District Calendar.
3. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

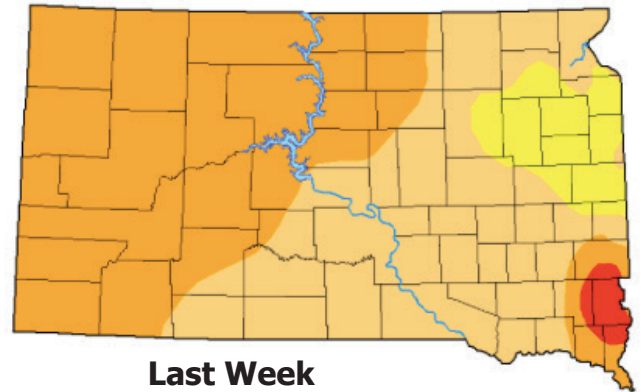
1. Discussion/Action regarding reduction in force of 1.0 FTE instrumental music position.
2. Approve hiring Joie Spier, MS Language Arts/Social Studies Teacher and JH Volleyball Coach, for 2020-2021 school year.
3. Approve hiring Kyle Gerlach, PE/Health Teacher and Assistant Boys Basketball Coach, for 2020-2021 school year.
4. Approve hiring Jordyn Bortnem, MS/HS Special Education Teacher, for 2020-2021 school year.

ADJOURN

Drought Monitor



This Week



Last Week

High Plains

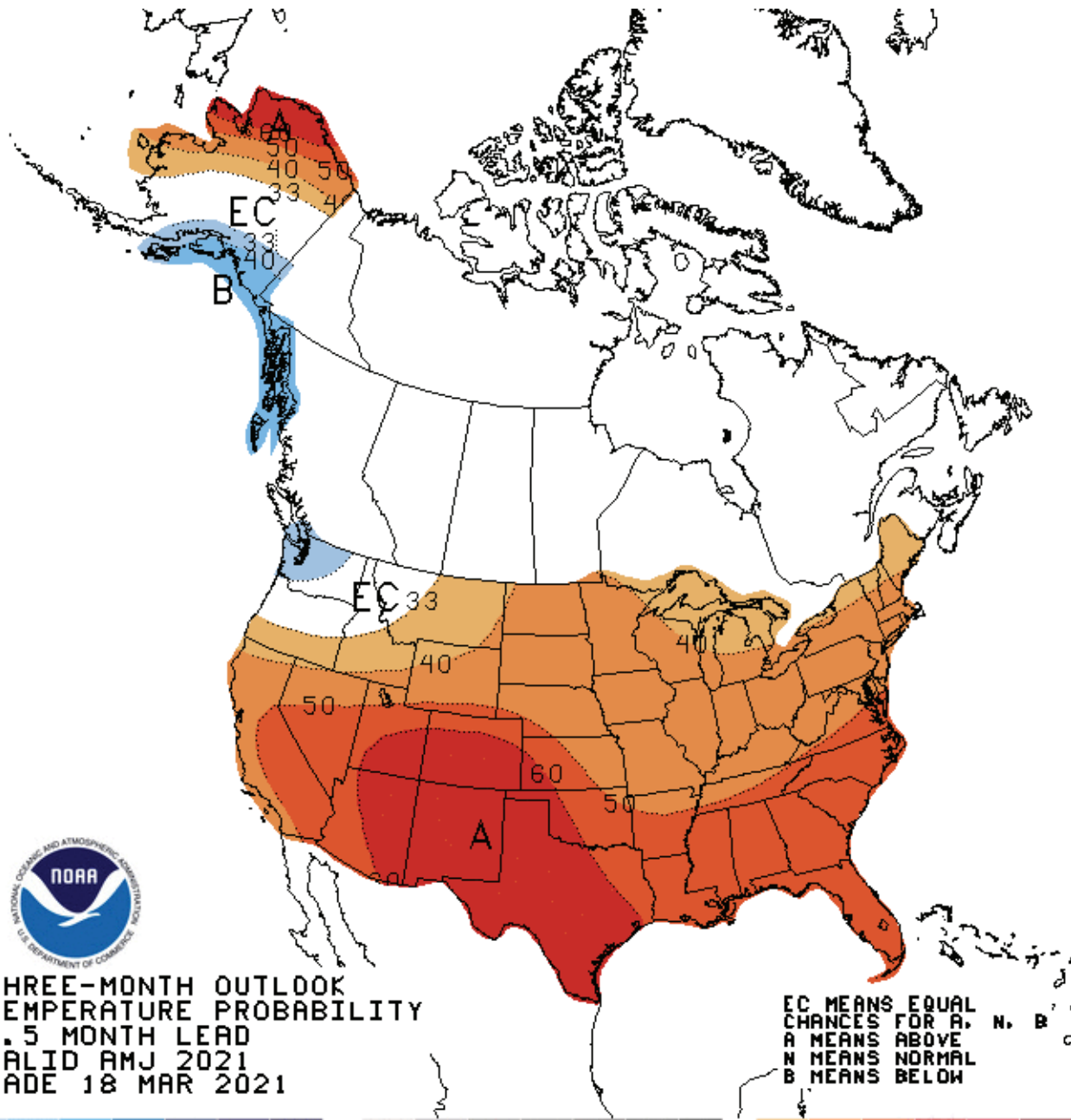
A strong and slow-moving low pressure system brought widespread heavy precipitation (more than 2 inches, liquid equivalent) to northeast Colorado, southeast Wyoming, southwest South Dakota, northern Kansas, and much of Nebraska. Denver, Colorado received 27.1 inches of snowfall on March 13 and 14, making it the 4th largest snowfall on record. According to the storm summary from the Weather Prediction Center, other notable snowfall amounts included: 42" near Buckhorn Mountain, CO, 27" near Hot Springs, SD, and 19" near Gering, NE. The highest snowfall amount reported from this storm was 52.5" at Windy Peak, WY. The heavy snowfall brought snow water content close to average for mid-March across most of Colorado and Wyoming. This recent heavy precipitation also eliminated precipitation deficits and resulted in precipitation surpluses for the past 90 days for much of the central Plains. Therefore, a broad 1-category improvement was made for areas that received 1 inch or more of precipitation. Based on SPI values at various time scales, small areas of 2-category improvements were justified for the central Great Plains west to the central Rockies. Please note that the drought impact type was changed from SL (short and long-term) to L (long-term) drought only where the heaviest precipitation occurred, but where long-term indicators such as SPI support a continuation of D1+ long-term drought.

Based on 120-day SPI values, a 1-category improvement was made to parts of southwest Wyoming and bordering areas of southeast Idaho and northeast Utah. Farther to the north, the northern third of South Dakota and North Dakota missed out on the drought relief. During the past two weeks, widespread 1 to 2-category degradations were made and only slight changes were necessary this week. However, based on soil moisture below the 5th percentile and SPI values, D3 (extreme) drought was introduced to parts of North Dakota. If below normal precipitation persists later into the spring when temperatures warm, rapid intensification of drought conditions may occur.

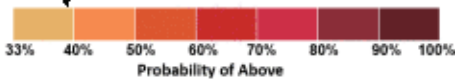
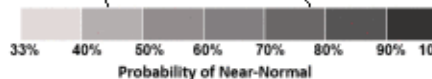
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Temperature Spring Outlook



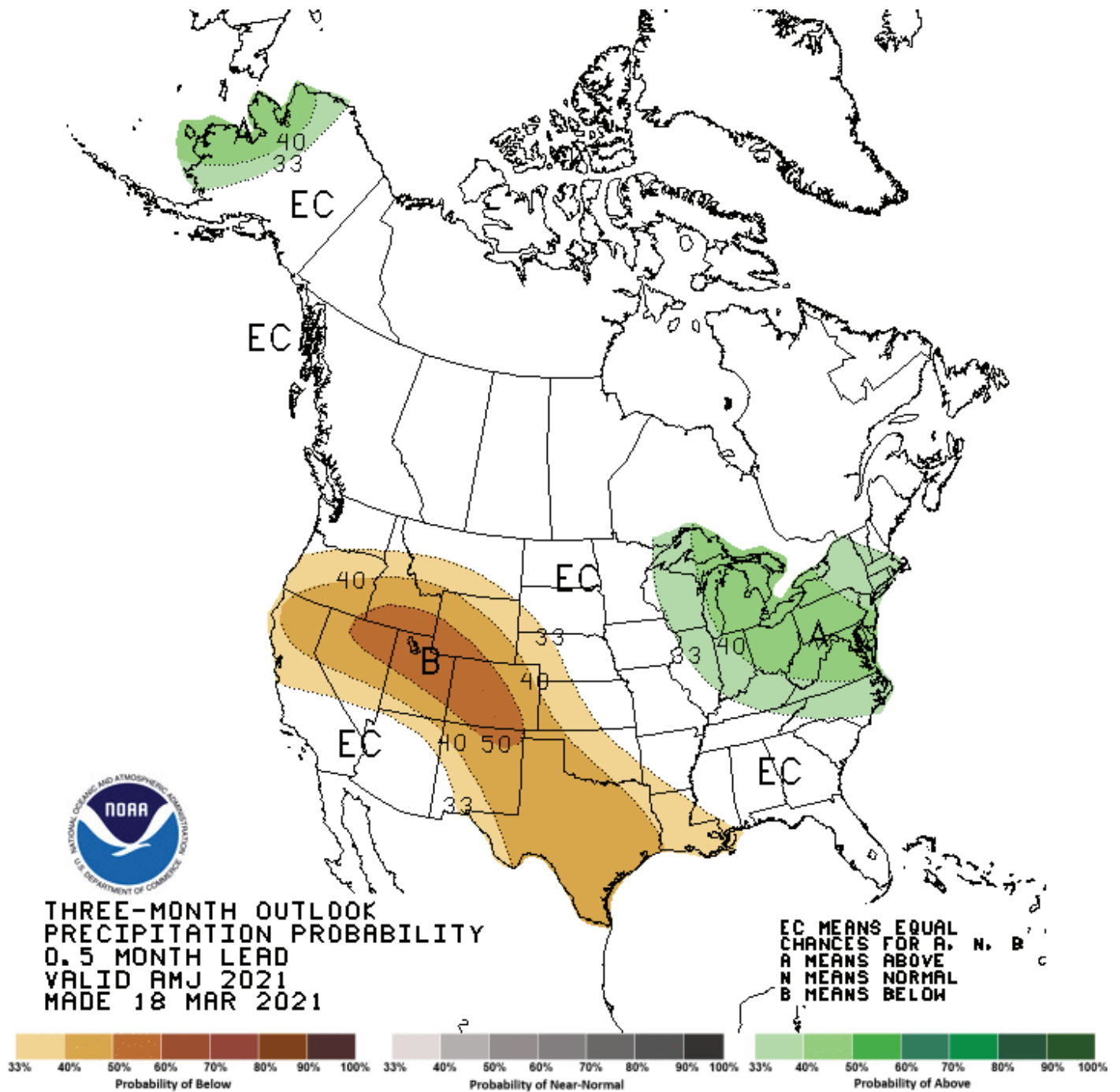
THREE-MONTH OUTLOOK
TEMPERATURE PROBABILITY
0.5 MONTH LEAD
VALID AMJ 2021
MADE 18 MAR 2021



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Precipitation Spring Outlook



Spotlight on Groton Area Staff

Name: Sarah Hanten

Occupation: High School English Instructor

Length of Employment: 2005-Present

Despite the ever-changing nature of the English language, there is still a necessity for trained educators to teach students about proper usage of English in both written and spoken forms. While some students may debate the necessity of formal English, there is still a place in society for those with knowledge of proper etiquette and grammar. As such, the role of the English instructor is to ensure that students can learn how to speak and write English in the proper manner. In Groton, this duty is placed upon the shoulders of Mrs. Sarah Hanten, Groton Area High School's resident English and Speech teacher.



Sarah Hanten graduated from Northern State University in 1998 with a major in English Education and a minor in Business Education. She declared her minor in Business Education because of her skill in math and accounting. Before beginning her tenure in Groton in 2005, Mrs. Hanten taught in Redfield for two years and spent five years teaching high school students in Roncalli.

As a teacher, Mrs. Hanten prefers to tailor assignments to her students based on their interests and aptitudes. Before the advent of precautionary measures for the prevention of COVID-19 in the classroom, Mrs. Hanten often gave students group assignments and discussion-based activities. However, group activities are understandably sparse in order to prevent close contact.

Sarah Hanten is a member of the Carnival of Silver Skates board, a 4-H Club Leader, and dedicates a majority of her free time to assisting her four children with their various extracurricular activities. As such, she can often be found ferrying her kids from one activity to another. Mrs. Hanten and her family are also active participants at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church in Groton.

Editor's Note: This is a continuing series compiled by Benjamin Higgins. Higgins who is working for the Groton Independent through the Project Skills program.



Happy 80th Birthday

**Patrick
Stoebner**

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#389 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Nothing to see here. We're up to 29,690,300 total cases in the US, 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 60,500 new cases reported today. Hospitalizations were up a bit to 41,136 today. There were 1607 deaths reported today, bringing us up to 539,167 total deaths.

From my tone and the numbers, I'd say March 18, 2020, one year ago today, was not a good day. I started out this way: "Things look grim. I'm hoping we're reaching some kind of peak created by increased testing and that this will abate soon, but I am not hopeful based on the fact that some states ran out of testing supplies on Monday [this was a Wednesday] and still have not been replenished. This means we likely still have some important number of undetected cases waiting for sufficient testing. Thinking it will continue to get significantly worse each day for a while yet." We jumped to 8317 cases, a 49 percent increase overnight. New York alone added 1000 cases on this day; the state was in deep trouble. There'd been 147 deaths, a nearly 50 percent increase in a day.

Worldwide, we had more than 200,000 cases and 8000 deaths. The number of cases had doubled in just 12 days. While China had 81,000 cases, others were catching up: Italy over 31,000, Iran over 16,000, and Spain at almost 14,000. Over 6000 of those deaths were in just three countries: 3000 in China, 2500 in Italy, and almost 1000 in Iran. The European Union and at least 30 countries had imposed some travel bans. The International Olympic Committee, despite growing protests, still planned to go ahead with the Tokyo Olympics on schedule in July.

This was the day we heard the first of monoclonal antibody treatments and also convalescent plasma. One of those panned out well, and as we very recently heard, the other did not. It was also the day I heard about an upcoming coronavirus party in Rapid City, complete with DJ, karaoke, and a free roll of toilet paper with every bucket of beer. We were stupid early and often here in the Mount Rushmore state. Sigh.

We were up to nine authorized diagnostic tests and were still short of testing capacity, woefully short; so we were recognizing the role of undetected, asymptomatic infections in transmission without having any way to deal with the problem. The first rapid test was announced. We were also getting some idea how inadequate infection control procedures were in most nursing homes as the body count mounted. And we were learning about symptoms and how long it takes to die once you're sick; experience is a great teacher. The first cases showed up in the federal prison system; everyone knew—or should have known—what this was going to mean: The infection and death rates in prisons have been horrific. Two members of Congress were diagnosed on this day. NASA ordered employees to work remotely. There were serious blood shortages, and calls were going out for donors.

Cancellations and closures: schools in Colorado, Scotland, and Wales; standardized testing for California students; floor trading at the New York Stock Exchange; 12,094 flights just on this one day; men's and women's professional tennis tours; US Census field operations; all US auto plants; refugee admissions to the US; foreclosures and evictions; the Eurovision Song Contest; the US-Canada border; immigration courts and hearings; the White House state dinner for the Spanish royal family; the Glastonbury music festival.

We've been watching long enough to identify a trend, and it's a trend no one's going to like; despite a nationwide decline in daily new-case average of almost 33 percent, we have 12 states showing increases of more than 10 percent over the last two weeks: Michigan has increased by over 80 percent in two weeks, and Hawaii clocks in at 42 percent. Then we have North Dakota and Minnesota in the mid-20s. Between about 10 percent and 16 percent are Nevada, Idaho, Montana, Alabama, Maine, New Hampshire, Maryland, and Delaware. When we add that to the persistently-high averages in New York, Rhode Island, and New Jersey, I get really nervous. A whole lot of the signals are pointing in the wrong direction, and I'm not so sure we can stay ahead of the gathering wave with vaccinations—just not sure we can go fast enough at this point.

There's been some analysis of the situation in Michigan, which is particularly grim, and here's what we're seeing, according to the Mid-Michigan District Health Department medical director, Dr. Jennifer Morse, who spoke with CNN yesterday: rollback of restrictions, a prison outbreak, Covid fatigue, failure to wear

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masks, hopefulness with the vaccines, and the B.1.1.7 variant. She pointed out that there has been an increase in travel as well.

Two of the states with the big numbers, Michigan and Minnesota, are seeing significant variant effects. In Michigan, B.1.1.7 accounted for 420 of the 725 cases reported by the Department of Corrections—that would be the prison cases cited above. Nationally, B.1.1.7 accounted for 36.11 percent of new cases a week ago, and that proportion continues to grow. It seems to really start hurting you once it's above 50 percent of new cases, and so we're approaching that. Minnesota's had a more gradual increase than Michigan, but it's been steady. Of particular concern is an outbreak of B.1.1.7 cases in Carver County linked to school sports; the county has had a 62 percent increase in cases in the week ending March 4, which would fit with B.1.1.7's predilection for transmissibility.

One of the two new New York variants we discussed last night, B.1.526, is spreading quickly in that state, along with B.1.1.7. Together, they're accounting for half of the cases in New York City. Considering the aggressive vaccination campaign carried out there, the fact that new-case numbers have been fairly level for a while is concerning; there is suspicion these new, highly-transmissible variants are offsetting the gains from vaccination. That means a whole lot more vaccinating needs to happen fast in order to start bringing new-case numbers down in the city.

If there's any good news here, it is that we continue to see support for believing our current vaccines can cover these variants we're seeing. We've been reading about reduced antibody efficacy against some of these variants, particularly B.1.351 that first was detected in South Africa. There's been evidence that, even though antibodies are less effective, they're still going to be capable of neutralizing the virus, at least enough to prevent severe cases. There is new research now with better news. In order to discuss it, first we need to do a little science.

You may recall from our conversations over the past year that antibodies aren't all there is to the immune response; they're just the easy-to-measure part. Short version: The adaptive immune response, the part of the operation that responds specifically to a particular pathogen has two arms, the humoral and the cell-mediated. Humoral responses are the ones involving antibodies, and they're the ones we tend to get fixated on, mostly I suspect because antibodies are easy to measure and quantify. The antibody titer (level) is something we can run a blood test for and express as a number, which is handy. Cell-mediated responses are a little more complicated to quantify and to understand. They depend on white blood cells called T cells, which come in several varieties. There are the aptly-named killer T cells (known to us nerdy old science types as CD8+ T cells) that go out and find cells infected with virus, destroying them as they come across them; knocking off host cells leaves the virus stranded with no way to replicate, a good outcome from our perspective, well worth the sacrifice of a few mucosal cells or whatever. Other T cells (CD4+ T cells) do a bunch of other things, including stimulating antibody production and recruiting killer Ts. This means T cells don't prevent infection the way antibodies do; they wait until your cells are infected and then make the virus sorry. These are the guys who make the difference between a little cough and a terrible infection. They clear Covid-19 before the virus can spread from your upper respiratory tract to your lungs; this also restricts transmission by reducing the number of infected cells you have so that you won't shed so much virus into the community. If you missed our earlier conversations about these responses or need a refresher, see my Update #150 posted on July 22 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3796230603726651>

We have some pretty solid evidence from a Duke University research team that indicates T cells are more resistant to emerging variants than humoral responses are. SARS-CoV-2 seems to generate T cells that target 15 to 20 different places on the viral proteins. Better news is that the particular bits of protein targeted vary from person to person. This means a population is going to generate a huge variety of T cells, each focused on a different antigenic component of the virus. Alessandro Sette from the La Jolla Institute for Immunology told the journal *Nature*, "That makes it very hard for the virus to mutate to escape cell recognition unlike the situation for antibodies." This is because a separate mutation (or two) is needed to escape each particular kind of sensitized T cell. I personally am in favor of things that make it hard for the virus to escape recognition.

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There are some early data from studies suggesting this might be precisely what's happening. So far published only in preprint (which means it's not yet peer-reviewed), there are some data showing T-cell responses to vaccination do not target regions that were mutated in variants we're worried about, particularly B.1.351, the variant which most worries us on this count. There is also preliminary evidence from Setts's research group showing the vast majority of T-cell responses evade the mutations. Nothing's for sure yet, but I like the direction this is taking.

We don't have firm information yet, but it makes sense that, because T cells can target more than just that spike protein which has been susceptible to antibodies, there is some likelihood that more stable proteins found inside the infected cell would remain susceptible to T cells even though cycles of mutation. And just in case, there is a company, Gritstone Oncology, designing a vaccine targeted at viral proteins known to elicit T-cell responses as well as spike protein, which will produce a robust antibody response too, sort of hedging their bets. The company president, Andrew Allen, told Nature he hopes this vaccine will never be produced. "We developed this absolutely to prepare for bad scenarios. We're half hoping that everything we did was a waste of time. But it's good to be ready." Indeed, it is. Makes me feel better.

A new study appeared yesterday in the journal *The Lancet* from a research team in Denmark. They looked at reinfections in a sample of four million people in the last quarter of 2020 compared with the three months of March, April, and May. In that sample, of the 11,068 people who tested positive in the first surge, only 72 tested positive during the second surge, a reinfection rate of only 0.65 percent. Most of the reinfections occurred in people who were 65 years or older—not a big surprise since we've already established your immune system gets less efficient as you age. I'm going to say that I wouldn't count on a prior infection for protection; even among the young, prior infection provided only about 80 percent protection from reinfection, and in the older group, the protection diminished to only 47 percent. This points up the importance of vaccination, particularly in older adults.

Rita Krenz is a flight paramedic, riding a helicopter that picks up patients from emergency settings or transports them from one health care facility to another. She works 24-hour shifts, flying several times a week, and got into in her career to help people. Thing is, she began to wonder how much she was helping them when they often ended up faced with financial ruin due to huge bills they couldn't pay for their transport and care. As health care costs rise and insurance coverage declines, people can end up with five-figure or higher bills, amounts some people will simply never be able to pay. More than one in seven US residents has overdue medical debt, and some significant proportion of those will suffer long-term damage from their inability to pay.

Krenz decided she needed to do more than care for patients, and she discovered RIP Medical Debt, an organization we've discussed before here. They buy up overdue medical debt from collectors for pennies on the dollar and then forgive it to give the debtors a new start in life without the burden of debt. This organization uses individual donation, sponsors, and fundraising to pull together money to help debtors. Krenz joined the effort last fall by asking friends and family to kick in. RIP Medical Debt helped her to fundraise too. While she had a slow start, putting in her own stimulus check, she eventually passed her initial fundraising goal of \$15,000 to raise more than \$18,000. With that, the charity was able to purchase the debt for over 900 people—over a million dollars' worth, sending each one a letter telling them their debt is forgiven. Just like that. RIP Medical Debt has wiped out over three billion dollars in medical debt since it started in 2014, and that's just a drop in the bucket, considering there was over \$140 billion in collections just last year. This is ruining people's lives, lots of them.

Krenz told the AP that her success in raising money for this purpose was "uplifting and reaffirming that there are good people in the world." There are. It's easy to forget that in these tough times, so it's nice to have a reminder. Let's set a goal to be among those people.

Be well. I'll be back tomorrow.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	455	433	883	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2832	2715	6019	39	Substantial	14.9%
Bennett	385	371	1189	9	Minimal	3.1%
Bon Homme	1511	1479	2121	26	Minimal	1.5%
Brookings	3689	3560	12265	37	Substantial	3.7%
Brown	5229	5059	12959	90	Moderate	6.2%
Brule	699	683	1901	9	Minimal	3.2%
Buffalo	422	407	902	13	Minimal	8.3%
Butte	992	959	3271	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	262	4	Minimal	0.0%
Charles Mix	1326	1259	4003	21	Substantial	7.2%
Clark	388	368	957	5	Minimal	16.7%
Clay	1830	1790	5497	15	Substantial	6.2%
Codington	4118	3933	9828	79	Substantial	21.6%
Corson	473	460	1005	12	Minimal	9.1%
Custer	770	745	2764	12	Moderate	3.5%
Davison	3013	2899	6687	65	Substantial	13.4%
Day	680	639	1809	29	Moderate	3.6%
Deuel	484	464	1156	8	Minimal	5.0%
Dewey	1435	1405	3894	26	Substantial	6.9%
Douglas	437	425	930	9	Minimal	6.5%
Edmunds	488	469	1079	13	Minimal	14.8%
Fall River	557	530	2674	15	Substantial	4.5%
Faulk	363	348	706	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	990	931	2292	39	Moderate	5.0%
Gregory	563	516	1310	30	Moderate	4.0%
Haakon	258	245	545	10	Minimal	14.3%
Hamlin	734	677	1828	38	Moderate	4.3%
Hand	353	335	834	6	Moderate	9.1%
Hanson	373	361	741	4	Moderate	13.6%
Harding	92	91	187	1	Minimal	0.0%
Hughes	2343	2279	6704	36	Moderate	2.2%
Hutchinson	799	759	2421	26	Moderate	0.0%

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Hyde	139	138	418	1	Minimal	0.0%
Jackson	282	264	919	14	Minimal	9.1%
Jerauld	275	253	565	16	Minimal	0.0%
Jones	86	86	229	0	None	0.0%
Kingsbury	660	632	1702	14	Moderate	2.4%
Lake	1249	1181	3424	18	Substantial	12.7%
Lawrence	2843	2778	8644	45	Moderate	2.0%
Lincoln	7994	7743	20710	77	Substantial	10.5%
Lyman	608	590	1885	10	Moderate	6.5%
Marshall	354	325	1230	6	Substantial	10.0%
McCook	765	723	1671	24	Substantial	19.4%
McPherson	240	234	561	4	Minimal	0.0%
Meade	2654	2578	7839	31	Moderate	7.4%
Mellette	255	248	746	2	Moderate	0.0%
Miner	280	255	589	9	Minimal	10.0%
Minnehaha	28835	27889	79846	339	Substantial	9.4%
Moody	621	601	1788	17	Minimal	0.0%
Oglala Lakota	2076	2003	6687	49	Moderate	9.2%
Pennington	13108	12760	40031	191	Moderate	6.2%
Perkins	348	332	829	14	Minimal	0.0%
Potter	384	371	850	4	Moderate	13.8%
Roberts	1277	1185	4228	36	Substantial	18.7%
Sanborn	335	326	699	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	818	776	2167	26	Moderate	9.4%
Stanley	338	336	953	2	Minimal	4.3%
Sully	137	134	321	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1220	1189	4174	29	Minimal	1.5%
Tripp	723	687	1510	16	Substantial	11.9%
Turner	1105	1020	2769	53	Substantial	20.8%
Union	2058	1952	6407	40	Substantial	11.3%
Walworth	737	707	1846	15	Moderate	12.8%
Yankton	2850	2776	9495	28	Moderate	9.0%
Ziebach	337	327	877	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1918	0		

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South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	86116	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13631	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5548	5%
Hispanic	4188	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2551	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1685	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1484	1%

COVID-19 Variant	# of Cases
B.1.1.7	3
B.1.351	0
B.1.427	0
B.1.429	0
P.1	0

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	59942	903
Male	55261	1016

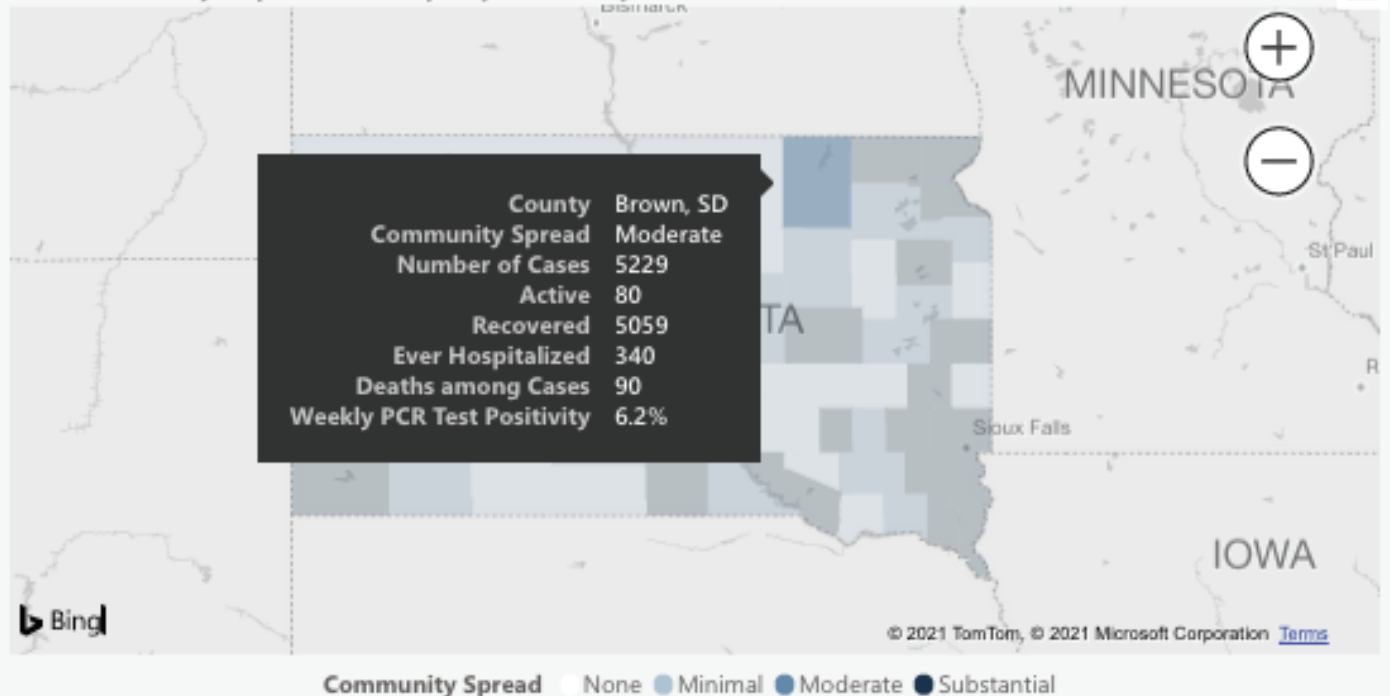
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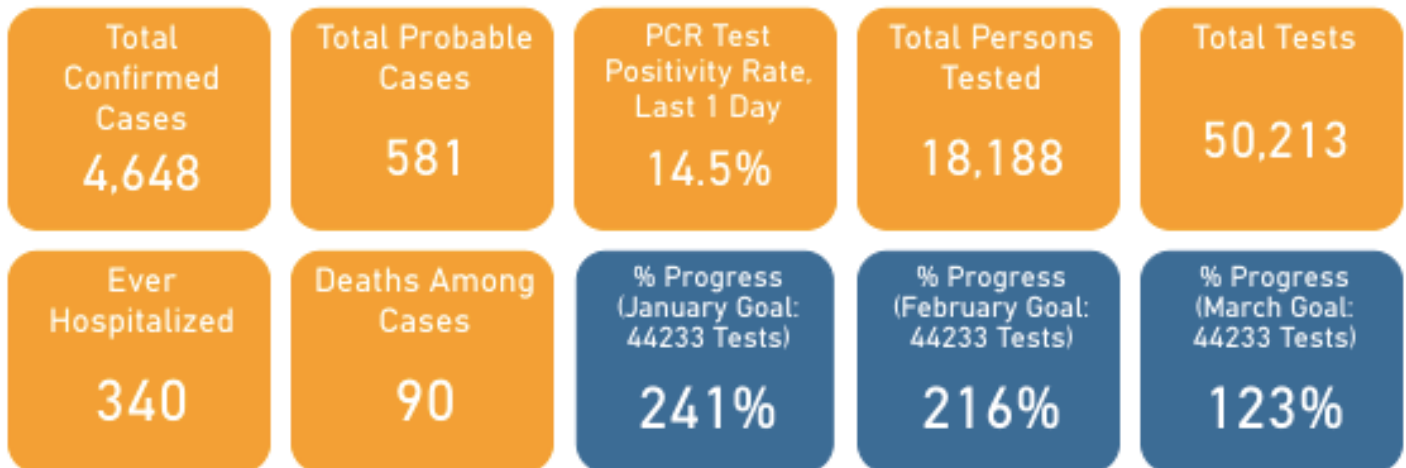
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



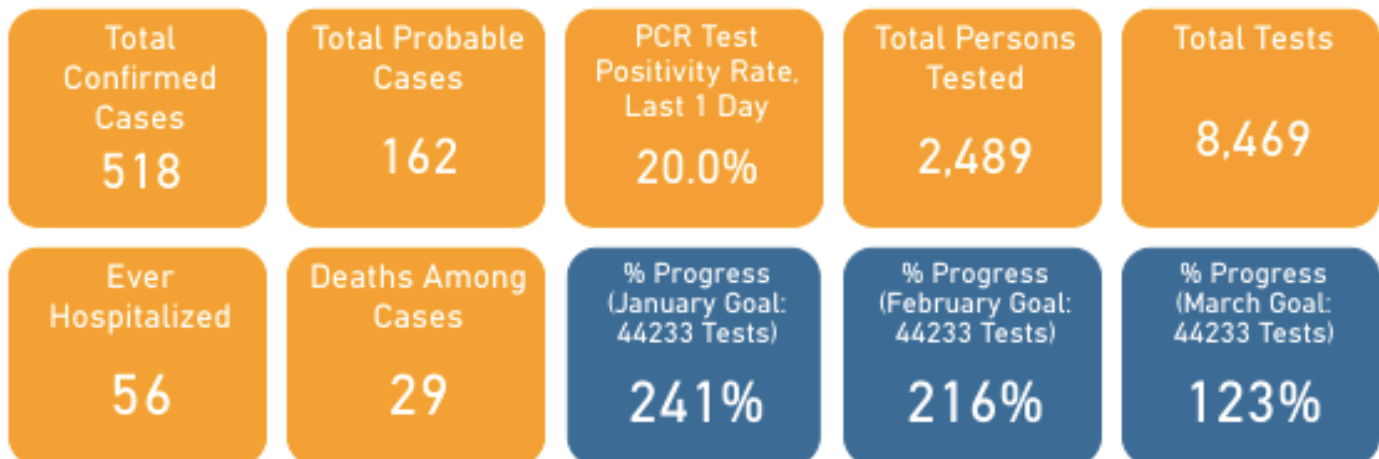
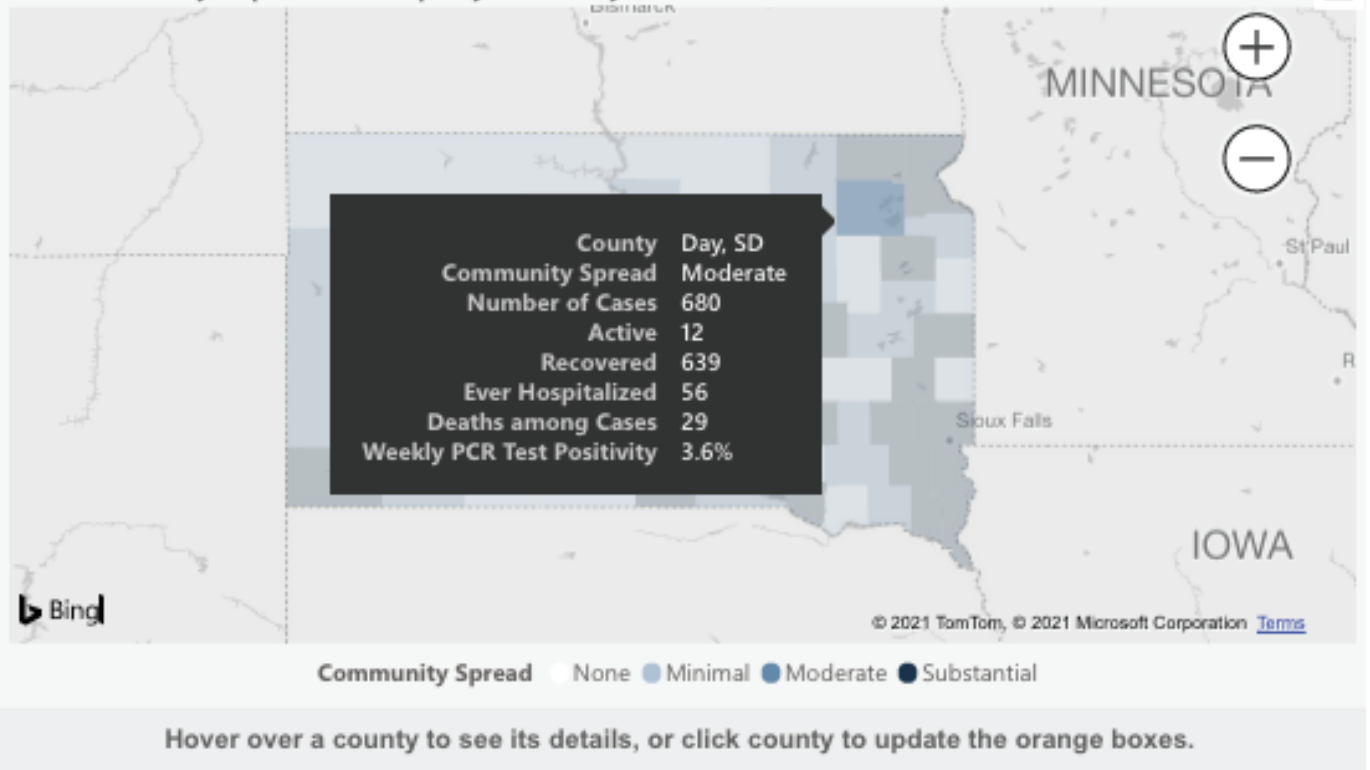
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Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

321,447

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	4,035
Moderna	156,358
Pfizer	161,054

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

204,793

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	4,035
Moderna - 1 dose	44,276
Moderna - Series Complete	56,041
Pfizer - 1 dose	39,844
Pfizer - Series Complete	60,605

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

35%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	35.23%
Series Complete	21.04%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	893	303	295	598
Beadle	6,618	2,143	2,237	4,380
Bennett*	478	132	173	305
Bon Homme*	3,574	1,136	1,219	2,355
Brookings	10,027	4,211	2,908	7,119
Brown	15,265	3,811	5,727	9,538
Brule*	1,941	487	727	1,214
Buffalo*	132	76	28	104
Butte	2,216	894	661	1,555
Campbell	966	270	348	618
Charles Mix*	3,387	1,165	1,111	2,276
Clark	1,270	428	421	849
Clay	5,112	1,782	1,665	3,447
Codington*	10,003	3,215	3,394	6,609
Corson*	296	88	104	192
Custer*	2,875	861	1,007	1,868
Davison	7,585	2,177	2,704	4,881
Day*	2,526	890	818	1,708
Deuel	1,501	539	481	1,020
Dewey*	370	74	148	222
Douglas*	1,239	325	457	782
Edmunds	1,420	438	491	929
Fall River*	2,515	767	874	1,641
Faulk	1,081	337	372	709
Grant*	2,774	1,158	808	1,966
Gregory*	1,863	611	626	1,237
Haakon*	547	155	196	351

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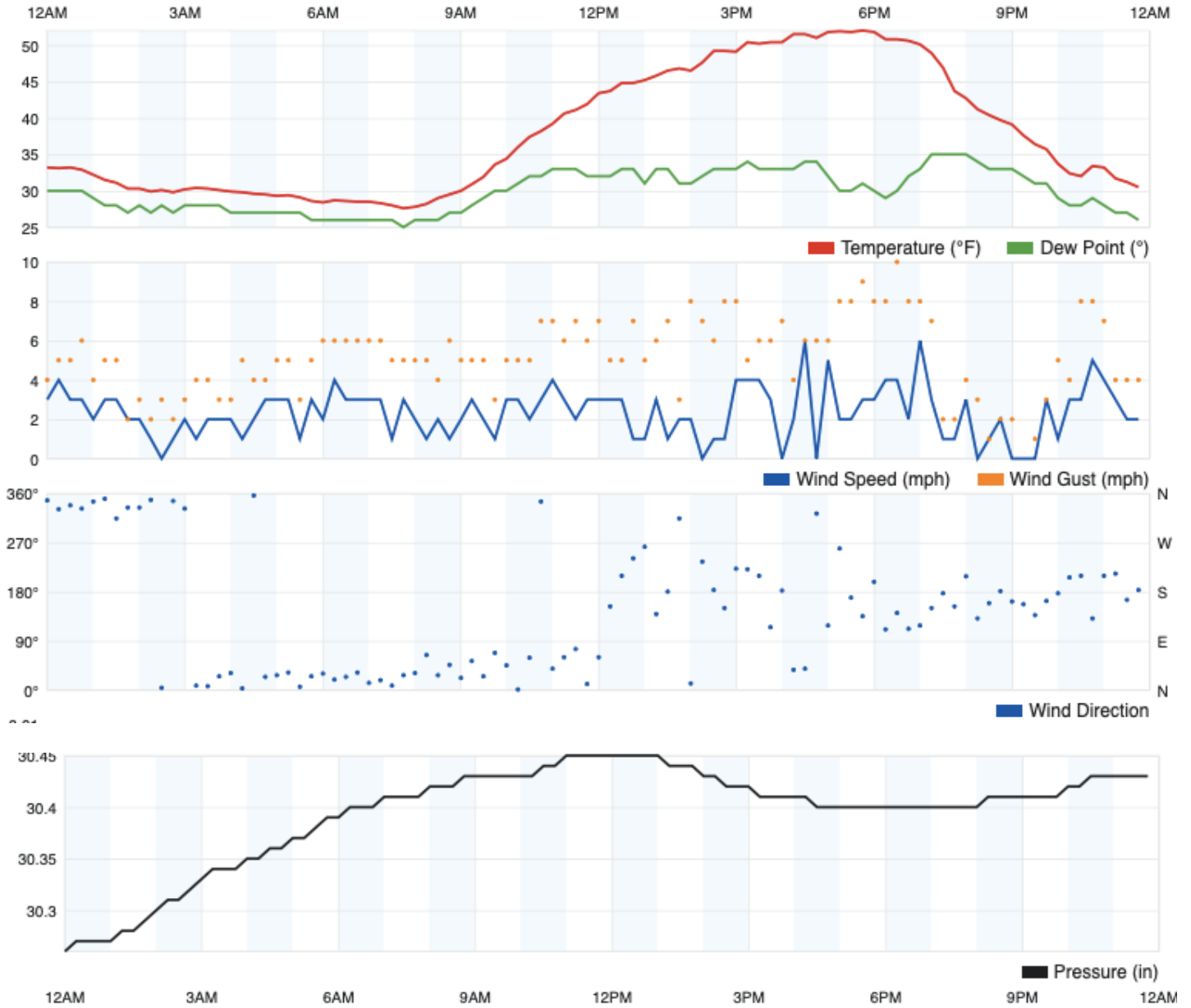
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Hamlin	1,767	607	580	1,187
Hand	1,570	508	531	1,039
Hanson	489	167	161	328
Harding	102	50	26	76
Hughes*	7,894	1,582	3,156	4,738
Hutchinson*	3,700	927	1,386	2,313
Hyde*	568	156	206	362
Jackson*	395	115	140	255
Jerauld	949	277	336	613
Jones*	624	154	235	389
Kingsbury	2,499	955	772	1,727
Lake	4,185	1,663	1,261	2,924
Lawrence	8,425	3,085	2,670	5,755
Lincoln	26,184	5,641	10,271	15,912
Lyman*	839	273	283	556
Marshall*	1,744	570	587	1,157
McCook	2,239	619	810	1,429
McPherson	241	77	82	159
Meade*	6,439	1,941	2,249	4,190
Mellette*	46	18	14	32
Miner	876	258	309	567
Minnehaha*	82,304	18,991	31,654	50,645
Moody*	1,841	679	581	1,260
Oglala Lakota*	183	57	63	120
Pennington*	38,276	9,182	14,547	23,729
Perkins*	685	281	202	483
Potter	930	372	279	651
Roberts*	4,496	1,258	1,619	2,877
Sanborn	985	311	337	648
Spink	2,959	833	1,063	1,896
Stanley*	1,203	229	487	716
Sully	367	67	150	217
Todd*	159	51	54	105
Tripp*	2,009	553	728	1,281
Turner	3,514	1,022	1,246	2,268
Union	3,398	1,332	1,033	2,365
Walworth*	1,902	460	721	1,181
Yankton	9,921	2,625	3,648	6,273
Ziebach*	57	15	21	36
Other	6,009	1,713	2,148	3,861

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



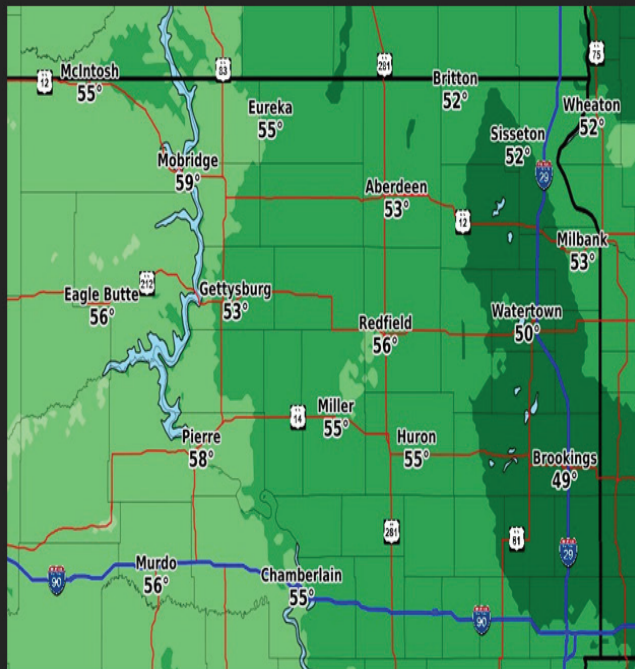
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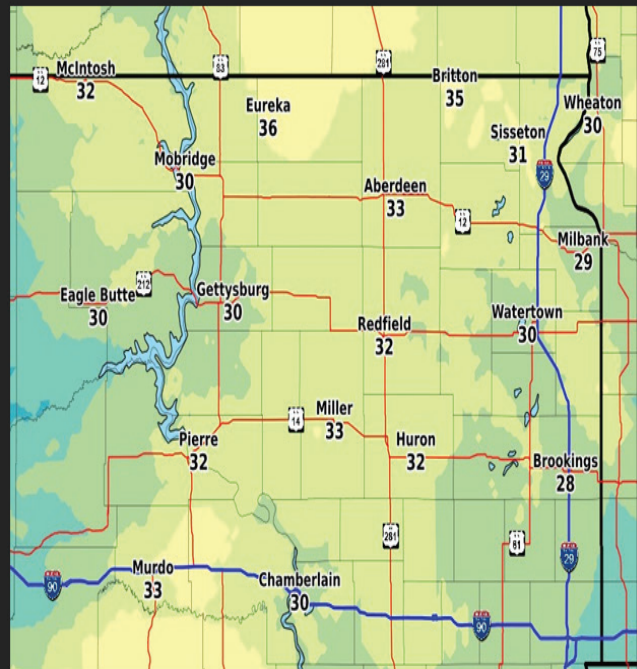
Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny then Sunny and Breezy	Clear then Clear and Breezy	Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Breezy. Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance Rain	Chance Rain
High: 52 °F	Low: 35 °F	High: 61 °F	Low: 41 °F	High: 58 °F

Warm And Breezy Today

High Temperatures Today



Max Wind Gusts Expected



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

Updated: 3/19/2021 4:26 AM Central

A warm and breezy start to the weekend is expected, with highs today in the 50s and wind gusts 30-35 mph possible. Dry conditions start the weekend, but we may see a chance for some light rain Sunday.

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Today in Weather History

March 19, 1968: During a severe weather event, hail up to 1.75 inches in diameter fell 2 miles south of Brookings. Also, hail 1.00 inch in diameter fell 3 miles northeast of Sioux Falls.

March 19, 2006: Heavy snow of 7 to as much as 20 inches fell on the afternoon of the 18th until around noon on the 20th. The South Dakota Department of Public Safety issued a travel advisory for any travel but especially for the State Basketball Tournament travelers. Interstate-90 was closed on Sunday into Monday morning, with many people stranded. Many cars and trucks were stuck on the roads. Many schools and meetings were postponed or canceled. Snowfall amounts included 8 inches at Blunt, Onida, and Lake Sharpe, 9 inches at Mission Ridge, 10 inches at Pierre, 11 inches at Fort Pierre and near Stephan, 12 inches at Eagle Butte, 14 inches northwest of Presho, 16 inches at Murdo, and 20 inches near Iona.

1907: The highest March temperature in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, was set when the temperature soared to 97 degrees. Dodge City, Kansas, also set a March record with 98 degrees. Denver, Colorado, set a daily record high of 81 degrees.

1948: An estimated F4 tornado moved through Fosterburg, Bunker Hill, and Gillespie, Illinois, killing 33 people and injuring 449 others. 2,000 buildings in Bunker Hill were damaged or destroyed. The total damage was \$3.6 million.

2003: One of the worst blizzards since records began in 1872, struck the Denver metro area and Colorado's Front Range started with a vengeance. Denver International Airport was closed, stranding about 4,000 travelers. The weight of the snow caused a 40-foot gash in a portion of the roof, forcing the evacuation of that section of the main terminal building. Winds gusting to 40 mph produced drifts six feet high in places around the city. Snowfall in foothills was even more impressive. The heavy wet snow caused numerous roofs of homes and businesses to collapse. The estimated cost of property damage alone, not including large commercial buildings, was \$93 million, making it the most costly snowstorm on record for the area. In Denver alone, at least 258 structures were damaged. Up to 135,000 people lost power during the storm, and it took several days for power to be restored. Mayor Wellington Webb of Denver said, "This is the storm of the century, a backbreaker, a record-breaker, a roof breaker." Avalanches in the mountains and foothills closed many roads, including Interstate 70, stranding hundreds of skiers and travelers. The Eldora Ski area 270 skiers were stranded when an avalanche closed the main access road. After the storm, a military helicopter had to deliver food to the resort until the road could be cleared. Two people died in Aurora from heart attacks after shoveling the heavy wet snow. The National Guard sent 40 soldiers and 20 heavy-duty vehicles to rescue stranded travelers along a section of I-70. The storm made March 2003 the snowiest March on record, the fourth snowiest month on record, and the fifth wettest March on record. The total of 22.9 inches is the most significant 24-hour total in March. The storm also broke 19 consecutive months of below-average precipitation for Denver. The 31.8 inches of snow was recorded at the former Stapleton Airport in Denver for its second-greatest snowstorm on record (the greatest was 37.5 inches on 12/4-12/5/1913) with up to three feet in other areas in and around the city and more than seven feet in the foothills. Higher amounts included: Fritz Peak: 87.5 inches, Rollinsville: 87.5 inches, Canin Creek: 83 inches, Near Bergen Park: 74 inches, Northwest of Evergreen: 73 inches, Cola Creek Canyon: 72 inches, Georgetown: 70 inches, Jamestown: 63 inches, Near Blackhawk: 60 inches, Eldora Ski Area: 55 inches, Ken Caryl Ranch: 46.6 inches, Aurora: 40 inches, Centennial: 38 inches, Buckley AFB: 37 inches, Southwest Denver: 35 inches, Louisville: 34 inches, Arvada: 32 inches, Broomfield: 31 inches, Westminster: 31 inches and Boulder: 22.5 inches. This storm was the result of a very moist intense slow-moving Pacific system that tracked across the four corners and into southeastern Colorado, which allowed a deep easterly upslope to form among the front-range.

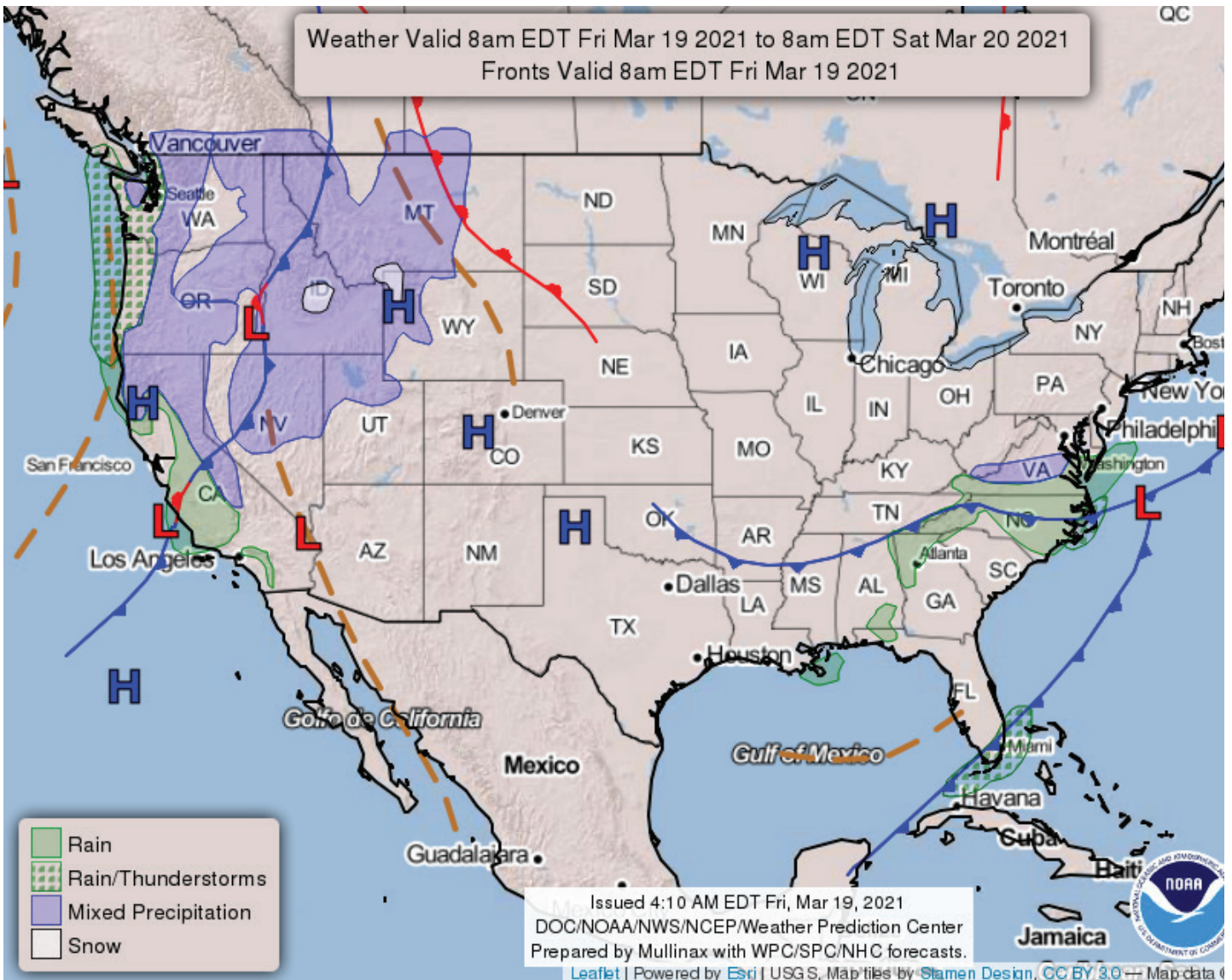
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 53 °F at 5:23 PM
Low Temp: 28 °F at 7:44 AM
Wind: 11 mph at 7:01 PM
Precip:

Record High: 73° in 2012
Record Low: -11° in 1965
Average High: 41°F
Average Low: 21°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.59
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.61
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:45 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:33 a.m.



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WHY TWELVE?

Why did Jesus choose twelve disciples? Was there some significance in that number? Could it have been because there were twelve months in the Jewish calendar, or because they divided their day into twelve hours, or because there were twelve tribes of Israel? Not at all.

We find the answer in Mark's gospel: "that they might be with Him!" Jesus wanted His "friends" to be with Him and learn from Him. Psalm 24:14 says, "The Lord is a friend to those who fear Him. He teaches them His covenant" – His plan of salvation.

Someone once said, "A friend is a person who knows you and likes to be with you despite your faults." This seems to go beyond "love." Love is "doing" something for someone because, as Christians, it is our obligation.

It is a gracious thought to know that God wants us to be His "friends." The picture represented in this verse is that of two friends sitting on a couch having a confidential conversation. What a wonderful way to think of our relationship with God: sitting next to Him and quietly talking to Him about this life and the one to come – His eternal covenant with His people – those whom He calls His friends – now and the life to come!

How amazing it is to think that we can share every thought with God as a friend. What an opportunity He offers us: to sit with Him as a friend and ask Him to teach us what His covenant is all about: His promises, His presence, His protection, His provisions, His peace – His plan for our well-being in this life and the one to come.

We can do this – be with Him – this very moment by reading His Word and allowing Him to speak to us through His Word as well as listening for His voice when we pray!

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for being our Friend and Teacher and always being willing to share Your Words and ways with us now! How blest we are! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The Lord is a friend to those who fear him. He teaches them his covenant. Psalm

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
- 03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
- 04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
- 04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
- 04/25/2021 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
- 09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
- 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

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

By The Associated Press

BOYS BASKETBALL=

First Round=

State Quarterfinal=

Class AA=

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58, Harrisburg 39

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 64, Brandon Valley 47

Sioux Falls Washington 49, Aberdeen Central 40

Yankton 50, Mitchell 46

Class A=

Dakota Valley 65, Winner 58

Dell Rapids 53, Vermillion 52

Sioux Falls Christian 58, St. Thomas More 47

Sioux Valley 53, Chamberlain 44

Class B=

Aberdeen Christian 55, Canistota 49

DeSmet 80, Lower Brule 53

Dell Rapids St. Mary 75, White River 69

Viborg-Hurley 53, Lyman 45

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

In a first, US pipeline agency weighs climate change impacts

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the first time, a federal energy board is weighing how a proposed natural gas pipeline would affect greenhouse gas emissions, one of several steps taken this week by the Biden administration in its effort to slow climate change.

With a new Democratic chair at the helm, the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission voted 3-2 to approve a pipeline operator's request to replace 87 miles of natural gas pipelines in South Dakota and Nebraska, finding that the project's climate-warming carbon emissions would not be significant.

The ruling marked the first time the commission has formally assessed a pipeline's greenhouse gas emissions and their expected contribution to climate change, a reversal of policies pursued under Republican chairs appointed by former President Donald Trump.

FERC is an independent agency that regulates interstate transmission of electricity, natural gas and oil, among other tasks. Members are appointed by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

"A proposed pipeline's contribution to #ClimateChange is 1 of its most consequential environmental impacts," the chair, Democrat Rich Glick, tweeted Thursday.

FERC "cannot claim to have adequately addressed the public interest without addressing the significance of that impact," Glick added. "More work to do, but this is an important start."

Glick was one of two Democrats to support the addition of climate change as a key consideration, along with former FERC Chair Neil Chatterjee, a Republican who previously opposed the climate provision. Two other Republicans opposed the ruling.

Chatterjee, a former aide to Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, said in an interview that his vote reflected a "pragmatic approach" to the commission's work. "Without compromise like this, needed infrastructure won't get built" around the country, .

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Under FERC rules, the chair has broad authority over pipeline projects and can delay a vote indefinitely. Glick, who became chair in January after the inauguration of President Joe Biden, had voted against a string of pipeline projects while serving under Chatterjee and other GOP leaders, citing their refusal to consider climate impacts. Glick has said he does not oppose all pipelines, but that climate change must be considered along with other environmental impacts.

Biden has called climate change an "existential threat."

In other action this week, the acting chair of the Commodity Futures Trading Commission announced he is establishing a unit to focus on the role of complex financial derivatives in understanding and pricing climate-related hazards. The Securities and Exchange Commission said it is seeking public input on how to require companies to disclose information on climate change risks to investors.

The Environmental Protection Agency reinstated a dormant website centered on climate science and policy. The information was removed from the agency's website by the Trump administration, which frequently downplayed or denied the risks of climate change.

Biden has pledged to slash greenhouse gas emissions amid a government-wide focus on climate change. Biden has set a goal of eliminating pollution from fossil fuel in the power sector by 2035 and from the U.S. economy overall by 2050, speeding what is already a market-driven growth of solar and wind energy and lessening the country's dependence on oil and gas. The aggressive plan is aimed at slowing human-caused global warming that is magnifying extreme weather events such as deadly wildfires in the West and drenching rains and hurricanes in the East.

There were nearly two dozen extreme weather events in the U.S. last year, costing taxpayers, businesses, investors and homeowners a combined \$95 billion, according to the federal government.

Gillian Giannetti, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, called the FERC ruling "a tremendous step in the right direction" and an indication of how the agency will rule under Glick's leadership. She praised Chatterjee for his apparent change of heart, calling him "a smart and thoughtful member of the commission" who "recognizes he's not chairman anymore."

Chatterjee, who led the commission in 2017 and again from late 2018 until last November, offered a similar rationale for reversing his position on climate. Glick has assured him he will not oppose all pipeline projects, so long as their climate impacts are considered, Chatterjee said, adding: "He's a man of his word."

By making the policy change, other pipeline projects are likely to go forward, Chatterjee said.

James Danly, a fellow Republican who briefly replaced Chatterjee as chair, blasted the decision, saying the only thing that's changed is the panel's leader — and Chatterjee's views.

"Basically, I think the reasoning in the order is legally infirm," Danly said. He accused Glick of hiding a major change to FERC policy in an order for a specific project.

Forecast for spring: Nasty drought worsens for much of US

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

With nearly two-thirds of the United States abnormally dry or worse, the government's spring forecast offers little hope for relief, especially in the West where a devastating megadrought has taken root and worsened.

Weather service and agriculture officials warned of possible water use cutbacks in California and the Southwest, increased wildfires, low levels in key reservoirs such as Lake Mead and Lake Powell and damage to wheat crops.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's official spring outlook Thursday sees an expanding drought with a drier than normal April, May and June for a large swath of the country from Louisiana to Oregon, including some areas hardest hit by the most severe drought. And nearly all of the continental United States is looking at warmer than normal spring, except for tiny parts of the Pacific Northwest and southeast Alaska, which makes drought worse.

"We are predicting prolonged and widespread drought," National Weather Service Deputy Director Mary Erickson said. "It's definitely something we're watching and very concerned about."

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NOAA expects the spring drought to hit 74 million people.

Several factors go into worsening drought, the agency said. A La Nina cooling of parts of the central Pacific continues to bring dry weather for much of the country, while in the Southwest heavy summer monsoon rains failed to materialize. Meteorologists also say the California megadrought is associated with long-term climate change.

Thursday's national Drought Monitor shows almost 66% of the nation is in an abnormally dry condition, the highest mid-March level since 2002. And forecasters predict that will worsen, expanding in parts of Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, Wyoming and South Dakota, with small islands of relief in parts of the Great Lakes and New England.

More than 44% of the nation is in moderate or worse drought, and nearly 18% is in extreme or exceptional drought — all of it west of the Mississippi River. Climate scientists are calling what's happening in the West a "megadrought" that started in 1999.

"The nearly West-wide drought is already quite severe in its breadth and intensity, and unfortunately it doesn't appear likely that there will be much relief this spring," said UCLA climate scientist Daniel Swain, who writes the Weather West blog and isn't part of the NOAA outlook. "Winter precipitation has been much below average across much of California, and summer precipitation reached record low levels in 2020 across the desert Southwest."

With the Sierra Nevada snowpack only 60% of normal levels, U.S. Department of Agriculture meteorologist Brad Rippey said "there will be some water cutbacks and allocation cutbacks in California and perhaps other areas of the Southwest" for agriculture and other uses. It will probably hit nut crops in the Golden State.

Winter and spring wheat crops also have been hit hard by the western drought with 78% of the spring wheat production area in drought conditions, Rippey said.

The dry, warm conditions the upcoming months likely will bring "an enhanced wildfire season," said Jon Gottschalck, chief of NOAA's prediction branch.

Swain of UCLA said the wildfires probably will not be as bad as 2020 because so much vegetation already has burned and drought conditions retarded regrowth. Last year, he said, wildfire was so massive it will be hard to exceed, though this fire season likely will be above average.

Drought and heat breed a vicious cycle. When it's this dry, less of the sun's energy goes to evaporating soil moisture because it's not as wet, Swain said. That leaves more of the energy to heat up the air, and the heat makes the drought worse by boosting evaporation.

"Across the West, it is clear that climate change has increased temperatures essentially year round, which has decreased mountain snowpack and increased evaporation — substantially worsening the severity of the ongoing drought conditions," he said.

In the next week or two, parts of the central United States may get pockets of heavy rain, but the question is whether that will be enough to make up for large rain deficits in the High Plains from the past year, Nebraska state climatologist Martha Shulski said.

The drought's flip side is that for the first time in three years, NOAA is projecting zero major spring flooding, with smaller amounts of minor and moderate flooding.

About 82 million people will be at risk for flooding this spring, mostly minor with no property damage. That's down from 128 million people last year.

Flooding tends to be a short-term expensive localized problem while drought and wildfire hit larger areas and are longer lasting, NOAA climatologist Karin Gleason.

Since 1980, NOAA has tracked weather disasters that caused at least \$1 billion in damage. The 28 droughts have caused nearly \$259 billion in damage, while the 33 floods have cost about \$151 billion.

Read more stories on climate issues by The Associated Press at <https://www.apnews.com/Climate>

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears .

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.

Medicaid incentive so far not enough to sway holdout states

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Democrats' nearly \$2 trillion coronavirus relief package includes a big financial incentive for the states that have opted against expanding Medicaid to provide health coverage for more low-income Americans. It's proving to be a tough sell.

The Associated Press surveyed top Republican elected officials in the dozen states that have resisted expanding coverage under a key provision of former President Barack Obama's health care law. Some have softened their opposition, but the key gatekeepers—governors or legislative leaders—indicated they have no plans to change course.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster remains firmly opposed to the Medicaid expansion.

"Gov. McMaster isn't for sale, regardless of whatever ill-conceived 'incentives' congressional Democrats may come up with," spokesman Brian Symmes said in a statement. "What the federal spending plan does is attempt to offer a short term solution for a long term problem."

The federal government already pays 90% of the costs of expanding Medicaid coverage to more low-income adults. Thirty-six states have signed on to the expansion. Two more -- Missouri and Oklahoma -- are scheduled to begin their expansions in July.

Under the enticement included in the coronavirus relief bill adopted by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, the federal government would boost its share of costs in the regular Medicaid program, which offers coverage for the poorest Americans. The bump in federal funding would last two years for the states that join the Medicaid expansion.

An analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation found the additional federal money would cover 150% to 400% of the cost for the holdout states to expand Medicaid, which is jointly funded with federal and state dollars.

In Texas, the incentives would send the state about \$5 billion over two years, and the state's share of expanding coverage would be about \$3.1 billion. More than 1.4 million people in the state could become eligible for coverage. For Georgia, the estimate says it would add a net \$710 million to state coffers and in Tennessee, \$900 million.

"It's the literal offer you can't refuse, but let's see if anyone refuses it, anyway," said Katherine Hempstead, a senior policy adviser at the nonpartisan Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Through interviews and public statements, AP found little change in the 12 states that have held out against the Medicaid expansion: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

In Mississippi, one of the nation's poorest states, advocates say up to 300,000 people — about one-tenth of the state's population — could become eligible for health coverage if the state adopted the expansion.

Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican, said he's not going for it, noting that his stance was a major issue in his 2019 campaign. His GOP primary opponents supported a plan to expand, with the state's share being paid for by hospitals and a fee of up to \$20 a month for people who signed up. He opposed it, even as the Mississippi Hospital Association said it could bring up to 19,000 jobs to the state.

"My position has not changed," he said last week. "I am opposed to expanding Medicaid in Mississippi. I am opposed to Obamacare expansion."

In three of the states — Kansas, North Carolina and Wisconsin — the Democratic governor favors expansion but can't convince a Republican-controlled legislature.

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelley this year called for legalizing medical use of marijuana and using the tax revenue to pay for expanding Medicaid. But the Republicans who control the Legislature blocked hearings on the proposal.

Those lawmakers say they worry the federal government would eventually cut its share of expansion

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funding.

"It's not a big enough bribe," said Richard Hilderbrand, the chair of the state Senate health committee. Many Republicans remain concerned about the long-term costs of the program and are ideologically opposed to expanding government health care to working-age adults.

"I acknowledge that there are some gaps in coverage that need to be addressed, but I think they can be addressed in ways that do not require us to create a whole new level of entitlement in the state of North Carolina," North Carolina Senate Leader Phil Berger, a Republican, told The Associated Press.

It's a similar story in Wisconsin, where the GOP-dominated Legislature and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers are at odds over the expansion. The Democrats' coronavirus aid package doesn't change that, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said earlier this month.

"It's a nonstarter, and we will continue to oppose the liberal wish list item of Medicaid expansion," he said. Hempstead, of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said Medicaid expansion is a way to address one of the biggest shortcomings in the national healthcare landscape: How to get coverage for a group of adults whose incomes put them below the poverty line -- \$12,880 for a person living alone.

In states that haven't expanded Medicaid, there are about 2.2 million such people, the Kaiser study found. They usually don't qualify for traditional Medicaid programs. They also do not make enough to be eligible to buy subsidized private coverage on the health insurance marketplaces established under Obama's overhaul.

Another 1.8 million people in those states who make slightly more -- up to about \$17,774 for an individual -- qualify for subsidized coverage but often can't afford it. They also could be covered through an expansion of Medicaid.

Studies have found that adding coverage for these lower-income people reduces charity care in hospitals, allows some people to be healthy enough to work and creates additional health care industry jobs. The financial benefits partially or totally offset the states' share of the costs over time.

Even in the holdout states, those arguments catch the attention of some Republicans. In Texas, a Republican lawmaker has introduced a longshot bill calling for expansion, though the legislation has no other GOP co-sponsor and there is no indication that Republicans there have lessened their opposition. A similar measure has advanced through a legislative committee in Wyoming, though its prospects appear slim for passing the full Legislature.

In Alabama, Gov. Kay Ivey left open the possibility of expanding Medicaid at some point in the future, but there are no plans to do so.

"The problem has always been how to pay for it," Ivey spokeswoman Gina Maiola said. "She is open to the discussion, but right now, we simply do not have all the facts."

Mulvihill reported from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Follow him at <http://www.twitter.com/geoffmulvihill> and Collins at <http://www.twitter.com/JSCollinsAP>

Associated Press writers Scott Bauer in Madison, Wisconsin; Kimberly Chandler in Montgomery, Alabama; Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee, Florida; Stephen Groves in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Gary Robertson in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Emily Wagster Pettus in Jackson, Mississippi, contributed to this report.

Montana Senate advances bills targeting transgender youth

By IRIS SAMUELS Associated Press/Report for America

HELENA, Mont. (AP) — The Montana Senate Judiciary Committee voted Thursday to advance two bills targeting transgender youth despite overwhelming testimony opposing the measures.

The measures would ban gender affirming surgeries for transgender minors and ban transgender athletes from participating in school and college sports.

Both bills have already passed the Montana House. They head next to votes by the GOP-controlled Montana Senate.

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The measures passed votes by the committee along party lines, with Republicans in favor and Democrats opposed.

"This is one of the most hateful heinous bills this session has ever considered, and I'm ashamed of us," Democratic Sen. Diane Sands said Thursday on the bill banning gender affirming surgeries for transgender minors.

Earlier this week, the committee heard overwhelming testimony opposing the measures from medical providers, human rights activist and students in the state. They said the measures could harm the mental and physical health of an already vulnerable group.

Proponents of the measures said they would protect minors from undergoing irreversible surgeries they may later regret and would protect female athletes from competing against athletes with an unfair physical advantage.

"Transgender people deserve full human rights. But there is no human right to female sport, just like there is no human right for me to participate in a junior high school wrestling team," Republican Rep. John Fuller, who sponsored both measures, said during a hearing on Wednesday.

Bills banning transgender athletes from participating in school sports have been introduced in more than 20 states this year. Mississippi Republican Gov. Tate Reeves signed such a ban last week.

In South Dakota, a similar bill was passed by Legislature. Republican Gov. Kristi Noem has expressed support for it but has not signed the bill. A similar ban was enacted in Idaho last year, and quickly blocked by a federal judge as a lawsuit plays out.

Bills banning gender affirming medical treatments for minors have been introduced in at least a dozen other states, but none have been signed into law.

Samuels 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.

Spring chickens? Hawks' hot start catches eye of rival Bison

By DAVE KOLPACK Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — A hot start by the University of North Dakota in the strange spring football season precipitated by the coronavirus pandemic has given the Fighting Hawks confidence entering their meeting with longtime rival and FCS kingpin North Dakota State.

The unbeaten Hawks, who have yet to reach the upper echelon in their more than decade-old transition to the FCS level from Division II, may have found their comfort zone by moving from the run-and-gun Big Sky Conference to the physical Missouri Valley. While there were other reasons for making the switch, including an easier travel schedule, the No. 1 prize was the yearly showdown with North Dakota State.

"To play our rival school for a conference game is just different than playing them when we play non-conference. You're going to play them year after year," Hawks coach Bubba Schweigert said. "It's big for our program. Huge opportunity to play a team that has won national championships."

Despite having to drive 70 miles from Grand Forks to Fargo for Saturday's game, No 2 North Dakota may be catching No. 4 North Dakota State at the right time,

The postponement of the normal season cost the Bison two highly touted pro prospects in quarterback Trey Lance and offensive lineman Dillon Radunz, as well as several experienced linemen who would have played fall ball. The Bison, who saw a 39-game winning streak end last month at Southern Illinois, are somewhat of an unknown at quarterback after talented true freshman Cam Miller spelled starter Zeb Noland last week to finish off a win over Illinois State.

The Hawks, meanwhile, have used a strong running game and stout run defense to beat some of the best teams in FCS, including No. 5 Southern Illinois and No. 6 South Dakota State. Running back Otis Weah, a bullish 5-foot-9, 195-pound sophomore from Moorhead, Minnesota, has rushed for 441 yards and six touchdowns.

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"They're a team that's playing with a whole lot of confidence right now," North Dakota State defensive end Spencer Waege — from South Shore, South Dakota — said of the Hawks. "I know that just looking at their O-line, I mean everyone who's going to be playing in the spring was playing in the fall for them. So they've got a pretty veteran group all across the board."

Even so, oddsmakers have made eight-time FCS champ North Dakota State, with a school-record 31-game home winning streak, as slight favorites over North Dakota, which was picked to finish seventh in the league.

The return to an annual showdown has clearly been more of a talking point for North Dakota (4-0, 4-0 MVFC) than North Dakota State (4-1, 3-1 MVFC). Hawks players like Graham Devore, from Grant, Minnesota, have been watching videos of previous games and said he's honored to be a part of it. He said beating the Bison would be a "milestone" victory.

"It's just really cool to see how much interest it brings for the state," Devore said, before referring to a documentary on the game. "They were talking about it's not a big game until every cafe and barber shop is talking about it."

Bison coach Matt Entz, on the other hand, said Monday he planned to keep the history lesson brief with his players, who along with most of their fans have considered South Dakota State their top rival in FCS.

"I'm going to give them the facts, of you know, 1894 was the first time these schools played. There used to be a trophy for it. But otherwise it's the biggest game of the week because it's the only game," Entz said.

He later added that he's focusing on getting better and not "to win cheerleading contests."

The teams had played 111 times, with the Hawks winning 62, until the Bison made the jump to FCS I in 2004 and North Dakota opted to stay put. They have played twice at the FCS level, in 2015 and 2019, both dominated by the Bison.

Schweigert said he just wants his team to play well and enjoy the circumstances.

"This is a fun game. I mean, come on, this is what you want," he said. "If you're a competitor you've got to have fun with this."

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

Bankers survey for parts of 10 states rockets to record high

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states appears to be on record pace, according to a monthly survey of bankers released Thursday that saw individual indicators soar and the overall index rocket to its highest reading since the survey began in 2006.

The overall index of the Rural Mainstreet Survey shot up more than 18 points to 71.9 in March from February's 53.8. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Nearly 70% bank CEOs reported their local economies were expanding, while about 31% indicated little or no growth, said Creighton University economist Ernie Goss, who oversees the survey.

"Sharp gains in grain prices, federal farm support, and the Federal Reserve's record-low interest rates have underpinned the Rural Mainstreet Economy," Goss said.

Components of the survey also saw drastic jumps, with the hiring index soaring to 72.9 from 51.9 in February and the farmland price index climbing from 60.0 last month to 71.9 in March — its highest level since November 2012. For the first time in six months, bankers reported an expansion in loan volumes, with that index increasing to 60.9 from February's 46.1.

Bankers' economic optimism looking ahead six months also grew. The survey's confidence index leapt to 76.7 from February's 64.0.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

South Dakota moves to next group eligible for vaccine Monday

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PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Fire service personnel and critical infrastructure workers in South Dakota will be eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine beginning Monday.

Health officials say the critical infrastructure sectors include water and wastewater, energy, finance, food service, food and agriculture, legal, manufacturing, shelter and housing, transportation and logistics, information technology and communications.

South Dakota is still one of the nation's leaders in vaccinations, according to Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon, adding that the state should be ahead of President Joe Biden's timeline to ensure all Americans have access to the vaccine by May 1.

If the state continues to receive the same or increased allocations of vaccine, all South Dakotans can expect to be eligible before that date, Malsam-Rysdon said.

While some states have plans to open up vaccinations to all populations, South Dakota will continue with its vaccination plan as laid out and work through the pre-established priority groups, the Rapid City Journal reported.

At least 35% of South Dakotans have received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine from either a state or federal entity.

More pharmacies, including Walgreens, have started offering COVID vaccines in the state as a part of the Federal Retail Pharmacy Program for a total of 65 locations.

USAA Launches Telematics App SafePilot in South Dakota

SAN ANTONIO, March 18, 2021 /PRNewswire/ -- USAA members are showing an increased interest in telematics and behavior-based insurance programs. To accommodate growing demand, USAA is launching SafePilot in the majority of states throughout 2021, beginning today in South Dakota.

The USAA SafePilot™ app instructs, inspires and rewards safe driving habits to help keep drivers safe on the road while lowering insurance premiums. Members who enroll in SafePilot in South Dakota are now eligible for initial policy discounts up to 10% for signing up for the program, and continued policy discounts up to 30% for safe driving behaviors.

USAA recently shared that SafePilot enrollments grew over 200% in 2020, and that nearly half of the new policyholders in states where the program was available opted-in to the program.

"We are excited to offer SafePilot to our members in South Dakota to promote safe driving behaviors and to offer up significant policy discounts," said Randy Termeer, SVP, GM Auto Insurance. "USAA is committed to providing competitive products and services that support the military and their families, with discounts being just one way for us to help facilitate their financial security."

SafePilot is currently available in Arizona, Ohio, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas and Virginia, with plans to launch in the majority of states throughout 2021 to accommodate growing demand.

In addition to discounts, members may be eligible for extra savings through bundling their auto and homeowners' insurance.

To learn more about SafePilot, visit usaa.com/insurance/safedriving.

USAA Founded in 1922 by a group of military officers, USAA is among the leading providers of insurance, banking and investment and retirement solutions to more than 13 million members of the U.S. military, veterans who have honorably served and their families. Headquartered in San Antonio, Tex., USAA has offices in seven U.S. cities and three overseas locations and employs approximately 36,000 people worldwide. Each year, the company contributes to national and local nonprofits in support of military families and communities where employees live and work. For more information about USAA, follow us on Facebook or Twitter (@USAA), or visit usaa.com.

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SOURCE USAA

Biden, Harris offering solace to grieving Asian Americans

By BILL BARROW, JONATHAN LEMIRE and JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — For Asian Americans, 2020 was a year of political success and newfound influence. But it was also a time of vulnerability to racist assaults.

That painful dichotomy will be on display Friday when President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the first person of South Asian descent to hold national office, visit Atlanta just days after a white gunman killed eight people, most of them Asian American women, in three metro-area massage businesses. The killings come after a spike of anti-Asian violence nationally.

The presidential trip was planned before the shooting, as part of a victory lap aimed at selling the benefits of pandemic relief legislation. But Biden and Harris will instead spend their visit consoling a community whose growing voting power helped secure their victory in Georgia and beyond.

As the fastest-growing racial demographic in the U.S. electorate, Asian Americans' political influence was felt across the country. In California, two Korean American Republican women made history with their congressional victories. The Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, typically dominated by Democrats, has its largest roster ever, including Asian American and Pacific Islander members and others who represent significant numbers of Asian Americans.

"We're becoming increasingly more visible and active in the political ecosystem," said Georgia state Sen. Michelle Au, a Democrat who represents part of the growing, diversifying suburbs north of the city. Yet, Au said, "What I've heard personally, and what I have felt, is that people sometimes don't tend to listen to us."

Au said a White House spotlight, especially amid tragedy, is welcomed by a community whose influence — and struggles — are often overshadowed in national conversations about diversity. She notes President Donald Trump and other Republicans merely brushed off charges of racism when they dubbed coronavirus the "China virus" because of its origins.

Activists say they saw a rise of racist attacks. Nearly 3,800 incidents have been reported to Stop AAPI Hate, a California-based reporting center for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and its partner advocacy groups, since March 2020.

In his first primetime address to the nation as president, Biden last Thursday — five days before the Atlanta killings — called attacks on Asian Americans "un-American."

"To have them talk about it in this way, so publicly, and to say AAPI, or to note that our communities are going through difficult times, is huge," Au said.

The White House said Biden and Harris will meet Friday with Asian American state legislators and other community leaders about racist rhetoric and actions against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Biden also will visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's main campus in Atlanta.

The originally planned political event to tout the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill has been scrapped. The White House confirmed that the president also will meet with Georgia voting rights advocate Stacey Abrams, Democrats' likely 2022 candidate for governor, as Republicans in the state legislature push several proposals to make it harder to vote in the state.

The number of Black and Latino voters far outnumber Asian American voters nationally and in Georgia, but the Asian American and Pacific Islander population is growing at a faster rate. Out of Georgia's 7.3 million-plus registered voters, more than 300,000 identify as Asian American or Pacific Islander, according to data from the Asian American Advocacy Fund.

Democrats' coordinated 2020 campaign in Georgia — the joint effort of Biden's campaign and state Democrats — tailored a turnout effort specifically to Asian American and Pacific Islanders. The Advocacy Fund analysis concluded that more than 185,000 voted in 2020, a 63% increase from four years prior. Biden ultimately won the state by fewer than 13,000 votes out of almost 5 million cast. Democrats also forced two Senate runoffs that they ultimately won, giving the party control of the chamber.

Now, Georgia Democratic Party staffers have started offering their Asian American outreach program

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as a model to other state parties.

"We certainly aren't taking the community for granted," said Rep. Carolyn Bourdeaux.

The freshman congresswoman lost in the suburban Atlanta 7th District by fewer than 1,000 votes in 2018. In November, she won by 10,000 votes, flipping what was once a Republican stronghold. She said her campaign's data shows the share of Asian American voters increased in the district from 7% in 2016 to 11% in 2020 — enough that she considers the community decisive in her political fortunes.

That influence doesn't only benefit Democrats. In California, where the Asian American and Pacific Islander community has long been a political force, freshman Reps. Young Kim and Michelle Steele, both Republicans, became the first Korean American women elected to Congress while giving the GOP two big pickups.

Asian Americans are particularly important as Democrats target suburban voters across the Sun Belt, including the growing communities around Charlotte, Houston and Phoenix, said Guy Cecil, head of the Democratic super PAC Priorities USA.

For example, Priorities' review of the November election results found that Asian Americans increased their share of the suburban vote in Georgia by 2.5 percentage points compared to 2016. They also made up a notable share of new voters in Arizona and Wisconsin— places where new voters favored Biden and helped drive his victories, the group found.

"We must mobilize these same people in 2022. This is going to be critical for Democrats to maintain our majorities (in Congress) and win governor's races," Cecil said.

Au, the Georgia state senator, and Bourdeaux said it's also important for elected officials and others to understand the breadth of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community and not treat it simply as a bloc to be tapped for votes.

Although the Atlanta-area Asian population is overwhelmingly suburban, drawn in part to high-performing public schools, Au said politicians must acknowledge its diversity and economic challenges. "I get it, right, I'm a doctor too," she said. "So everyone's like all Asians are doctors and lawyers and they're doing great ... but that eclipses a huge portion of the AAPI population."

Bourdeaux praised a "diverse community that is South Asian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, a host of different religions, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, Catholic, Buddhist, non-religious, and so on, just an extraordinarily diverse group of people."

But that very diversity means some Americans see those differences as a threat.

"We have faced systemic racism, exclusion and violence before," said Georgia state Rep. Sam Park on Thursday, standing beside his Asian American and Pacific Islander legislative colleagues. "In spite of it all, we have thrived."

Lemire reported from Washington.

Biden says US to hit 100 million vaccinations goal on Friday

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the U.S. closing in on President Joe Biden's goal of injecting 100 million coronavirus vaccinations weeks ahead of his target date, the White House said the nation is now in position to help supply neighbors Canada and Mexico with millions of lifesaving shots.

The Biden administration on Thursday revealed the outlines of a plan to "loan" a limited number of vaccines to Canada and Mexico as the president announced the U.S. is on the cusp of meeting his 100-day injection goal "way ahead of schedule."

"I'm proud to announce that tomorrow, 58 days into our administration, we will have met our goal," Biden said. He promised to unveil a new vaccination target next week, as the U.S. is on pace to have enough of the three currently authorized vaccines to cover the entire adult population just 10 weeks from now.

Ahead of Biden's remarks, the White House said it was finalizing plans to send a combined 4 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to Mexico and Canada in its first export of shots. Press secretary Jen

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Psaki said the details of the "loan" were still being worked out, but 2.5 million doses would go to Mexico and 1.5 million would be sent to Canada.

"Our first priority remains vaccinating the U.S. population," Psaki said. But she added that "ensuring our neighbors can contain the virus is a mission critical step, is mission critical to ending the pandemic."

The AstraZeneca vaccine has not yet been authorized for use in the U.S. but has been by the World Health Organization. Tens of millions of doses have been stockpiled in the U.S., waiting for emergency use authorization, and that has sparked an international outcry that lifesaving vaccine is being withheld when it could be used elsewhere. The White House said just 7 million of the AstraZeneca doses are ready for shipment.

The initial run of doses manufactured in the U.S. are owned by the federal government under the terms of agreements reached with drugmakers, and the Biden administration has faced calls from allies across the globe to release the AstraZeneca shots for immediate use. Biden has also fielded direct requests from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to buy vaccines produced in the United States.

Global public health advocates say wealthy nations like the U.S. need to do far more to help stem the spread of the pandemic. The World Health Organization on Thursday issued a report that fewer than 7 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Africa thus far. That's the equivalent of what the U.S. administers in a matter of days.

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

From his first days in office, Biden has set clear — and achievable — metrics for U.S. success, whether they be vaccinations or school reopenings, as part of an apparent strategy of underpromising, then over-delivering. Aides believe that exceeding his goals breeds trust in government after the Trump administration's sometimes-fanciful rhetoric on the virus.

The 100 million-dose goal was first announced on Dec. 8, days before the U.S. had even one authorized vaccine for COVID-19, let alone the three that have now received emergency authorization. Still, it was generally seen within reach, if optimistic.

By the time Biden was inaugurated on Jan. 20, the U.S. had already administered 20 million shots at a rate of about 1 million per day, bringing complaints at the time that Biden's goal was not ambitious enough. He quickly revised it upward to 150 million doses in his first 100 days.

Now the U.S. is injecting an average of about 2.2 million doses each day — and the pace is likely to dramatically rise later this month in conjunction with an expected surge in supply of the vaccines.

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, injections of 96 million doses have been reported to the agency since Biden's inauguration, but those reports lag the actual date of administration. Vaccination trend lines pointed to Biden breaking the 100 million mark on Thursday, with the numbers likely to be confirmed by the CDC as soon as Friday.

The president has moved to speed up deliveries of vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, as well as to expand the number of places to get shots and people who can administer them, with a focus on increasing the nation's capacity to inject doses as supply constraints lift.

The risk in setting too rosy expectations is that an administration might become defined by its failure to meet them, such as in May 2020, when President Donald Trump said the nation had "prevailed" over the virus.

At the time, the country had seen about 80,000 deaths from the virus. This week, the U.S. death toll topped 538,000. Trump's lax approach and lack of credibility also contributed to poor adherence to public safety rules among the American public.

Myanmar garment workers urge global brands to denounce coup

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO and ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writers

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NEW YORK (AP) — Tin Tin Wei used to toil 11 hours a day, six days week sewing jackets at a factory in Myanmar. But she hasn't stitched a single garment since a coup in February.

Instead, the 26-year-old union organizer has been protesting in the streets — and trying to bring international pressure to bear on the newly installed junta.

Her union, the Federation of Garment Workers in Myanmar, and others have been staging general strikes to protest the coup and are urging major international brands like H&M and Mango, which source some of their products in Myanmar, to denounce the takeover and put more pressure on factories to protect workers from being fired or harassed — or worse arrested and killed for participating in the protests.

"If we go back to work and if we work for the system, our future is in the darkness, and we will lose our labor rights and even our human rights," said Tin Tin Wei, who has been a clothing factory worker since age 13.

The response from companies so far has been mixed. Only a few have said they would curtail their business in Myanmar. Most others have put out statements that stop short of taking action, saying that while they denounce the coup, they want to support the workers by providing them with jobs.

Tin Tin Wei's union and the Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar have also been demanding comprehensive international sanctions — not the targeted sanctions some have imposed — to bring down the junta that ousted the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

As international sanctions were dropped in the mid-2010s when Myanmar began shifting toward democracy after decades of military rule and started to set some labor standards, Western brands looking to diversify their sourcing were attracted to the country's cheap labor. Broad sanctions now would cripple that burgeoning clothing industry, which has been growing rapidly in recent years before the coronavirus pandemic cut orders and eliminated jobs.

Comprehensive sanctions could wreck the livelihoods of more than 600,000 garment workers, but some union leaders say they would rather see massive layoffs than endure military oppression.

"I need to do some sort of sacrifice in the short term for the long term for our next generation," said Tin Tin Wei, who is the sole breadwinner in her family and has been receiving food donations.

The civil disobedience movement, or CDM as it is known, has included railway workers, truck drivers, hospital, bank employees and many others determined to stifle the economy.

The aim is "no participation with the junta at all," Sein Htay, a migrant labor organizer who returned to Myanmar from Thailand said in an emailed comment. "We believe that CDM is really working. So we are motivated to continue."

But violent crackdowns by Myanmar security forces against protesters including garment workers are escalating. Troops shot and killed at least 38 people Sunday in an industrial suburb of Yangon — an area dominated by clothing factories — after Chinese-owned factories were set on fire. Tens of thousands of workers and their families were seen fleeing the area in the days that followed.

The garment industry plays a key role in Myanmar's economy, particularly the export sector. Roughly a third of Myanmar's total merchandising exports come from textiles and apparel, worth \$4.59 billion in 2018. That's up from 9%, or \$900 million, in 2012 as international sanctions were dropped, according to the latest data from the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar.

Myanmar's apparel exports mostly go to the European Union, Japan and South Korea because of favorable trade agreements. The U.S. accounts for 5.5% of Myanmar's exports, with clothing, footwear and luggage representing the bulk of that, according to garment trade expert Sheng Lu.

But Myanmar still accounts for a tiny share — less than 0.1% — in U.S. and European Union fashion companies' total sourcing networks. And there are plenty of other alternatives for brands.

Despite this, many are taking a wait-and-see stance when it comes to any long-term decisions. Experts note it's not easy to shift products to a different country, nor is it easy to return to Myanmar once companies leave. Furthermore, some argue Western companies play a role in reducing poverty by giving workers in Myanmar opportunities to earn an income while also helping to improve labor standards there.

Factory working conditions were already poor before the February coup, but the labor unions had made

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some inroads and gave workers hope. And while the National League for Democracy, the party that was ousted in the takeover, wasn't proactively protecting unions, it didn't persecute or crack down on them, says Andrew Tillett-Saks, a labor organizer in Southeast Asia who previously was based in Myanmar.

Asian brands have so far remained quiet about the turmoil. The American Apparel & Footwear Association joined other groups like the Fair Labor Association in condemning the coup while urging members to honor existing financial contracts with factories there.

L.L. Bean CEO Steve Smith said he was saddened by the situation in Myanmar, which he visited in 2019. Bean uses several factories and suppliers for three product lines.

Smith said there's backup production elsewhere, but it's important not to abandon the country.

Other companies have been more forceful in their response. For instance, Hennes & Mauritz and The Benetton Group have suspended all new orders from factories in Myanmar.

"Although we refrain from taking any immediate action regarding our long-term presence in the country, we have at this point paused placing new orders with our suppliers," H&M said in a statement. "This is due to our concern for the safety of people and an unpredictable situation limiting our ability to operate in the country."

Spanish brand Mango said it would work with its trade and union partners, globally and locally in Myanmar, to ensure there's no retaliation against any factory worker or union leader exercising their civil or union rights.

Moe Sandar Myint, chairwoman of the Federation of Garment Workers in Myanmar who organized small strikes on factory floors that later moved to the streets, said brands aren't doing enough to help workers. She wants to see "concrete action."

Nearly 70% of the garment factories in Myanmar are owned by foreigners, according to the European Chamber of Commerce in Myanmar, and a good chunk of them are Chinese-owned. International brands using the factories don't directly hire the workers, often depending on a web of contractors and sub-contractors to produce goods for them.

But companies have "an enormous amount of influence in the industry," Tillett-Saks said. "They hold all the power over the supplier."

Tin Tin Wei says escalating intimidation by the military is scaring some employees at her factory. Located in the Hlaing Thayar industrial zone, it unionized five years ago. Out of 900 workers employed at the factory, 700 initially joined the protests but that number dropped to 500 by early March, she said.

Moe Sandar Myint, who's in hiding and moving from one safe house to another after the police raided her home in early February, said she will keep fighting.

"I cannot allow my generation and my next generation to live through another military leadership," she said. "This is unacceptable."

Kurtenbach reported from Bangkok. Associated Press writers Grant Peck in Bangkok and Dave Sharp in Freeport, Maine, contributed to the report.

Fleeing Myanmar police: We defied orders to kill protesters

By ANUPAM NATH Associated Press

MIZORAM, India (AP) — A group of police officers who defied the Myanmar army's orders to shoot opponents of the coup recounted their experience after they escaped to India. While speaking, they raised a three-finger salute — a symbol of resistance to Myanmar's military rulers.

"We cannot hurt our people, that's why we came to Mizoram," said one of the men, who hails from the northwestern town of Tedim. Mizoram state in India's northeast shares a border with Bangladesh and Myanmar.

After the army coup, the police were ordered to "shoot people and not just the people, we were told to shoot our own family if they are not on the side of the army," he said. The Associated Press has not been able to independently verify their claims, though images and accounts of the security forces' crackdown

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inside Myanmar have shown intensifying violence against civilians.

Indian villagers in Mizoram have given shelter to 34 police personnel and one firefighter who crossed into India over the last two weeks. They spoke to an AP photojournalist on condition of anonymity because of fears of retribution against family members still in Myanmar.

Back in Myanmar, the three-finger salute, which traces its origins to the Hunger Games books and movies by Suzanne Collins, is being used by youth protesters at massive anti-army demonstrations.

Meanwhile, K. Vanlalvena, a lawmaker from Mizoram state, urged the Indian government not to deport refugees from Myanmar until the return of normalcy there. The lawmaker belongs to the Mizo National Front, an ally of India's governing Bharatiya Janata Party.

Those who escaped spend their time watching television and doing chores. Some have carried mobile phones and are trying to connect to families they were forced to leave behind. At night, all of them sleep on mattresses on the floor of a single room.

One of them told the AP that they were under the command of Myanmar's army.

"We are all policemen working under the Myanmar government. We left our family in Myanmar. We do not know what is happening to our family, but they will face a lot of problems from the army. We came to Mizoram for shelter, we will die if we go back there," he said.

"We cannot reach our parents due to telecommunication problems, but what we heard is they are very scared to go out of their homes ... I'm hoping that one day we will meet again," he added.

Earlier this month, Myanmar asked India to return the police officers who crossed the border. India shares a 1,643-kilometer (1,020-mile) border with Myanmar, and is home to thousands of refugees from Myanmar in different states.

Last week, Ramliana, president of a Village Council in Mizoram state, a community-based body, said 116 Myanmar nationals crossed the Tiau River and reached Farkawn Village through a stretch where India's paramilitary Assam Rifles personnel were not present. He uses one name.

India's state and federal government officials haven't given an exact number of people from Myanmar who have crossed over to India after the coup.

Last week, India's Home Ministry told four Indian states bordering Myanmar — Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh — to take measures to prevent refugees from entering India except on humanitarian grounds.

The ministry said the states were not authorized to accord refugee status to anyone entering India from Myanmar, as India is not a signatory to the U.N. Refugee Convention of 1951 or its 1967 Protocol.

Myanmar has been ruled by the military for most of its history since gaining independence from Britain in 1948. A gradual move toward democracy in the past decade allowed Aung San Suu Kyi to lead a civilian government beginning in 2016, although the country's generals retained substantial power under a military-drafted constitution.

Her party won last November's election by a landslide, but the military stepped in before Parliament was to convene on Feb. 1, detained Suu Kyi and other government officials and instituted a state of emergency, alleging the vote was tainted by fraud.

Verified tallies show more than 200 people have been killed by security forces in Myanmar since the coup. They have used live fire and rubber bullets against protesters and some detainees have died in custody.

US and China spar in 1st face-to-face meeting under Biden

By MATTHEW LEE and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Top U.S. and Chinese officials were set to meet again on Friday after offering sharply different views of each other and the world in their first face-to-face talks since President Joe Biden took office.

After the opening on Thursday, the two sides traded barbs, with the U.S. accusing the Chinese delegation of "grandstanding" for domestic consumption in China and Beijing firing back Friday by saying there was a "strong smell of gunpowder and drama" in the room that was entirely the fault of the Americans.

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In unusually pointed remarks for a staid diplomatic meeting, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi took aim at each other's country's policies. The contentious tone of their public comments suggested the private discussions would be even more rocky.

The meetings in Anchorage, which continue with a closing session on Friday, were a new test in increasingly troubled relations between the two countries, which are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and China's western Xinjiang region, as well as over Taiwan, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

Blinken said the Biden administration is united with its allies in pushing back against China's increasing authoritarianism and assertiveness at home and abroad. Yang then unloaded a list of Chinese complaints about the U.S. and accused Washington of hypocrisy for criticizing Beijing on human rights and other issues.

"Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability," Blinken said of China's actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and of cyber attacks on the United States and economic coercion against U.S. allies. "That's why they're not merely internal matters, and why we feel an obligation to raise these issues here today."

National security adviser Jake Sullivan amplified the criticism, saying China has undertaken an "assault on basic values."

"We do not seek conflict but we welcome stiff competition," he said.

Yang responded angrily by demanding the U.S. stop pushing its own version of democracy at a time when the United States itself has been roiled by domestic discontent. He also accused the U.S. of failing to deal with its own human rights problems and took issue with what he said was "condescension" from Blinken, Sullivan and other U.S. officials.

"We believe that it is important for the United States to change its own image and to stop advancing its own democracy in the rest of the world," he said. "Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States."

"China will not accept unwarranted accusations from the U.S. side," he said, adding that recent developments had plunged relations "into a period of unprecedented difficulty" that "has damaged the interests of our two peoples."

"There is no way to strangle China," he said.

Blinken appeared to be annoyed by the tenor and length of the comments, which went on for more than 15 minutes. He said his impressions from speaking with world leaders and on his just-concluded trip to Japan and South Korea were entirely different from the Chinese position.

"I'm hearing deep satisfaction that the United States is back, that we're reengaged," Blinken retorted. "I'm also hearing deep concern about some of the actions your government is taking."

Underscoring the animosity, the State Department blasted the Chinese delegation for violating an agreed upon two-minute time limit for opening statements and suggested it "seem(ed) to have arrived intent on grandstanding, focused on public theatrics and dramatics over substance."

"America's approach will be undergirded by confidence in our dealing with Beijing — which we are doing from a position of strength — even as we have the humility to know that we are a country eternally striving to become a more perfect union," it said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian, speaking later in Beijing, said Blinken and Sullivan had provoked Chinese officials into making a "solemn response" after U.S. officials made "groundless attacks" against China.

"It was the U.S. side that ... provoked the dispute in the first place, so the two sides had a strong smell of gunpowder and drama from the beginning in the opening remarks. It was not the original intention of the Chinese side," Zhao told reporters at a daily briefing.

A senior Biden administration official said that despite the acrimonious public airing of differences, the initial closed-door discussions had been "substantive, serious and direct" and lasted far longer than the two hours that been planned.

U.S.-China ties have been torn for years, and the Biden administration has yet to signal whether it's

ready or willing to back away from the hard-line stances taken under Donald Trump.

Just a day before the meeting, Blinken had announced new sanctions over Beijing's crackdown on pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong. In response, China stepped up its rhetoric opposing U.S. interference in domestic affairs and complained directly about it.

"Is this a decision made by the United States to try to gain some advantage in dealing with China?" State Councilor Wang Yi asked. "Certainly this is miscalculated and only reflects the vulnerability and weakness inside the United States and it will not shake China's position or resolve on those issues."

Trump had taken pride in forging what he saw as a strong relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. But the relationship disintegrated after the coronavirus pandemic spread from the Wuhan province across the globe and unleashed a public health and economic disaster.

Lee reported from Washington.

Scientist behind coronavirus shot says next target is cancer

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — The scientist who won the race to deliver the first widely used coronavirus vaccine says people can rest assured the shots are safe, and the technology behind it will soon be used to fight another global scourge — cancer.

Ozlem Tureci, who founded the German company BioNTech with her husband Ugur Sahin, was working on a way to harness the body's immune system to tackle tumors when they learned last year of an unknown virus infecting people in China.

Over breakfast, the couple decided to apply the technology they'd been researching for two decades to the new threat.

Britain authorized BioNTech's mRNA vaccine for use in December, followed a week later by the United States. Dozens of other countries have followed suit and tens of millions of people worldwide have since received the shot developed together with U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer.

"It pays off to make bold decisions and to trust that if you have an extraordinary team, you will be able to solve any problem and obstacle which comes your way in real time," Tureci told The Associated Press in an interview.

Among the biggest challenges for the small, Mainz-based company were how to conduct large-scale clinical trials across different regions and how to scale up the manufacturing process to meet global demand.

Along with Pfizer, the company enlisted the help of Fosun Pharma in China "to get assets, capabilities and geographical footprint on board, which we did not have," said Tureci.

Among the lessons she and her colleagues learned was "how important cooperation and collaboration is internationally."

Tureci, who was born in Germany to Turkish immigrants, said the company reached out to medical oversight bodies from the start, to ensure that the new type of vaccine would pass the rigorous scrutiny of regulators.

"The process of getting a medicine or a vaccine approved is one where many questions are asked, many experts are involved and there is external peer review of all the data and scientific discourse," she said.

Amid a scare in Europe this week over the coronavirus shot made by British-Swedish rival AstraZeneca, Tureci dismissed the idea that any corners were cut by those racing to develop a vaccine.

"There is a very rigid process in place and the process does not stop after a vaccine has been approved," she said. "It is, in fact, continuing now all around the world, where regulators have used reporting systems to screen and to assess any observations made with our or other vaccines."

Tureci and her colleagues have all received the BioNTech shot themselves, she told the AP. "Yes, we have been vaccinated."

As BioNTech's profile has grown during the pandemic, so has its value, adding much-needed funds the company will be able to use to pursue its original goal of developing a new tool against cancer.

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The vaccine made by BioNTech-Pfizer and U.S. rival Moderna uses messenger RNA, or mRNA, to carry instructions into the human body for making proteins that prime it to attack a specific virus. The same principle can be applied to get the immune system to take on tumors.

"We have several different cancer vaccines based on mRNA," said Tureci.

Asked when such a therapy might be available, Tureci said "that's very difficult to predict in innovative development. But we expect that within only a couple of years, we will also have our vaccines (against) cancer at a place where we can offer them to people."

For now, Tureci and Sahin are trying to ensure the vaccines governments have ordered are delivered and that the shots respond effectively to any new mutation in the virus.

On Friday the couple is taking time out of their schedule to receive Germany's highest award, the Order of Merit, from President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. German Chancellor Angela Merkel, a trained scientist herself, will attend the ceremony.

"It's indeed an honor," Tureci said of the award. "Both my husband and I are touched."

But she insisted developing the vaccine was the work of many.

"It's about the effort of many, our team at BioNTech, all the partners who were involved, also governments, regulatory authorities, which worked together with a sense of urgency," she said. "The way we see it, this is an acknowledgement of this effort and also a celebration of science."

Europe pause of AstraZeneca sends ripple of doubt elsewhere

By RODNEY MUHUMUZA Associated Press

KAMPALA, Uganda (AP) — The suspension of the AstraZeneca vaccine in several European countries over the past week could fuel skepticism about the shot far beyond their shores, potentially threatening the rollout of a vaccine that is key to the global strategy to stamp out the coronavirus pandemic, especially in developing nations.

As things stand, it's either AstraZeneca or nothing for some poorer countries. The vaccine from the Anglo-Swedish drug maker is cheaper and easier to store than many others. It will make up nearly all of the doses shipped in the first half of the year by COVAX, a consortium meant to ensure low- and middle-income countries receive vaccines.

With little other choice, most developing countries that had the AstraZeneca on hand pushed ahead with it even as major countries in Europe suspended its use over the past week after reports that unusual blood clots were found in some recipients of the shot — despite insistence from international health agencies that there was no evidence the vaccine was responsible.

But while governments in Africa and elsewhere expressed their determination to continue using the shot, not everyone is convinced.

"Why should I allow it to be used on me? Are we not human beings like those in Europe?" Peter Odongo, a resident of a town in northern Uganda, told the Daily Monitor newspaper this week.

The East African country has received 864,000 AstraZeneca doses via COVAX so far but had administered fewer than 3,000 by Tuesday. Authorities blamed logistical challenges in transporting the vaccines deep into the country, but newspaper reports cite resistance to the vaccine.

Even before the latest debate over AstraZeneca, vaccine skepticism had been a concern across the world, as many people are hesitant about shots developed in record time. African countries have faced particular hurdles on a continent wary of being a testing ground for the West. Some leaders have pushed back against skepticism, while others, such as those in Burundi and Tanzania, have fed it by appearing to deny the seriousness of COVID-19.

"Unfortunate events" in Europe will "clearly not be helpful for our public confidence, in building public confidence and trust on the use of that particular vaccine and other vaccines for sure," John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told reporters Thursday, as he encouraged African countries to continue their vaccinations.

That came hours before the European Union drug regulator gave the same message to its 27 members.

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The European Medicines Agency said its experts concluded that the vaccine is not linked to an overall increase in the risk of blood clots, though it could not definitively rule out a link to rare types of clots and the vaccine. In response, countries including Italy, France and Germany announced they would resume use of the shot.

Even before those reversals, several developing nations had said they would stick by the shot.

"We will continue the inoculations," said Lia Tadesse, health minister of Ethiopia, which received 2.2 million doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine last week.

Authorities in India — home to the vaccine manufacturer that will likely make a large portion of the doses destined for the developing world — said Wednesday they would continue AstraZeneca inoculations with "full vigor" as infections jumped in several parts of the country. After initially saying it would delay use of the vaccine, Thailand said Tuesday it would carry on with AstraZeneca, and the prime minister even got his shot in public.

Brazil's state-run Fiocruz institute delivered the first AstraZeneca shots bottled in Brazil on Wednesday as the Health Ministry sought to allay concerns about the blood clot reports, urging calm.

Very few developing countries bucked the trend. Congo, for instance, halted use of AstraZeneca, putting its vaccination campaign on hold even before it began since it has no doses of anything else. Indonesia also initially paused the shot but then said Friday it would resume using it.

European and other wealthy countries have several vaccines to choose from, but AstraZeneca is currently the linchpin in the strategy to vaccinate the rest of the world. Some developing countries have received doses of Chinese-made or Russian-made vaccines — often as donations — but, at least in Africa, these allotments have usually been relatively small. The Chinese and Russian vaccines have not yet been endorsed by WHO and so cannot be distributed by COVAX.

Africa, with a population of 1.3 billion, hopes to vaccinate 60% of its people by the end of 2022. That target almost certainly will not be met without widespread use of AstraZeneca. And experts have warned that until vaccinations rates are high the world over, the virus remains a threat everywhere.

The eroding confidence in the AstraZeneca vaccine only compounds the difficulties Africa will face in rolling out their inoculation campaigns. The continent is home to some of the world's weakest health systems. Nations there have struggled just to test enough people for the coronavirus, and the actual toll is unknown because of challenges in tracking cases and deaths. According to the Africa CDC, more than 4 million coronavirus cases have been confirmed across the continent, including over 108,000 deaths.

In an analysis released Thursday, the World Bank found that 85% of low- and middle-income countries had a plan to vaccinate but less than a third had public engagement strategies to combat hesitancy and misinformation about vaccines.

That means confusion like that caused by the pause in AstraZeneca across Europe can be hard to iron out.

"It complicates the situation," said Dr. Misaki Wayengera, head of a technical taskforce that's advising Uganda's pandemic response, referring to the suspension. "It's the best shot we have here, and we should be able to take it."

The blow to public confidence was felt in countries such as Somalia, which began vaccinations on Tuesday, but where some said they were not keen on getting the AstraZeneca shot while many in Europe weren't using it.

"This immunization does not make any sense when the countries in EU" have suspended its use, said Abdulkadir Osman. "We cannot simply trust it."

In Rwanda, which received 240,000 AstraZeneca doses and just over 102,000 of the Pfizer vaccine, Justin Gatsinzi said he was initially reluctant to get the shot but relented out of fear he would be denied some public services if he refused.

"It's very tricky actually," said Gatsinzi, a teacher, adding that he was not told which vaccine he got.

Associated Press journalists David Biller in Rio de Janeiro, Ignatius Ssuuna in Kigali, Rwanda, Ashok Sharma in New Delhi, Mohamed Sheikh Nor in Mogadishu, Somalia, Lori Hinnant in Paris and Maria Cheng in London contributed to this report.

Samia Suluhu Hassan becomes Tanzania's first woman president

By KHALED ABUBAKAR and TOM ODULA Associated Press

DAR ES SALAAM, Tanzania (AP) — Samia Suluhu Hassan, 61, made history Friday when she was sworn in as Tanzania's first female president at State House, the government offices in Dar es Salaam, the country's largest city.

Wearing a hijab and holding up a Quran with her right hand, Hassan took the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice Ibrahim Jumavowing, in which she vowed to uphold the East African country's constitution.

The inauguration was witnessed by Cabinet members and Tanzania's former presidents Ali Hassan Mwinyi, Jakaya Kikwete and Abeid Karume. The former heads of state were among the few people in the room wearing facemasks to protect against COVID-19.

Hassan's inauguration comes two days after she announced the death of President John Magufuli, after he had not been seen in public for more than two weeks. Magufuli had denied that COVID-19 was a problem in Tanzania, saying that national prayer had eradicated the disease from the country. But weeks before his death, Magufuli acknowledged that the virus was a danger.

A major test of Hassan's new presidency will be how she deals with COVID-19. Under Magufuli, Tanzania, one of Africa's most populous countries with 60 million people, made no efforts to obtain vaccines or promote the use of masks and social distancing to combat the virus. This policy of ignoring the disease endangers neighboring countries, say Africa health officials.

When Magufuli was absent from view, other Tanzanian officials flatly denied that he was sick, but Hassan sought to reassure the nation, saying it was "normal" for human beings to suffer colds and other illnesses.

Although Hassan announced that Magufuli died of heart failure, exiled opposition leader Tundu Lissu says the president died of COVID-19.

In her first public address as president, Hassan announced 21 days of mourning for Magufuli and public holidays on March 22 and March 25, the day the late president will be buried.

"It's not a good day for me to talk to you because I have a wound in my heart," said Hassan. "Today I have taken an oath different from the rest that I have taken in my career. Those were taken in happiness. Today I took the highest oath of office in mourning," she said.

She said that Magufuli "who always liked teaching" had prepared her for the task ahead. "Nothing shall go wrong," she assured, urging the nation's people to be united.

"This is the time to stand together and get connected. It's time to bury our differences, show love to one another and look forward with confidence," she said. "It is not the time to point fingers at each other but to hold hands and move forward to build the new Tanzania that President Magufuli aspired to."

Hassan will complete Magufuli's second term in office which had just started after he won elections in October. Magufuli's

Hassan has had a meteoric rise in politics in a male-dominated field. Both Tanzania and the surrounding East African region are slowly emerging from patriarchy.

After Magufuli selected her as his running mate in 2015, Hassan became Tanzania's first female vice president. She was the second woman to become vice president in the region since Uganda's Specioza Naigaga Wandira who was in office from 1994 to 2003.

Born in Zanzibar, Tanzania's semi-autonomous archipelago in 1960, Hassan went to primary school and secondary school at a time when very few girls in Tanzania were getting educations as parents thought a woman's place was that of wife and homemaker.

After graduating from secondary school in 1977, Hassan studied statistics and started working for the government, in the Ministry of Planning and Development. She worked for a World Food Program project in Tanzania in 1992 and then attended the University of Manchester in London to earn a postgraduate diploma in economics. In 2005, she got a Master's degree in community economic development through a joint program between the Open University of Tanzania and Southern New Hampshire University in the U.S.

Hassan went into politics in 2000 when she became a member of the Zanzibar House of Representatives.

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In 2010 she won the Makunduchi parliamentary seat with more than 80% percent of the vote. In 2014 she was appointed a Cabinet minister and became Vice-Chairperson of the Constitutional Assembly tasked with drafting a new constitution for Tanzania where she won respect for deftly handling several challenges.

As president, Hassan's first task will be to unite the ruling party, Chama Cha Mapinduzi, behind her, said Ed Hobe-Hamsher, Senior Africa Analyst with Verisk Maplecroft risk analysts. The party has been in power since Tanzania's independence.

As a Muslim woman from Zanzibar, Hassan may find it difficult to win the support of the party's mainland Christians, he said, warning that some entrenched leaders may develop "obstructionist strategies" against her. He said it's likely that Hassan will start her rule by maintaining the status quo and not embarking on a significant Cabinet reshuffle.

Hassan is the second woman in East Africa to serve as the head of government. Burundi's Sylvia Kiringi served as president of that tiny landlocked country for nearly four months until Feb. 1994.

Odula contributed from Nakuru, Kenya.

Canadian tried in China on spy charges, no verdict announced

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

DANDONG, China (AP) — China on Friday put on trial one of two Canadians held for more than two years in apparent retaliation for Canada's arrest of a senior Chinese telecom executive.

Canada said its consular officials were refused permission to attend the proceedings against Michael Spavor, who is accused by China of stealing state secrets.

Jim Nickel, the Canadian Embassy's deputy chief of mission, said following a meeting with Spavor's lawyer that the hearing ended at noon Friday after two hours. No verdict has been announced. Nickel declined to give other details, citing rules on protecting Spavor's privacy.

In a statement posted on its website, the Intermediate People's Court of Dandong in the northeastern province of Liaoning Province said it had held a closed-door hearing against Spavor on charges of spying and illegally sending state secrets abroad. It said Spavor and his defense lawyers were present for the proceedings and the court would pronounce a sentence at a date "determined in accordance with law."

Fellow Canadian Michael Kovrig is due to go before a court on Monday. The two were detained in December 2018, days after Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou was arrested at the request of the U.S. at the airport in Vancouver. Both are charged with spying.

The entrance to the courthouse was roped off with police tape and journalists were kept outside, although not detained or told to leave, as often occurs during sensitive legal cases. Police cars and vans with lights flashing passed through the gate to the the court complex, located beside the Yalu River that divides China from North Korea.

Earlier, Nickel had knocked on a court door seeking entry but was refused. Another 10 diplomats from eight countries, including the U.S., the U.K. and Australia, stood on the street opposite the courthouse in a show of support.

International and bilateral treaties required that China provide Canadian diplomats access to the trial, but the court said Chinese law regarding trials on state security charges overrode such obligations, Nickel said.

Spavor and Kovrig were detained in December 2018, days after Meng was arrested at the request of the U.S. at the airport in Vancouver, British Columbia. The U.S. is seeking her extradition to face fraud charges related to the telecom giant's dealings with Iran, which is under American financial sanctions.

The two Canadians have been held ever since, while Meng has been released on bail. They were charged in June 2020 with spying under China's broadly-defined national security laws.

Spavor, an entrepreneur with North Korea-related business, was charged with spying for a foreign entity and illegally procuring state secrets. Kovrig, an analyst and former diplomat, was charged with illegally receiving state secrets and intelligence in collaboration with Spavor.

Prosecutors have not released details of the charges and national security cases are routinely held be-

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hind closed doors. The state-owned Global Times newspaper said Kovrig was accused of having used an ordinary passport and business visa to enter China to steal sensitive information and intelligence through contacts in China since 2017, while Spavor was accused of being a key source of intelligence for Kovrig.

Meng's case has infuriated China's government, which has promoted Huawei as a global leader in mobile communications technology.

In Vancouver on Thursday, Meng's lawyers told an extradition hearing Canadian officials abused their power when they conspired with the U.S. to arrest her. Defense lawyer Tony Paisana said Canadian Border Services Agency officers took Meng's phones, obtained their passwords, then handed to them to Canadian police so the data could be shared with the FBI.

Paisana said Meng was never told during questioning that she faced an arrest warrant in the U.S. and would have immediately asked for a lawyer if so informed. British Columbia Supreme Court Associate Chief Justice Heather Holmes suggested border officers would have questioned Meng more rigorously if their exam was actually a covert criminal investigation, as her lawyers said.

China has demanded Meng's immediate and unconditional release, saying the U.S. engineered her detention as part of a drive to contain China's growing rise. Canadian authorities say Kovrig and Spavor were arbitrarily arrested to put pressure on Ottawa and say they should be released without charge.

China has also restricted various Canadian exports, including canola oil seed, and handed death sentences to another four Canadians convicted of drug smuggling.

Outside the courthouse, Nickel said Canada still held hope that Spavor and Kovrig could be released through joint efforts with the U.S., whose Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan are currently holding their first face-to-face talks with China's top diplomats in Anchorage, Alaska.

"So we're hopeful that, in some measure, this trial may too lead to their immediate release," Nickel said.

In Canada, Spavor's family issued a statement saying he had been granted "very limited access and interaction with his retained Chinese defense counsel," according to Canadian newspaper The Globe and Mail.

"At this time, we feel it is necessary to speak out and call for his unconditional release. His continued unjust detention depriving him of his liberty is both unfair and unreasonable, especially given the lack of transparency in the case," the newspaper quoted the statement as saying.

Associated Press writers Rob Gillies in Toronto and Jim Morris in Vancouver, British Columbia contributed to this report.

Lebanese are gripped by worry as economic meltdown speeds up

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — Shops closing, companies going bankrupt and pharmacies with shelves emptying — in Lebanon these days, fistfights erupt in supermarkets as shoppers scramble to get to subsidized powdered milk, rice and cooking oil.

Like almost every other Lebanese, Nisrine Taha's life has been turned upside down in the past year under the weight of the country's crushing economic crisis. Anxiety for the future is eating at her.

Five months ago, she was laid off from her job at the real estate company where she had worked for years. Her daughter, who is 21, cannot find work, forcing the family to rely on her husband's monthly salary which has lost 90% of its value because of the collapse of the national currency.

The family hasn't been able to pay rent for seven months, and Taha worries their landlord's patience won't last forever. As the price of meat and chicken soared beyond their means, they changed their diet.

"Everything is very expensive," she said.

Taha's family is among hundreds of thousands of lower income and middle class Lebanese who have been plunged into sudden poverty by the crisis that started in late 2019 — a culmination of decades of corruption by a greedy political class that pillaged nearly every sector of the economy.

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 25% in value over the past weeks alone. Inflation and prices

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of basic goods have skyrocketed in a country that imports more than 80% of its basic goods. Purchasing power of salaries has dramatically declined and savings have evaporated — all on top of the coronavirus pandemic and a massive explosion last August at Beirut's port that damaged parts of the capital.

More than half the population now lives in poverty, according to the World Bank, while an intractable political crisis heralds further collapse.

Alia Moubayed, managing director at Jefferies, a diversified financial services company, said the "sharp contraction in growth, coupled with hyperinflation and devaluation" has pushed more people into precarious employment, raised unemployment levels and brought more than 50% of the population below the poverty line, compared to an estimated third in 2018.

Lebanon has been without a government since the last one resigned in August, with top politicians unwilling to compromise over the formation of a new Cabinet that could forge a path toward reforms and recovery. Street violence and sectarian tensions are on the rise.

"People are dying, and no one cares!" said Taha as she visited a cousin who owns a perfume shop in Beirut's commercial Hamra Street. Both wore masks to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

Once a famous shopping district, known for its boutiques, bustling cafes and theaters, Hamra Street has changed amid the pandemic. On a recent day, many shops were closed, some because of lockdown measures, others permanently because of the economic crisis. Merchants in those still open complain they are selling almost nothing.

Beggars solicited passers-by for money. A woman and her child sat on the pavement next to a drawing on a wall with the words: "We are all beggars."

"It cannot get worse," said Ibrahim Simmo, 59, who manages a clothes shop. Sales have dropped 90%, compared to previous years. He couldn't sell his winter stock during the nearly two-month-long virus lockdown earlier their year, and now the currency crash is making things worse.

Ibrahim Farshoukh, 28, said he barely pays the rent for his shop where he sells hand-made leather bracelets and bags. Sometimes his wife stays behind while he takes to the streets, trying to sell bracelets to passers-by. "The situation is unbearable," he added.

The vast majority of the population gets paid in Lebanese pounds, meaning their incomes decline further while prices shoot up and pensions evaporate. The crisis has also depleted foreign reserves, prompting stark warnings the Central Bank can no longer finance subsidies of some basic commodities, including fuel.

Videos on social media show fistfights in supermarkets as shoppers try to get to subsidized products such as cooking oil or powdered milk. In one video, armed members of one of Lebanon's intelligence agencies check ID cards inside a supermarket before handing over a bag of subsidized rice.

People who once lived comfortably are now unable to pay school fees and insurance premiums, or even eat well.

"I don't remember the last time we ate meat. I cannot afford it," said Taha, whose husband is an airport maintenance employee. The family's diet now mainly consists of lentils, rice, and bulgur, she said.

The currency collapse has forced some grocery shops, pharmacies and other businesses to temporarily shut down, as officials warn of growing food insecurity.

Nabil Fahd, head of the supermarket owners' association, told the local MTV station that people are hoarding goods, which stores can no longer restock — once something is sold out, storeowners have to pay more in Lebanese pounds for new supplies. We are "in a very, very serious crisis," he said.

The price of bread, the country's main staple, was raised twice over the past year — and then, earlier this month, bakers reduced the weight of a pack of bread, without changing the price.

Taha blames Lebanon's corrupt political class for bringing the small nation to near-bankruptcy.

Assem Shoueib quit his job at a leading newspaper in Beirut in 2000 and moved with his family to France, where he opened a Lebanese restaurant near Paris. Walking through Hamra Street on a recent visit back, the 59-year-old said he made the right decision.

"It was clear the country was heading toward collapse," he said.

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710 days later, NCAA Tournament is back with 'First Four'

By JIM LITKE AP Sports Writer

Who are we kidding? "First Four" still sounds more like an educational toy than the prelude to three of the best weeks in sport.

But because of the pandemic, it's been 710 days since last we saw the NCAA Tournament — who's counting? — so let's not quibble over names and go straight to the opening-night review:

Pretty, pretty good.

In the finale pitting two of college hoops' marquee programs, UCLA outlasted Michigan State 86-80 in overtime. Two other games were decided by a single point: Drake beat Wichita State 53-52, and Norfolk State squeezed Appalachian State 54-53. In Thursday's opener, Texas Southern pulled steadily away from Mount St. Mary's and won 60-52.

The first four games were grafted onto the 64-team main bracket in 2011, naturally, to pad the NCAA coffers. They were originally dubbed "play-in" games, and then briefly the "First Round," which the NCAA quickly squashed to avoid any confusion with the 16 games that begin the tournament in earnest Friday.

Only one First Four team has also made it all the way to the Final Four — Virginia Commonwealth in 2011 — but survivors tend to punch above their weight. Four teams have made it to the Sweet 16 and 2019 marked the only year at least one of the first four survivors failed to win a game in the big-boy bracket.

Michigan State's brief appearance in the tournament was coach Tom Izzo's 23rd straight, but it was small consolation. He got into a heated exchange with one of his own players — and not for the first time — after what appeared to be a defensive miscommunication on the final play of the first half. When Gabe Brown turned away, Izzo grabbed his arm and then the back of his jersey.

"It was a normal nothing. But in this day and age, everything's got to be something," Izzo groaned, then added. "It was over a missed switch that we talked about."

The Spartans promptly went on to hand back the double-digit lead they held at intermission, yet still led by six points with four minutes left. Then the house fell in. The Bruins Jaime Jaquez Jr., who finished with 27 points, banged in a layup and added the game-tying free throw in regulation. Johnny Juzang hit back-to-back baskets to begin the extra period and UCLA kept its nose in front the rest of the way.

The reward for winning the clash of No. 11 seeds is a short drive to Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis, where the Bruins will face No. 6 Brigham Young.

Drake's win was a long time coming — 50 years to be exact — and didn't go into the books until a last-second 3-point try by Wichita State's Alterique Gilbert clanged off the front rim. An early dunk by the Bulldogs 6-foot guard Joseph Yesufu over the Shockers 6-7 Clarence Jackson produced the tournament's first sure-fire poster. But Drake had to erase a double-digit, second-half deficit in a battle of No. 11 seeds and then hold its breath until the final buzzer.

"It's been a long time coming and our guys knew that," said Bulldogs coach Darian DeVries, whose eight-year contract extension, signed just a day earlier, is already paying dividends. Good thing, too, because he'll draw No. 6 USC in the main bracket.

Texas Southern simply had too much pace for a deliberate Mount St. Mary's squad in a match of No. 16 seeds. TSU coach Johnny Jones took advantage of the sport's more equitable transfer rules to quickly build an up-tempo attack. He sweet-talked eight talented kids from other programs onto campus, including John Walker III, who had a season-high 19 points and nine rebounds. The win was the Tigers' 10th straight.

"I feel like I'm on top of the world," Walker, who was previously at Texas A&M, shouted afterward.

But maybe not for long.

Texas Southern faces East Region top seed Michigan on Saturday. Jones won't have long to prepare a game plan, but he planned to savor the win, which his players celebrated by emptying a water cooler over his head.

"They drenched me," Jones laughed, "but I'll tell you what: It's one of the best feelings I've had in cold water in a long time."

Norfolk State won the other battle of No. 16s, but did so drenched in sweat. The Spartans built a big

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first-half lead, squandered it and then some in the second and had to close with a 9-2 run — capped by Devante Carter's free throws with 8.6 seconds left — to prevail.

"We knew what was on the line. Nobody wants to go home. They told me that the flight was leaving tomorrow at 9:30 (am)," Norfolk State coach Robert Jones said. "I told them I'm not packing."

Jones better not put the suitcase too far out of reach. The Spartans' reward is a chance to burnish their giant-killer reputation against the overall No. 1 seed this year — Godzilla ... er, Gonzaga.

More AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and updated bracket: <https://apnews.com/hub/ncaa-mens-bracket>

Israeli voters poised to send first Reform rabbi to Knesset

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — In years of going against Israel's religious and political mainstream, Rabbi Gilad Kariv has learned to handle conflict. He has argued controversial civil rights cases before Israel's Supreme Court. And as an activist, he has lobbied at the Knesset, the 120-seat parliament for a country facing its fourth election in two years.

So after locking up a spot that put him on the brink of joining the Knesset, it did not rock Kariv's world when powerful Orthodox lawmakers responded by threatening to boycott him.

The 47-year-old lawyer and father of three is poised next week to become the first Reform movement rabbi to hold a seat in parliament, a political ascent that marks a key victory for religious pluralism in Israel and for the millions of American Jews who practice liberal streams of their religion.

Kariv's rise to the fourth-highest seat in the center-left Labor party would also put the Reform movement closer to the center of power inside Israel, rather than remaining a feature of the far-flung diaspora. The politically powerful Orthodox establishment has treated Kariv as a threat, suggesting he is the face of a "clownish" and "illegitimate" cult of pretenders.

Kariv shrugs off the hostility.

"If an Israeli politician and politicians in general need to have the skin of an elephant, a thick skin," Kariv said in an interview at Labor headquarters in Tel Aviv. "Then an Israeli Reform rabbi needs the skin of a mammoth."

He spoke not far from the spot where, during the first Palestinian uprising in 1987, he said he and his fellow teenage activists demonstrated weekly for a two-state peace agreement with the Palestinians and were spit upon by passers-by.

Kariv himself was raised in a secular Tel Aviv family. Like most Jewish Israeli boys, he celebrated his bar mitzvah, and early on, he considered becoming Orthodox.

He first encountered Reform Judaism during a high school trip to the United States. After returning home, he joined one of Israel's first Reform congregations, rising to become its leader.

The Israel Movement for Reform and Progressive Judaism now lists more than 50 congregations, representing a still-small but growing slice of a country whose Jewish rituals are largely controlled by Orthodox leaders. About 3% of Israeli Jews say they belong to the Reform movement.

About a third of American Jews, about 2 million people, identify as Reform.

Non-Orthodox American Jews also tend to hold much more liberal views on social and political issues than Israel's increasingly right-leaning society. That has translated into rising tensions between the world's two largest Jewish communities over issues like religious pluralism, West Bank settlement construction and how to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians.

Those differences were on display during the Trump administration, when Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's close ties with the former U.S. president alienated many American Jews.

Just talking about "Western liberal democratic values, you're losing big parts of the Israeli audience," said Kariv.

But Kariv, who is both a rabbi and a lawyer, believes Israel's Zionist ideals include respect for human rights and the LGBT community, assisting African migrants who have made their way to Israel and pro-

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tecting the environment. He is a strong advocate of a two-state solution with the Palestinians, believes West Bank settlement construction should be frozen and borders should be worked out in negotiations.

Such positions will put Kariv at odds on many issues with Netanyahu's religious and nationalist partners, if the Israeli leader wins another term in Tuesday's vote.

Even if Netanyahu's opponents manage to form a more moderate coalition, Kariv isn't likely to change much policy on his own as a new member of the parliament. But he'll have influence and a louder microphone just for having a seat inside the government. That's expected to raise his profile on volatile issues, such as a recent Supreme Court decision allowing people who convert to Judaism inside Israel through the Reform or Conservative movements to become citizens.

The March 1 ruling, 15 years in the making, only affects about 30 people a year. But like Kariv's rise, the symbolism of the ruling challenged the Orthodox establishment's monopoly on defining what and who qualifies as Jewish. Several members of the Knesset have vowed to challenge the decision via legislation.

As a lawmaker, Kariv would have a voice in the parliament's debate. He's said that if Israel wants to be the nation-state of the Jewish world, then it must recognize all the denominations of Judaism with equality.

"To be inside the Knesset means he's at the table. He's at the lectern, wearing a kippah as an Israeli," said Rabbi Rick Jacobs, head of the Reform movement in the U.S. who has lobbied the Knesset with Kariv, his Israeli counterpart, for nine years. Now, Jacobs said, "instead of writing op-eds, he's going to be standing at the plenum."

This equal footing would give some added legitimacy to a movement the Orthodox leaders have dismissed. They see Reform Judaism as a threat unlike secularism, said one expert.

"Reform Judaism conveys an alternative interpretation of Judaism," said Shmuel Rosner, senior fellow at the Jewish People Policy Institute in Jerusalem. Many Orthodox leaders "don't want to have any discussion about it."

United Torah Judaism, an ultra-Orthodox party, released a campaign video just after the court decision that cast non-Orthodox converts in Israel as akin to dogs wearing skullcaps.

The ferocious blowback might work in Kariv's favor.

Kariv "is a strong individual and he's been very outspoken," said Jay Ruderman, president of The Ruderman Foundation, a Boston-based group that educates Israeli lawmakers about American Jewry, and himself an Orthodox Jew. "In the Knesset, it will be a bumpy ride."

But if Kariv's critics keep up the hostility, Ruderman added, "they will make him more well-known."

And in a closely split parliament, pragmatism may end up prevailing. Rosner said the threatened, pre-election boycott of Kariv could easily fade if the Orthodox politicians need him in a tight vote.

"We should all remember that this is politics," he said. "People can be enemies in public and still trade horses privately."

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

Zoos, scientists aim to curb people giving virus to animals

By CHRISTINA LARSON and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

SAN DIEGO (AP) — The coughing among the western lowland gorillas at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park in January was the first warning sign. Soon the fears were confirmed: A troop of gorillas became the first apes known to test positive for the coronavirus.

Around the world, many scientists and veterinarians are now racing to protect animals from the coronavirus, often using the same playbook for minimizing disease spread among people: That includes social distancing, health checks and, for some zoo animals, a vaccine.

Karen, a 28-year-old orangutan, became the first ape in the world to get a coronavirus vaccine on Jan. 26 at the San Diego Zoo.

Karen has received two shots of a vaccine from Zoetis, a veterinary pharmaceutical company in New Jersey, and has shown no adverse reactions. Since then, nine other primates at the San Diego Zoo have been fully vaccinated: five bonobos and four orangutans. Four more animals — one bonobo and three

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gorillas — got their first shot this month and will get a second one in April.

"I was really convinced that we wanted to get that to protect our other great apes," said the zoo's wildlife health officer Nadine Lamberski, who explained she felt urgency to act after the eight gorillas fell sick.

That virus outbreak was linked to a zookeeper who was infected but had no symptoms. Seven gorillas recovered after a mild cases of sniffles, but one elderly silverback had pneumonia, likely caused by the virus, as well as heart disease. He was put on antibiotics and heart medication, and received an antibody treatment to block the virus from infecting cells.

About three dozen zoos across the United States and abroad have put in orders for the Zoetis vaccine, which is formulated to elicit a strong immune response in particular animal species.

"We will jump at the opportunity to get the Zoetis vaccine for our own great apes," said Oakland Zoo's veterinary director Alex Herman, who is ordering 100 doses.

Zoetis got a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to provide the doses on an experimental basis to the San Diego Zoo. The company will need to apply for the same permission to provide vaccine to additional zoos.

Scientists believe the coronavirus likely originated in wild horseshoe bats, before jumping — perhaps through an intermediary species — to humans. Now many researchers worry that humans may unwittingly infect other susceptible species.

"Right now, humans are the main vectors of SARS-CoV-2, with consequences for many animal species," said Arinjay Banerjee, a disease researcher at McMaster University in Canada.

Great apes such as gorillas, which share 98% of their DNA with humans, are especially susceptible, as are felines. So far, confirmed coronavirus cases include gorillas, tigers and lions at zoos; domestic cats and dogs; farmed mink, and at least one wild mink in Utah.

Scientists have also experimentally shown that ferrets, racoon dogs and white-tailed deer are susceptible, although pigs and cattle are not.

"This could be a conservation concern, especially if the virus began to spread in a wild species with extremely reduced populations, like the black-footed ferret," which is endangered, said Kate Langwig, an infectious disease ecologist at Virginia Tech.

Another worry is that virus spread among other species could produce new variants, complicating health authorities' efforts to curb the pandemic.

In Denmark, workers at a mink farm accidentally infected the animals. As the coronavirus spread among the mink, it mutated — and human handlers contracted the new variant. In response, the government ordered millions of mink to be killed.

"Mutations happen when there's a lot of disease transfer going on between animals," said Scott Weese, a veterinary microbiologist at the Ontario Veterinary College.

Many recommended steps to minimize disease spread to animals are familiar: wearing masks and sanitizing shared equipment, regular health checks, and maintaining physical distance.

Since the outbreak, the San Diego Zoo and its safari park north of San Diego have installed more fans at its indoor primate areas to increase air circulation. The staff wears double masks and face shields and limits their time indoors with animals.

Scientists and conservationists who monitor wild primates have also adapted their daily routines.

"Covid-19 has been a wake-up call for the world about the fact that these viruses can go from wild animals to people, and from people to great apes," said Kirsten Gilardi, executive director of Gorilla Doctors, a conservation group that includes field veterinarians who treat wild gorillas in Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

There are only about 1,000 wild mountain gorillas, so the threat of coronavirus infection "has changed the way we do our work," said Felix Ndagijimana, the Rwanda country director for Dian Fossey Gorilla Fund International, a conservation group.

For the past year, field trackers who check on gorillas daily in the rainforest first get a coronavirus test, then stay with other trackers in an encampment for work stints of several weeks. This is to ensure that

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they don't pick up the bug by returning to their villages at night.

"It was really a big ask of our team, especially during the pandemic. People want to be close to their families, but also keep the gorillas safe," said Ndagijimana. To date, he said, there have been no coronavirus cases among wild gorillas.

While some wild gorillas were vaccinated against measles in the 1980s, there are currently no plans to vaccinate them against the coronavirus. With wild apes, the first choice is always to be as hands-off as possible, said Jean Bosco Noheli, a field veterinarian for Gorilla Doctors in Rwanda. "Let's focus on other measures we can take first to protect wild gorillas," he said.

But more zoo animals could soon be getting virus shots.

"There's a lot of interest," said Sharon Deem, a veterinary epidemiologist at the St. Louis Zoo who is also part of a hazard preparedness group of the Association of Zoos & Aquariums that represents 240 zoos.

"I think given how horrible this particular pathogen has been to humans, and that we know it can be transmitted between humans and animals, that there is great interest to use an animal vaccine as soon as it is available," she said.

Larson reported from Washington. Associated Press reporter Terry Chea contributed from Oakland, California.

On Twitter follow Christina Larson: @larsonchristina and Julie Watson: @watson_julie

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Brazil vaccine drive faces challenges in remote communities

By ERALDO PERES and MAURICIO SAVARESE Associated Press

CAVALCANTE, Brazil (AP) — Brazil's vast size and deficient infrastructure make getting coronavirus vaccines to far-flung communities of Indigenous peoples and descendants of slaves a particularly daunting endeavor.

Nurse Rosemeire Bezerra has years of experience inoculating descendants of slaves — known as "quilombolas" — in the municipality of Cavalcante, about 180 miles from Brazil's capital, Brasilia. Her biggest challenge in the current vaccination drive is keeping vaccine doses below 8 degrees Celsius (46 degrees Fahrenheit) in an isolated, tropical region. It's especially sweltering in the Valley of Souls (Vão de Almas, in Portuguese) where she was headed.

On Monday, Bezerra protected plastic foam coolers with cardboard shells and filled them with ice. She intended to vaccinate 190 families within four days, before that ice melted. She set off with her team and three others, including an experienced driver familiar with the remote region.

Houses in the Valley of Souls are far apart, and chewed-up dirt roads make for a jolting journey that complicates keeping a cooler balanced on laps. The many river crossings test the four-wheel-drive vehicles, too.

Access is so poor that Bezerra and her staffers often vaccinate people they encounter on the roadside or tending to crops in their fields, as they might not have another chance. Some areas are reached only by foot, and they have to carry in their own food and water.

The vaccination team set up shop inside a school and pitched tents inside a classroom. Bezerra slept with a lantern and the coolers by her side.

"I woke up three times every night to see if the temperature was adequate," she said. "It's a very big responsibility if they're lost. I treated those vaccines like my daughter."

Brazil is in the midst of an alarming spike of COVID-19 cases, with nearly 3,000 deaths a day for the first time since the pandemic began. Public health experts say that restrictions on activity and social distancing can help ease pressure on hospitals' overloaded intensive care units, but that the only long-term solution is mass vaccination in a country of 210 million people that is bigger than the contiguous U.S.

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Almost 6% of Brazilians have received at least one shot, according to Our World in Data, a collaboration between researchers at the University of Oxford and the non-profit group Global Change Data Lab. Just 1.5% have gotten two doses.

There are formidable logistics to reaching Indigenous communities, many of which are only accessible by boat, and also difficulties overcoming doubts about the vaccines.

Members of the remote Baré group in Amazonas state received their vaccine jabs Wednesday after health workers travelled more than two hours from the state capital of Manaus up the Cuieiras River to the village of New Hope (Nova Esperança). Some of the villagers initially had rejected the shots.

It was hardly the only time Januário Carneiro, coordinator of the Manaus region's Indigenous health care unit, was met with skepticism and mistrust.

Carneiro has spent hours convincing Indigenous people the vaccines are safe, and says he has been successful. So far, 71% of about 15,000 Indigenous people in the Manaus region have received their first shots, and 52% had their second jabs this week, he said.

While New Hope is home to 195 villagers, Carneiro's journey on Wednesday was to immunize just 19 people missed on prior outings. That helps explain why priority vaccination for Indigenous people and quilombolas is a matter of efficiency.

"Imagine if you go to these isolated areas just for people over 70 years old, then have to come back later, paying for all the fuel for a boat just for a small group. That's why, when you go, you have to vaccinate everyone at once," Jacqueline Sachett, a nursing professor at the Amazonas state university, said in a video posted by the state-run Fiocruz Institute. "It isn't just a matter of human rights."

New Hope's chief, José Prancácio, said the whole village was infected with the coronavirus after people traveling to Manaus for food brought the virus home.

Manaus suffered a devastating second wave of COVID-19 cases in January, driven by a more contagious strain of the virus. Hospitals lacked oxygen for weeks and doctors had to choose which intensive care patients to put on ventilators.

The state has seen the number of cases and deaths ebb since, but immunization still has a way to go. New Hope, for its part, is nearing immunity. After Reinaldo de Souza Santos, 37, received his shot, he held up his vaccine card to display stickers proving he had gotten both his shots.

"My people are now calm and very happy about this vaccine," Prancácio said. "Until there's a vaccine, a lot of people die. But today, thank God, we're 100% satisfied."

In Cavalcante, quilombola Manoel Pereira and his wife, Leona, received their first shots standing beside the fence of their cassava farm. Wearing a disposable gown, Bezerra calmly delivered the dose to Pereira, who looked eager to return to his labors.

"It is a very poor community, with some places that can only be reached by special pick-up trucks," Bezerra said. "Our team didn't spare any effort. We needed to give them some hope."

Associated Press videojournalist Fernando Crispim in Manaus contributed to this report.

Asian American churches plan acts beyond prayer for healing

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO, MARIAM FAM and JESSIE WARDARSKI Associated Press

Asian American Christian leaders said Thursday their congregations are saddened and outraged after a white gunman killed eight people — most of them women of Asian descent — at three Atlanta-area massage parlors. And they're calling for action beyond prayers.

Asian Americans were already rattled by a wave of racist attacks amid the spread of the coronavirus pandemic across the United States. While the motive behind Tuesday's rampage remains under investigation, some see it as a wake-up call to stand up against a rise in violence against the community.

The lead pastor at Korean Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, located a few miles from two of the spas that were targeted, said he will ask congregants during his Sunday sermon to "not just pray, not just worry," because "it's time for us to act."

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"I'm going to urge people with love and peace that we need to step up and address this issue, so that ... our next generation should not be involved in tragic ... violence," the Rev. Byeong Han said. "That's what Christians need to do."

South Korea's Foreign Ministry says diplomats in Atlanta have confirmed with police that four of the dead were women of Korean descent, and are working to determine their nationality.

Jane Yoon, a congregant at Korean Central Presbyterian and a 17-year-old high school junior in nearby Marietta, said she increasingly worries for her family, which is of Korean descent, and was shocked by the killings.

"I was definitely very outraged," she said. "I was in shock at first of the news and just also how close it is to my community."

It also hit home on a very personal level: Last week, she said, she was in a car accident and another driver punched her in the face and body before she was able to call 911. Yoon said the woman, who was arrested, did not make any racist comments during the assault, but she couldn't help but think about rising attacks against Asian Americans.

Following that incident, she has been getting spiritual guidance and counseling from the congregation.

In the Atlanta suburb of Roswell, the Rev. Jong Kim of Grace Korean Presbyterian Church said he found a glimmer of hope in the wake of the killings after a woman reached out to donate \$100 to his church "to express her feelings of sorrow to the Asian community."

Kim spoke to several other Korean pastors in the area Thursday, and they now plan to join the group Asian Americans Advancing Justice, through which they hope to have discussions about issues of race and ethnicity and provide funeral service assistance for the victims' families.

The Atlanta chapter of Asian Americans Advancing Justice has said that while details of the shooting are still emerging, "the broader context cannot be ignored." The attacks, it said, "happened under the trauma of increasing violence against Asian Americans nationwide, fueled by white supremacy and systemic racism."

Ripples from the killings have been felt well beyond Atlanta.

In Chicago, Garden City Covenant Church invited Asian Americans "in need of a community who understands your pain" to join an online meeting in which they could "share, listen, lament and pray" together.

"There were a lot of tears, and there were a lot of questions, and for many I think there is a sense also of helplessness," said Gabriel J. Catanus, the lead pastor, who is Filipino American. The church's diverse congregation includes about 60 percent Filipino Americans, he said, along with worshippers from Latino and other communities.

"It's an important Biblical practice, and Christian practice, to come before God honestly and to pour one's own heart out before God," he said. "God can handle even the rage and the devastation that comes out of us at times."

Catanus said he was glad to see that people are now "more awakened" to the experiences of Asian Americans. But he said much work remains to be done in faith communities and called on religious leaders to denounce anti-Asian racism from their pulpits.

"In the Christian community and in our Christian institutions, specifically, we need to confess that we have in many ways failed to lead and to teach our people," he said. "Our discipleship has failed in many ways to address these very powerful forces that have led to violence and death."

Kevin Park, an associate pastor at Korean Central Presbyterian Church, said not only Asian Americans but the whole country needs to speak out against the violence, racism and "more subtle marginalization" that have been suffered for generations.

"There's opportunities among faith communities that we need to stand up together and reach out to communities that are hurting, not only Asian American communities but other communities of color," he said.

"And I think there needs to be kind of this movement toward solidarity. ... We're all in this together."

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US, China spar in first face-to-face meeting under Biden

By MATTHEW LEE and MARK THIESSEN Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — Top U.S. and Chinese officials offered sharply different views of each other and the world on Thursday as the two sides met face-to-face for the first time since President Joe Biden took office.

In unusually pointed public remarks for a staid diplomatic meeting, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Chinese Communist Party foreign affairs chief Yang Jiechi took aim at each other's country's policies at the start of two days of talks in Alaska. The contentious tone of their public comments suggested the private discussions would be even more rocky.

The meetings in Anchorage were a new test in increasingly troubled relations between the two countries, which are at odds over a range of issues from trade to human rights in Tibet, Hong Kong and China's western Xinjiang region, as well as over Taiwan, China's assertiveness in the South China Sea and the coronavirus pandemic.

Blinken said the Biden administration is united with its allies in pushing back against China's increasing authoritarianism and assertiveness at home and abroad. Yang then unloaded a list of Chinese complaints about the U.S. and accused Washington of hypocrisy for criticizing Beijing on human rights and other issues.

"Each of these actions threaten the rules-based order that maintains global stability," Blinken said of China's actions in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and of cyber attacks on the United States and economic coercion against U.S. allies. "That's why they're not merely internal matters, and why we feel an obligation to raise these issues here today."

National security adviser Jake Sullivan amplified the criticism, saying China has undertaken an "assault on basic values."

"We do not seek conflict but we welcome stiff competition," he said.

Yang responded angrily by demanding the U.S. stop pushing its own version of democracy at a time when the United States itself has been roiled by domestic discontent. He also accused the U.S. of failing to deal with its own human rights problems and took issue with what he said was "condescension" from Blinken, Sullivan and other U.S. officials.

"We believe that it is important for the United States to change its own image and to stop advancing its own democracy in the rest of the world," he said. "Many people within the United States actually have little confidence in the democracy of the United States."

"China will not accept unwarranted accusations from the U.S. side," he said, adding that recent developments had plunged relations "into a period of unprecedented difficulty" that "has damaged the interests of our two peoples."

"There is no way to strangle China," he said.

Blinken appeared to be annoyed by the tenor and length of the comments, which went on for more than 15 minutes. He said his impressions from speaking with world leaders and on his just-concluded trip to Japan and South Korea were entirely different from the Chinese position.

"I'm hearing deep satisfaction that the United States is back, that we're reengaged," Blinken retorted. "I'm also hearing deep concern about some of the actions your government is taking."

Underscoring the animosity, the State Department blasted the Chinese delegation for violating an agreed upon two-minute time limit for opening statements and suggested it "seem(ed) to have arrived intent on grandstanding, focused on public theatrics and dramatics over substance."

"America's approach will be undergirded by confidence in our dealing with Beijing — which we are doing from a position of strength — even as we have the humility to know that we are a country eternally striving to become a more perfect union," it said.

U.S.-China ties have been torn for years, and the Biden administration has yet to signal whether it's ready or willing to back away from the hard-line stances taken under Donald Trump.

Just a day before the meeting, Blinken had announced new sanctions over Beijing's crackdown on pro-

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democracy advocates in Hong Kong. In response, China stepped up its rhetoric opposing U.S. interference in domestic affairs and complained directly about it.

"Is this a decision made by the United States to try to gain some advantage in dealing with China?" State Councilor Wang Yi asked. "Certainly this is miscalculated and only reflects the vulnerability and weakness inside the United States and it will not shake China's position or resolve on those issues."

Trump had taken pride in forging what he saw as a strong relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. But the relationship disintegrated after the coronavirus pandemic spread from the Wuhan province across the globe and unleashed a public health and economic disaster.

Lee reported from Washington.

Biden says US to hit 100 million vaccine goal Friday

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With the U.S. closing in on President Joe Biden's goal of injecting 100 million coronavirus vaccinations weeks ahead of his target date, the White House announced Thursday the nation is now in position to help supply neighbors Canada and Mexico with millions of lifesaving shots.

The Biden administration revealed the outlines of a plan to "loan" a limited number of vaccines to Canada and Mexico as the president announced the U.S. is on the cusp of meeting his 100-day injection goal "way ahead of schedule."

"I'm proud to announce that tomorrow, 58 days into our administration, we will have met our goal," Biden said. He promised to unveil a new vaccination target next week, as the U.S. is on pace to have enough of the three currently authorized vaccines to cover the entire adult population just 10 weeks from now.

Ahead of Biden's remarks, the White House said it was finalizing plans to send a combined 4 million doses of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine to Mexico and Canada in its first export of shots. Press secretary Jen Psaki said the details of the "loan" were still being worked out, but 2.5 million doses would go to Mexico and 1.5 million would be sent to Canada.

"Our first priority remains vaccinating the U.S. population," Psaki said. But she added that "ensuring our neighbors can contain the virus is a mission critical step, is mission critical to ending the pandemic."

The AstraZeneca vaccine has not yet been authorized for use in the U.S. but has been by the World Health Organization. Tens of millions of doses have been stockpiled in the U.S., waiting for emergency use authorization, and that has sparked an international outcry that lifesaving vaccine is being withheld when it could be used elsewhere. The White House said just 7 million of the AstraZeneca doses are ready for shipment.

The initial run of doses manufactured in the U.S. are owned by the federal government under the terms of agreements reached with drugmakers, and the Biden administration has faced calls from allies across the globe to release the AstraZeneca shots for immediate use. Biden has also fielded direct requests from Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to buy vaccines produced in the United States.

Global public health advocates say wealthy nations like the U.S. need to do far more to help stem the spread of the pandemic. The World Health Organization on Thursday issued a report that fewer than 7 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have been administered in Africa thus far. That's the equivalent of what the U.S. administers in a matter of days.

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

From his first days in office, Biden has set clear — and achievable — metrics for U.S. success, whether they be vaccinations or school reopenings, as part of an apparent strategy of underpromising, then over-delivering. Aides believe that exceeding his goals breeds trust in government after the Trump administration's sometimes-fanciful rhetoric on the virus.

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The 100 million-dose goal was first announced on Dec. 8, days before the U.S. had even one authorized vaccine for COVID-19, let alone the three that have now received emergency authorization. Still, it was generally seen within reach, if optimistic.

By the time Biden was inaugurated on Jan. 20, the U.S. had already administered 20 million shots at a rate of about 1 million per day, bringing complaints at the time that Biden's goal was not ambitious enough. He quickly revised it upward to 150 million doses in his first 100 days.

Now the U.S. is injecting an average of about 2.2 million doses each day — and the pace is likely to dramatically rise later this month in conjunction with an expected surge in supply of the vaccines.

According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, injections of 96 million doses have been reported to the agency since Biden's inauguration, but those reports lag the actual date of administration. Vaccination trend lines pointed to Biden breaking the 100 million mark on Thursday, with the numbers likely to be confirmed by the CDC as soon as Friday.

The president has moved to speed up deliveries of vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson, as well as to expand the number of places to get shots and people who can administer them, with a focus on increasing the nation's capacity to inject doses as supply constraints lift.

The risk in setting too rosy expectations is that an administration might become defined by its failure to meet them, such as in May 2020, when President Donald Trump said the nation had "prevailed" over the virus.

At the time, the country had seen about 80,000 deaths from the virus. This week, the U.S. death toll topped 538,000. Trump's lax approach and lack of credibility also contributed to poor adherence to public safety rules among the American public.

Emergency sites for migrant children raising safety concerns

By NOMAAN MERCHANT and ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

McALLEN, Texas (AP) — The U.S. government has stopped taking immigrant teenagers to a converted camp for oil field workers in West Texas as it faces questions about the safety of emergency sites it is quickly setting up to hold children crossing the southern border.

The Associated Press has learned that the converted camp has faced multiple issues in the four days since the Biden administration opened it amid a scramble to find space for immigrant children. More than 10% of the camp's population has tested positive for COVID-19 and at least one child had to be hospitalized.

An official working at the Midland, Texas, facility said most of the Red Cross volunteers staffing the site don't speak Spanish, even though the teenagers they care for are overwhelmingly from Central America. When the facility opened, there weren't enough new clothes to give to teenagers who had been wearing the same shirts and pants for several days, the official said. And no case managers were on site to begin processing the minors' release to family elsewhere in the U.S.

Bringing in teenagers while still setting up basic services "was kind of like building a plane as it's taking off," said the official, who declined to be named due to government restrictions.

U.S. Health and Human Services notified local officials in Midland on Wednesday that it had no plans to bring more teenagers to the site, according to an email seen by the AP. HHS spokesman Mark Weber said taking more teenagers to Midland was on "pause for now." There were still 485 youths there as of Wednesday, 53 of whom had tested positive for COVID-19.

The government on Wednesday brought about 200 teenagers to another emergency site at the downtown Dallas convention center, which could expand to up to 3,000 minors. HHS will not open an influx facility for children at Moffett Federal Airfield near San Francisco, Democratic Rep. Anna Eshoo said.

President Joe Biden's administration has been sharply criticized for its response to a surge in crossings of unaccompanied immigrant children. As roughly 4,500 children wait in Border Patrol facilities unequipped for long-term detention, with some sleeping on floors, HHS has rushed to open holding sites across the country and tried to expedite its processes for releasing children in custody. About 9,500 minors are in HHS custody.

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In addition, the U.S. has seen a sharp increase in Central American families arriving at the border who are fleeing violence, poverty and the effects of a destructive hurricane. Biden has kept intact an emergency measure enacted by the Trump administration during the pandemic that allows the government to quickly expel them to Mexico, though families with young children are generally allowed to enter through South Texas.

Maria Cuellar, 38, of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, was expelled this week along with her 10-year-old boy. Cuellar said she had heard the U.S. was again admitting migrants with the changing administration. She said her house was ravaged by Hurricane Eta in November and she was not making ends meet as the pandemic slowed the economy.

Smugglers took her through Mexico and to the Rio Grande river with a group of 10 after sunset Sunday. The group then walked overnight for three hours to turn themselves over to Border Patrol agents, but they were returned through the pedestrian bridge that connects McAllen, Texas, to Reynosa, Mexico, in a matter of hours.

Cuellar sobbed as she described being away from her 11-year-old daughter. "I feel desperate because I don't know what we are going to do," she said. "I feel like I have to wait and try again."

The Biden administration is not expelling immigrant children unaccompanied by a parent or legal guardian. Several hundred a day are crossing the border, going first to often packed Border Patrol stations while they await placement in the HHS system.

HHS has turned to the American Red Cross to care for teenagers in both Midland and Dallas, a departure from the standard practice of having paid, trained staff watch over youths. Red Cross volunteers sit outside portable trailers in Midland to monitor the teenagers staying inside. Staff from HHS and the U.S. Public Health Service are also at both sites.

Neither HHS nor the Red Cross would say whether the volunteers had to pass FBI fingerprint checks, which are more exhaustive than a commercial background check. Both agencies have declined repeated requests for interviews.

The waiver of those background checks at another HHS camp in Tornillo, Texas, in 2018 led to concerns that the government was endangering child welfare. HHS requires caregivers in its permanent facilities to pass an FBI fingerprint check, and the agency's inspector general found in 2018 that waiving background checks combined with not having enough mental health clinicians were "serious safety and health vulnerabilities."

The official who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity said there was not sufficient mental health care at the Midland camp for minors who typically have fled their countries of origin and undergone a traumatic journey into the country.

In a statement earlier this week, HHS said it was rushing to get children out of Border Patrol custody and that emergency sites "will provide a safer and less over-crowded environment where children are cared for and processed as quickly as possible."

The Red Cross says its volunteers in Midland and Dallas "have received intensive training in sheltering operations and COVID-19 safety" and that they had all undergone background checks. The agency declined to say how many hours of training each volunteer had received.

U.S. Rep. August Pfluger, a Republican who represents Midland, was allowed to visit the site soon after it opened and saw the portable units that serve as rooms for each teenager.

"It's a professional facility that was intended for workers," he said.

But Pfluger and other Midland officials said the Biden administration wasn't answering their questions or giving them assurance that officials would keep the surrounding community safe. HHS opened the Midland site without notifying some top local officials who say many of their questions aren't being answered.

The email HHS sent to local officials this week details the haste with which government officials opened the site. It says officials identified the camp Friday and signed a contract Saturday. The first group of teenagers arrived Sunday night.

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"People don't trust what they're doing. They don't feel secure," Pfluger said. "The lack of transparency only serves to magnify that problem."

Leecia Welch, an attorney for the National Center for Youth Law, interviewed children last week who were detained at the Border Patrol's sprawling tent facility in Donna, Texas. Many of those children reported going days without a shower or being taken outside.

Welch noted that Biden "inherited a dismantled immigration system and the impact on children, in particular, is becoming increasingly dire."

But, she added, "building more and more holding centers without services or case management is just trading one set of problems for another."

Merchant reported from Houston. Associated Press journalist Ben Fox in Washington contributed to this report.

House OKs Dems' immigration bills for Dreamers, farm workers

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House voted Thursday to unlash a gateway to citizenship for young Dreamers, migrant farm workers and immigrants who've fled war or natural disasters, giving Democrats wins in the year's first votes on an issue that faces an uphill climb in the Senate.

On a near party-line 228-197 vote, lawmakers approved one bill offering legal status to around 2 million Dreamers, brought to the U.S. illegally as children, and hundreds of thousands of migrants admitted for humanitarian reasons from a dozen troubled countries.

They then voted 247-174 for a second measure creating similar protections for 1 million farm workers who have worked in the U.S. illegally. The government estimates they comprise half the nation's agricultural laborers.

In a statement after the votes, President Joe Biden called the action a "critical first step" toward a more sweeping overhaul he's proposed. He said he wants to work with Congress toward "building a 21st century immigration system that is grounded in dignity, safety, and fairness, and finally enacts the long term solutions we need to create an orderly and humane immigration system."

Both bills largely hit a wall of opposition from Republicans insistent that any immigration legislation bolster security at the Mexican border, which waves of migrants have tried breaching in recent weeks. The GOP has accused congressional Democrats of ignoring that problem and Biden of fueling it by erasing former President Donald Trump's restrictive policies, even though that surge began while Trump was still in office.

While Dreamers win wide public support and migrant farm workers are a backbone of the agriculture industry, both House bills face gloomy prospects in the evenly split Senate. That chamber's 50 Democrats will need at least 10 GOP supporters to break Republican filibusters.

The outlook was even grimmer for Biden's more ambitious goal of legislation making citizenship possible for all 11 million immigrants in the U.S. illegally, easing visa restrictions, improving border security technology and spending billions in Central America to ease problems that prompt people to leave.

Nine House Republicans joined all Democrats in voting for the Dreamers measure but 30 GOP lawmakers backed the farm workers bill, giving it a more bipartisan hue.

Congress has long deadlocked over immigration, which again seems headed toward becoming political ammunition. Republicans could use it to rally conservative voters in upcoming elections, while Democrats could add it to a stack of House-passed measures languishing in the Senate to build support for abolishing that chamber's bill-killing filibusters.

Democrats said their measures were aimed not at border security but at immigrants who deserve help. "They're so much of our country," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said of Dreamers, who like many immigrants have held frontline jobs during the pandemic. "These immigrant communities strengthen, enrich and ennoble our nation, and they must be allowed to stay."

Neither House measure would directly affect those trying to enter from Mexico. Republicans criticized

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them anyway for lacking border security provisions and used the debate to lambast Biden, who's ridden a wave of popularity since taking office and winning a massive COVID-19 relief package.

"It is a Biden border crisis, and it is spinning out of control," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

While the number of migrants caught trying to cross the border from Mexico has been rising since last April, the 100,441 encountered last month was the highest figure since March 2019. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has said the number is tracking toward a 20-year high.

In another measure of the problem, around 14,000 children and teens are in Customs and Border Protection custody or Health and Human Services Department shelters while officials find relatives or sponsors to take them, Biden administration officials told reporters.

Democrats were making that problem worse, Republicans said, with bills they said entice more immigrants to sneak into the U.S. and provide amnesty to immigrants who break laws to get here.

"We don't know who these people are, we don't know what their intentions are," Rep. Jody Hice, R-Ga., said of immigrant farm workers who might seek legal status. He added, "It's frightening, it's irresponsible, it's endangering American lives."

During earlier debate on the Dreamers' bill, Democrats said Republicans were going too far.

"Sometimes I stand in this chamber and I feel like I'm in the Twilight Zone, listening to a number of my Republican colleagues espouse white supremacist ideology to denigrate our Dreamers," said Rep. Mondaire Jones, D-N.Y.

Maine Rep. Jared Golden's vote against the farm workers measure made him the only Democrat to oppose either bill.

The House approved Dreamer and farm worker bills in 2019 by similar partisan margins, and both died in what was a Republican-run Senate. Trump, who as president constricted legal and illegal immigration, would have signed neither.

Biden has suspended work on Trump's wall along the Mexican border, ended his separation of young children from migrant families and allowed apprehended minors to stay in the U.S. as officials decide if they can legally remain. He has also turned away most single adults and families.

The Dreamer bill would grant conditional legal status for 10 years to many immigrants up to age 18 who were brought into the U.S. illegally before this year. They'd have to meet education and other requirements.

To attain legal permanent residence, or a green card, they'd have to obtain a higher education degree, serve in the military or be employed for at least three years. Like others with green cards, they could then apply for citizenship after five years.

The measure would also grant green cards to an estimated 400,000 immigrants with temporary protected status or deferred enforced departure status, which temporarily allow people fleeing extraordinary problems into the U.S.

The other bill would let immigrant farm workers who've worked in the country illegally over the past two years get certified agriculture worker status. That would let them, their spouses and children remain in the U.S. for renewable 5 1/2-year periods.

To earn green cards, they'd have to pay a \$1,000 fine and work up to an additional eight years, depending on how long they've already held farm jobs.

The legislation would cap wage increases, streamline the H-2A visa process for legal immigrant farm workers and phase in a mandatory system for electronically verifying the legal status of agriculture laborers.

AP reporter Ben Fox contributed to this report.

Atlanta police on shooting probe: 'Nothing is off the table'

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Police said Thursday that "nothing is off the table" in the investigation of the deadly shootings at two Atlanta massage parlors, including whether the slayings were a hate crime.

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Those attacks and a third one near the suburban town of Woodstock killed eight people and prompted President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris to change their plans for a previously scheduled trip to Atlanta. The pair postponed a political event in favor of meeting Friday with Asian American community leaders.

A 21-year-old white man, Robert Aaron Long, is charged with murder in Tuesday's slayings. Six of those killed were women of Asian descent.

"Our investigation is looking at everything, so nothing is off the table," Deputy Atlanta Police Chief Charles Hampton Jr. said at a news conference.

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office said it also was investigating whether the killings were hate crimes.

Georgia lawmakers last year passed a hate crimes law that allows additional penalties to be imposed for certain offenses when motivated by a victim's race, color, religion, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender or disability. A hate crime is not a standalone crime under the law, but it can be used to add time to a sentence once someone is convicted of another crime.

Investigators believe Long had previously visited two of the Atlanta massage parlors where four of the women were killed, Hampton said.

Long told police that the attacks were not racially motivated. He claimed to have a sex addiction, and authorities said he apparently lashed out at what he saw as sources of temptation.

Long's statements spurred outrage and widespread skepticism in the Asian American community, which has increasingly been targeted for violence during the coronavirus pandemic. Cherokee County Sheriff's Office spokesman Capt. Jay Baker also drew criticism for saying Long had "a really bad day" and "this is what he did."

Sheriff Frank Reynolds released a statement Thursday acknowledging that some of Baker's comments stirred "much debate and anger" and said the agency regrets any "heartache" caused by his words.

"In as much as his words were taken or construed as insensitive or inappropriate, they were not intended to disrespect any of the victims, the gravity of this tragedy or express empathy or sympathy for the suspect," Reynolds said, adding that Baker "had a difficult task before him, and this was one of the hardest in his 28 years in law enforcement."

Baker was replaced Thursday as spokesman for the investigation, according to a statement from a county spokeswoman who said she would be handling future media inquiries about the slayings.

The sheriff's statement did not address a 2020 Facebook post that appeared to have been written by Baker promoting a T-shirt with racist language about China and the coronavirus. Baker has not commented on the post, which was taken down Wednesday.

Meanwhile, lawyer J. Daran Burns issued a statement saying he had been appointed to represent Long. He offered condolences to the victims' families and said he was working on Long's behalf "to investigate the facts and circumstances" surrounding the slayings.

Long waived his right to an initial hearing in Cherokee County Magistrate Court on his lawyer's advice, the statement said.

Biden and Harris had already been scheduled to travel to Atlanta to tout the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill, but the trip took on new meaning after the shootings. The visit also comes amid an intense debate over voter rights in Georgia.

Biden and Harris, the first vice president of Asian descent, will instead meet with Asian American leaders to discuss threats against the community, meet with other local leaders and visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for an update on the pandemic.

Also Thursday, Biden directed that flags be flown at half-staff through sunset Monday in honor of the dead.

At a congressional hearing on violence against Asian Americans that was scheduled before the shootings, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerrold Nadler called for the government to "investigate and swiftly address" growing tensions but did not call for a specific course of action.

Lawmakers in the House and Senate have introduced legislation that would assign a person at the Justice Department to expedite the review of hate crimes related to COVID-19 and provide additional support to state and local authorities to respond to those crimes. But it is unclear if the bill by Rep. Grace Meng, a

New York Democrat, and Sen. Mazie Hirono, a Hawaii Democrat, will get a vote.

Testifying at the hearing, Meng urged Democratic leaders to move the legislation and said lawmakers "cannot turn a blind eye" to people who are living in fear.

"Our community is bleeding," Meng said. "We are in pain. And for the last year, we've been screaming out for help."

There was some tension as a Republican on the panel, Texas Rep. Chip Roy, charged that Democrats were trying to control speech.

"When we start policing free speech, we're doing the very thing that we're condemning when we condemn what the Chinese Communist Party does to their country," Roy said. "And that's exactly where this wants to go."

Meng responded angrily to Roy's comments, saying Republicans "can talk about issues with any other country you want, but you don't have to do it by putting a bull's-eye on the back of Asian Americans across this country, on our grandparents, on our kids."

Associated Press writers Mary Clare Jalonick, Zeke Miller, Jonathan Lemire and Nancy Benac in Washington contributed to this report.

12th juror picked, lawyers clash over expert in Floyd trial

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Attorneys at the trial of a former Minneapolis police officer charged in George Floyd's death nearly finished jury selection on Thursday by choosing three more panelists, hours after clashing over how much they should hear of Floyd's own actions.

A total of 12 jurors have now been selected, leaving just two alternates yet to be chosen. So far, the racial makeup of the jury is evenly split; six of the jurors are white, four are Black, and two are multiracial, according to the court.

The newest jurors include a white registered nurse in her 50s who assured the court that she wouldn't draw on her medical knowledge at Derek Chauvin's trial, and a Black woman in her 60s who said she didn't watch the entire bystander video of Floyd's arrest and didn't know enough to form a firm opinion of Chauvin or Floyd.

The 12th juror, a white woman in her 40s who works in the commercial insurance business, said she has experience with someone who struggled with alcohol, and might view someone who uses drugs cautiously, saying they could act violently or aggressively when under the influence.

Still, the woman said she doesn't ascribe to the sentiment that someone who uses drugs or doesn't cooperate with police should be treated poorly. "If someone uses drugs, I don't think there should be ramifications of violence for that," she said.

Earlier, prosecutor Jerry Blackwell argued that a forensic psychiatrist should be allowed to testify on how Floyd's behavior, as officers attempted to put him into the squad car, was consistent with any reasonable person's anxiety or panic during a traumatic event. Officers pointed a gun at Floyd after he allegedly tried to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill at a convenience store, and he struggled and told them he had claustrophobia as they tried to force him into the car.

Prosecutors want to show that Floyd wasn't actually resisting arrest -- as Blackwell said defense attorney Eric Nelson intended to argue -- but might have been panicking and physically unable to comply with officers' orders.

"The defense is doing a full-on trial of George Floyd, who is not on trial, but that is what they're doing," said Blackwell, adding that the defense also planned to make arguments about Floyd's drug use.

Nelson said that if the prosecution gets to present that evidence to the jury, the defense should be able to tell the jury about Floyd's drug arrest in May 2019, when he did not resist getting put into a squad car.

Nelson also has said there are striking similarities between the two encounters that could show a pattern of behavior.

Hennepin County Judge Peter Cahill said he'll rule on the forensic psychiatrist's testimony on Friday, when

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he plans to issue a broader ruling on the admissibility of Floyd's 2019 arrest and on defense motions for delaying or moving the trial.

The judge on Wednesday dismissed two of seven jurors who were seated before news broke last week that the city had reached a settlement with Floyd's family for \$27 million in a civil case. Cahill re-questioned them to see if the massive settlement affected their ability to be fair and impartial.

City leaders have taken sharp criticism for the timing of the settlement. City Attorney Jim Rowader said Thursday that the city agreed to it because there was no guarantee the offer would still be available later.

"In general, there is no good timing to settle any case, particularly one as complex and involved and sensitive as this," Rowader said, according to the Minneapolis Star Tribune.

Of the 12 seated jurors, five are men and seven are women. Their ages range from their 20s to 60s.

The first juror selected Thursday was questioned extensively by attorneys and Cahill about her experience as a nurse, whether she has ever resuscitated anyone and how she would view medical evidence in the case.

The woman said she would draw upon her knowledge to evaluate medical testimony and that she recognizes the amount of time a person can be without air before going unconscious. At one point, Cahill told her: "You can't be an expert witness in the jury room."

She said she could refrain from relying on her knowledge.

The second juror, who worked in marketing before retiring and currently volunteers with underserved youth, said she watched the bystander video of Floyd's arrest for about four or five minutes, then shut it off because "it just wasn't something that I needed to see."

She somewhat agreed that Black people and other minorities do not receive the same treatment as white people in the criminal justice system. She had a very favorable view of the Black Lives Matter movement, writing in her questionnaire "I am Black and my life matters."

She has a neutral view of Blue Lives Matter, saying everyone is important and that she has a relative who is a Minneapolis police officer.

Cahill has set March 29 for opening statements if the jury is complete by then.

Chauvin is charged with murder and manslaughter in the May 25 death of Floyd, a Black man who was declared dead after Chauvin, who is white, pressed his knee against his neck for about nine minutes. Floyd's death, captured on bystander video, set off weeks of sometimes-violent protests across the country and led to a national reckoning on racial justice.

Three other former officers face an August trial in Floyd's death on charges of aiding and abetting second-degree murder and manslaughter.

This story has been corrected, based on updated and corrected information provided by the court, to show that one juror previously identified as white has self-identified as multiracial.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

Amazon gets Thursday night games, NFL nearly doubles TV deal

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

Much like they did with cable in the 1980s and satellite television in the 1990s, the NFL on Thursday made another significant transition in the way its games are viewed.

The league's new rights agreements, worth \$113 billion over the 11 seasons of the new deals that begin in 2023, include a streaming service receiving an exclusive full season package for the first time when Amazon Prime Video will be the home of 15 "Thursday Night Football" games.

"This is a seminal moment for the distribution of our content," commissioner Roger Goodell said. "These deals remind me of back in the '60s, how NFL content and games were a big part of the broadcast TV growth, and then going into the '80s, with our first commitment to cable television, and then the '90s with our commitment to satellite television and our Sunday Ticket package. I'm sure we're going to look back

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on these deals the same way that we did back in the 1980s.

"This provides our fans with greater access. We want to provide our games on more platforms than ever before."

The new contracts also mean the NFL will nearly double its media revenue to more than \$10 billion a season. The league took in \$5.9 billion a year in its current contracts.

The total of \$113 billion is an increase of 80% over the previous such period, a person with direct knowledge of the contracts told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the money figures were not made public.

Amazon has partnered with the league to stream 11 Thursday night games since 2017, but it will take over the entire package from Fox, which has had it since 2018. Amazon streamed a Week 16 Saturday game between the 49ers and Cardinals last year that was seen by an estimated 11.2 million total viewers and had an average minute audience of 4.8 million. That was the largest audience to stream an NFL game.

"Over the last five years we have started the migration to streaming. This is another large step in this direction," said New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft, chairman of the league's media committee. "Our fans want this option and understand streaming is the future. We have created a unique hybrid of viewing options and streaming. This should provide a smooth transition to the future of content distribution."

Marie Donoghue, Amazon's vice president of global sports video, said the next couple seasons will be used to test certain things.

"Our relationship with the NFL has been a process. It is incredible trust the league has put in us which is largely based on our track record with them," she said. "It is a game changer for us. We are really excited for the innovative technologies and ways to serve fans."

Games on Amazon will also be carried on over-the-air broadcast stations in the cities of the participating teams, also the case with games aired on ESPN and NFL Network.

ABC gets back in the Super Bowl rotation with two games over the 11 seasons. ESPN gets some flexibility in its schedule on Monday nights, with the NFL agreeing to potentially move as many as five games from Sunday, and will have three doubleheaders, up from one.

The contract also expands digital rights for the other networks as well. ESPN+ will air one of the London games and NBC's "Peacock" platform will also have one exclusive game per season for six years beginning in 2023.

Games will continue to air on CBS, Fox, NBC as well as ESPN/ABC. ESPN's deal was scheduled to end after 2021, while the others expired a year later, but ESPN will have a bridge deal for 2022.

The new deals kick in with the 2023 season and expire after the 2033 schedule. The league was able to get a sizable increase despite ratings for regular-season games decreasing by 7% after two years of growth. The declines have been largely attributed to the coronavirus pandemic and a presidential election.

Even with declines, regular-season games last year averaged 15.6 million television and digital viewers, according to the league and Nielsen.

Here are other key points of the new contract:

INCREASED REVENUE: With the hefty new contracts the 32 NFL teams and their players can look forward to increased salary caps throughout the decade. The cap decreased by nearly \$16 million this year due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The broadcast partners also figure to get an extra game per season, likely beginning this year. NFL owners are getting ready to implement a 17-game regular season. Goodell said discussions about the new schedule will be conducted during the owners meetings later this month with an announcement expected within the next three weeks.

The media deals have wrapped up a hectic 12 months for the league, which included completing a new labor agreement and having no games canceled in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic.

BIG WINNER: Without a doubt it is ESPN and ABC. Not only does ABC return to the Super Bowl rotation for the first time since the 2005 season, but it finally gets those flex scheduling options for "Monday Night Football". That was a right only previously given to NBC when flex scheduling was introduced in 2006.

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ESPN's flex option will start in Week 12 and can be done on 12 days notice.

There will also be three weeks of multiple games, including two on Saturday in the final week of the regular season with playoff implications for the first time, and a divisional round playoff game to go with their wild-card weekend contest. The two Saturday games will begin this year as part of the bridge agreement.

While the other networks saw their rights fees double, Disney's increase came to 35%. It will still pay the most though as its contract averages \$2.7 billion per season.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON STABILITY: Fox will remain the primary network for the NFC while CBS will have the AFC. Eric Shanks and Sean McManus, chairmen of the respective networks, said it was important to retain those unique identities.

Fox will average \$2.25 billion a year and CBS' rights fees come to \$2.1 billion. Both networks also have provisions for their streaming services: Tubi for Fox and CBS' Paramount+.

QUITE A COMBINATION: NBC's next four Super Bowls, beginning with next year's game in Los Angeles, will also come during the Winter Olympics, which was important to the network. "Sunday Night Football" has been the top-rated prime-time program since 2011.

NBC also retains the opening Thursday night NFL Kickoff game as well as a Thanksgiving night game and flex scheduling beginning in Week 5.

MORE ALTERNATE BROADCASTS: After the success of CBS doing a kids-friendly broadcast on Nickelodeon, and ESPN's MegaCast during the NFL playoffs, there will be an increase in alternate presentations. The networks will also have greater flexibility to use stats and integrated social feeds on their digital presentations. Amazon experimented with on-demand highlights and increased use of Next Gen stats during Thursday night games last season.

More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/NFL> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Students who got partial loan relief to see full discharge

By CAROLE FELDMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thousands of students defrauded by for-profit schools will have their federal loans fully erased, the Biden administration announced Thursday, reversing a Trump administration policy that had given them only partial relief.

The change could lead to \$1 billion in loans being canceled for 72,000 borrowers, all of whom attended for-profit schools, the Education Department said.

"Borrowers deserve a simplified and fair path to relief when they have been harmed by their institution's misconduct," said Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona. "A close review of these claims and the associated evidence showed these borrowers have been harmed, and we will grant them a fresh start from their debt."

The department said it was rescinding the formula used by the Trump administration to determine partial relief and putting in place "a streamlined path to receiving full loan discharges."

The decision applies to students who already had their claims approved and received only partial relief, the department said.

A senior department official briefing reporters said the agency was continuing to review both the backlog of claims yet to be decided and those that have been denied.

The department described Thursday's action as "a first step" and said it would be looking at rewriting the regulations down the road.

The borrower defense to repayment program allows students to have their federal loans canceled if they were defrauded by their schools. The Obama administration had expanded the program aimed at helping students who attended for-profit colleges like Corinthian and ITT Technical Institute, which have shut down. But President Donald Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos, pulled it back, saying it had become too easy for students to have their loans erased, and revised the program to make it harder for them to get relief, including providing only partial cancellation of the loans.

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Congress voted to overturn DeVos' changes last March, but it was vetoed by Trump.

The Education Department said a total of 343,331 applications for relief under borrower defense had been received as of Feb. 28. Of those, 61,511 had been approved and borrowers notified. Most of the others had been declared ineligible or were still pending.

In addition to having their loans fully canceled, the Biden administration said students who received only partial awards will be reimbursed for any payments made on the loans and have their eligibility for federal student aid reinstated. The department said it also would ask credit bureaus to remove any negative ratings tied to the loans.

"Abandoning partial relief is a strong start for a narrow subset of borrowers, but what we need from the Education Department is an overhaul of the current borrower defense process," said Toby Merrill, director of the Project on Predatory Student Lending, which represents former students at for-profit colleges.

"The previous administration turned borrower defense into a total sham that was rigged to deny claims without any true consideration," Merrill said. "The Biden-Harris administration must now address these failings or else perpetuate a system that is stacked against the very students they are supposed to protect."

Career Education Colleges and Universities, an industry lobbying group, said it had no comment on the Biden administration's actions.

Congress voted to overturn DeVos' changes last March, but it was vetoed by Trump.

Nearly two dozen state attorneys general had sued the Trump administration over its implementation of the borrower defense to repayment program, which allows borrowers to have their loans canceled if their colleges made false claims to get them to enroll. One of the plaintiffs in that suit was California Attorney General Xavier Becerra, who was confirmed Thursday as President Joe Biden's health secretary.

The lawsuit, which was filed last July, argued that DeVos had changed the policy without justification, failed to provide a meaningful process for students to get their loans forgiven and created "arbitrary impediments" for them, including forcing them to prove that their schools knowingly misled them.

Sen. Patty Murray, who heads the Senate committee overseeing education, said DeVos used "faulty math" to deny student full relief. Rep. Bobby Scott, chair of the House Committee on Education and Labor, called it "a nonsensical formula."

"This announcement is life-changing for tens of thousands of people across the country," Scott said.

LA police: Armie Hammer under sexual assault investigation

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Actor Armie Hammer is under investigation for sexual assault, Los Angeles police said Thursday.

Hammer's attorney denied the allegation.

Hammer is the main suspect in a sexual assault that was reported to police on Feb. 3, LAPD spokesman Officer Drake Madison said. Police would give no further details on the incident or who made the report.

Earlier Thursday at a video news conference, a woman said that on April 24, 2017, in Los Angeles, Hammer raped her for four hours, slammed her head against a wall and committed other violent acts against her.

The Associated Press does not generally identify alleged victims of sexual assault.

The woman appeared on camera but identified herself only by her first name, Effie.

"During those four hours I tried to get away but he wouldn't let me," she said through tears. "I thought that he was going to kill me. He then left with no concern for my well-being."

The woman's attorney, Gloria Allred, said they had given evidence to Los Angeles police, including photos of Effie's injuries. Allred declined to say when they made the report, and would not confirm that it was the one made in February that the LAPD is investigating.

Effie was 20 when she and Hammer met on Facebook and began a relationship in 2016, and they had their last contact last year, Allred said.

Hammer's attorney said in a statement that from the beginning he has maintained that all of his interactions with Effie and every other sexual partner "have been completely consensual, discussed and agreed

upon in advance, and mutually participatory.”

The statement called her allegations “attention seeking and ill-advised” and said “her own correspondence with Mr. Hammer undermines and refutes her outrageous allegations.”

“With the truth on his side, Mr. Hammer welcomes the opportunity to set the record straight,” Andrew Brettler said.

The statement included a screenshot that Brettler said was a text message exchange in July of last year between Hammer and Effie, in which she expresses a desire for rough, forceful sex with him, and he responds by saying he no longer wants a relationship with her.

The 34-year-old actor was married at the time to television personality Elizabeth Chambers. They divorced last year.

Hammer first gained fame through playing twins in 2010’s “The Social Network,” and is best known for his starring roles in 2017’s “Call Me By Your Name” and 2013’s “The Lone Ranger.”

Most recently, Hammer starred in the Netflix remake of “Rebecca.” A sequel to “Call Me by Your Name” with Timothée Chalamet has also been in development.

Allegations of sexual violence in recent months have derailed Hammer’s career.

Earlier this year, an Instagram account began posting screenshots of text messages allegedly from Hammer as far back as 2016. Allred would not comment on whether her client was behind that account, @houseofeffie. When those text messages began appearing in media reports, Hammer called them “vicious and spurious online attacks against me.”

After those texts were published, Hammer departed the comedy “Shotgun Wedding,” in which he was to star alongside Jennifer Lopez, shortly before production was to begin. He soon after departed the Paramount+ series “The Offer,” about the making of “The Godfather.”

Hammer was also dropped by his agency, WME.

AP Film Writer Jake Coyle contributed to this report.

Follow AP Entertainment Writer Andrew Dalton on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/andyjamesdalton>

Alexi McCammond parts ways with Teen Vogue over past tweets

By LEANNE ITALIE Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Saying her past anti-Asian and homophobic tweets have overshadowed her work, Alexi McCammond said Thursday that she and publisher Conde Nast have decided to part ways at Teen Vogue.

“I should not have tweeted what I did and I have taken full responsibility for that,” the journalist said in a statement posted on social media. “I look at my work and growth in the years since, and have redoubled my commitment to growing in the years to come as both a person and as a professional.”

McCammond, who is Black, was tapped as the incoming editor in chief to replace Lindsay Peoples Wagner, but the tweets from when she was a teenager and college student in 2011 resurfaced after the appointment was announced.

Calls for the magazine to replace her were mounting, with more than 20 Teen Vogue staff members posting a statement last week saying they had written management in support of readers and others alarmed by the now-deleted tweets. They noted that McCammond’s appointment comes at a time of “historically high anti-Asian violence and amid the ongoing struggles of the LGBTQ community.”

In an internal email, Conde Nast’s “chief people officer” Stan Duncan told U.S. staff that McCammond’s departure comes as the “best path forward” so as not to “overshadow” Teen Vogue’s work to become more equitable and inclusive.

McCammond, 27, was appointed earlier this month by the digital-only Teen Vogue. She had worked as a political journalist in Washington for Axios and was an on-air contributor for MSNBC. Duncan noted she had disclosed the tweets during the hiring process but that Conde Nast was “dedicated to making her successful in this role.”

So what changed? McCammond was due to take over as editor in chief March 24. Last week, one of Teen Vogue's major advertisers, the popular skincare and cosmetics retailer Ulta Beauty, announced it had paused ad spending there, saying it stands with the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. It did not disclose its Teen Vogue ad budget.

On Thursday, after word broke that McCammond was out at Teen Vogue, Ulta Beauty said in a statement: "We saw today's news and are still in discussions with Conde Nast to determine next steps. For the time being, our advertising spend remains paused."

The tweets first surfaced in 2019, when McCammond said she was "deeply sorry" and that the posts "do not reflect my views or who I am today." She apologized again after her Teen Vogue appointment, saying on social media "there's no excuse for perpetuating those awful stereotypes in any way."

On Thursday, McCammond said she became a journalist to "lift up the stories and voices of our most vulnerable communities," and hopes to do that as a journalist once again.

Follow Leanne Italie on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/litalie>

US-Russia ties nosedive after Biden-Putin tit-for-tat

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — U.S.-Russia ties nosedived on Thursday after Russian leader Vladimir Putin shot back at President Joe Biden's description of him as a killer.

The back and forth underscored Biden's desire to distance himself from former President Donald Trump's perceived softness on Putin despite actions his administration took against Russia. Although Biden agreed to extend a major arms control deal with Russia, he has been notably cool toward Moscow and highly critical of many of its activities.

In taking a tough stance on Russia, Biden has said the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Putin are done. And he has taken pains to contrast his style with the approach of Trump, who avoided direct confrontation and frequently spoke about Putin with approval.

In an interview broadcast Wednesday, Biden replied "I do" when asked if he thought Putin was a "killer." Also Wednesday, U.S. intelligence released a report finding that Putin authorized influence operations to help Trump's re-election bid.

Later that day, Putin recalled his ambassador to the U.S. and on Thursday he pointed at the U.S. history of slavery and slaughtering Native Americans and the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II.

Responding to that, the White House said Biden would continue to look to work with Putin on areas of mutual concern but stressed that he was "not going to hold back" when he has concerns about Putin's actions.

Putin had been asked about Biden's comment during a video call marking the anniversary of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, and he responded along the lines of "it-takes-one-to-know-one," saying his counterpart's words reflected the United States' own problems. At the same time, he offered to have a phone call with Biden to discuss issues of mutual interest.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden would continue to look to cooperate on efforts to stem Iran's nuclear program and, more broadly, nuclear nonproliferation. But she said Biden did not regret referring to Putin as a killer and pushed back against suggestions that the rhetoric was unhelpful.

"President Biden has known President Putin for a long time," Psaki said. "They've both been on the global stage for a long time, worked through many iterations of a relationship between the United States and Russia. And he believes we can continue to do that."

Psaki also dismissed Putin's "it-takes-one-to-know-one" response, suggesting Biden was well aware of the United States' own problems.

"The president believes that one of the greatest attributes of the United States is our honest self-reflection and our constant striving for progress, and there's always more work to do," she said.

Putin pointed at the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan, as well as its history of slavery and slaughtering

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Native Americans, noting the painful legacies weighing on the United States.

"Otherwise, where would the Black Lives Matter movement come from?" he said, citing racial injustice and the killing of African Americans.

The exchange of tough statements follows a declassified report from the U.S. national intelligence director's office that found Putin authorized influence operations to try to help Trump in his failed bid to win reelection in November. The Kremlin has dismissed the report as baseless.

"(Putin) will pay a price," Biden said in the interview when asked about the declassified report.

Biden's administration warned that Russia would face sanctions soon over its attempt to influence the election and the massive SolarWinds hacks.

The spiraling tensions have brought U.S.-Russia relations to the point where they were at the end of President Barack Obama's administration, a chilly strain that differed markedly from Trump's efforts to court Putin.

Asked what he would tell Biden in response to his remarks, Putin said: "I would tell him: 'Be well.' I wish him health, and I say that without any irony or joking."

He noted that Russia would still cooperate with the United States where and when it supports Moscow's interests, adding that "a lot of honest and decent people in the U.S. want to have peace and friendship with Russia."

"I know that the U.S. and its leadership is generally inclined to have certain relations with us, but only on issues that are of interest to the U.S. and on its conditions," Putin said. "But we know how to defend our own interests, and we will work with them only in the areas we are interested in and on conditions we see as beneficial to ourselves. And they will have to reckon with it."

Speaking in separate comments later Thursday, Putin said he would ask the Foreign Ministry to arrange a call with Biden in the next few days to discuss the coronavirus pandemic, regional conflicts and other issues.

"We must continue our relations," he noted. "Last time, President Biden initiated a call and now I would like to offer President Biden to continue our discussions. It would be in the interest of both the Russian and U.S. people and other countries, bearing in mind that we bear a special responsibility for global security as the largest nuclear powers."

Other Russian officials and lawmakers were less diplomatic.

Dmitry Medvedev, the deputy head of Russia's Security Council who served as president in 2008-2012 when Putin had to shift into the premier's job because of term limits, said that "time hasn't spared" the 78-year-old Biden and cited Sigmund Freud as saying, "Nothing costs so much in life as illness and stupidity."

And Andrei Turchak, the leader of the main pro-Kremlin United Russia party, described Biden's remarks as a reflection of "the U.S. political marasmus and its leader's dementia."

Russia's relations with the United States and the European Union already had plunged to post-Cold War lows after Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula, election meddling, hacking attacks and, most recently, the jailing of Russia's opposition leader Alexei Navalny after his poisoning, which he blamed on the Kremlin. Russian authorities rejected the accusations.

Lee reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Aamer Madhani in Washington and Geir Moulson in Berlin contributed.

Stigmas on race, gender and sex overlap in Atlanta slayings

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

Seven of the eight people killed were women; six were of Asian descent. The suspect, according to police, appeared to blame his actions on a "sex addiction."

While the U.S. has seen mass killings in recent years where police said gunmen had racist or misogynist motivations, advocates and scholars say the shootings this week at three Atlanta-area massage parlors targeted a group of people marginalized in more ways than one, in a crime that stitches together stigmas

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about race, gender, migrant work and sex work.

"In some ways this is another manifestation of the targeting of marginalized people in the U.S.," said Angela Jones, an associate professor of sociology at Farmingdale State College, State University of New York, whose research has focused on race, gender, sexuality and sex work.

The killings in Atlanta follow a wave of recent attacks against Asian Americans since the coronavirus first entered the United States, with the majority of reports coming from women. The 21-year-old suspect denied his attack was racially motivated and claimed to have a "sex addiction," with authorities saying he apparently saw massage parlors as sources of temptation.

Police told a news conference Thursday that investigators believe the gunman previously visited two of the massage parlors, but it's not yet clear if any the businesses offered sexual services. The Atlanta mayor said police hadn't previously been there beyond a minor potential theft. Still, the suspect equated the parlors to sex, and that drove him to kill, police said.

"There's this assumption that all these massage parlor workers are sex workers. That may or may not be the case," said Esther Kao, an organizer with New York-based Red Canary Song, a group of Asian and Asian American sex workers and allies that does outreach to massage parlors. "The majority of massage parlors are licensed businesses that also provide professional, non-sexual massages."

"There's this assumption of sexuality and fetishization of Asian women's bodies that is unique to this kind of crime," she said.

At least one of the victims was a patron, not an employee. Thirty-three-year-old Delaina Ashley Yaun and her husband had gone to the spa on a date, her mother, Margaret Rushing, told WAGA-TV. Yaun leaves behind a 13-year-old son and 8-month-old daughter.

The shootings follow high-profile instances of race and gender-based killings in recent years by white men. In 2014, a 22-year-old who had railed against women online killed six people and wounded 14 near the University of California, Santa Barbara. The following year, eight Black church members and their pastor were shot and killed in a racist attack in South Carolina. In 2018, a Florida gunman with what police called a "hatred towards women" killed two and injured five at a yoga studio. The year after that a shooter targeting Latinos opened fire at an El Paso, Texas, Walmart, killing 22 people.

"This is a thread that is woven through the histories of these gunmen. Toxic masculinity is truly a problem in this country," said Shannon Watts, founder of the gun-control group Moms Demand Action.

The fact the Georgia shooter targeted the businesses because he linked them to commercial sex is a nightmare scenario for those who work in erotic industries and are increasingly subjected to online harassment and attempts to report massage parlors to the IRS, said Kate D'Adamo, an organizer and advocate for sex worker rights. "At its core it's about going out and targeting sex workers as fallen women, blaming them for social ills," she said.

Prostitution laws mean women also fear reporting harassment or violence to police, afraid of being arrested themselves or their pleas ignored, she said. Those fears are even more pronounced for women of color, those who are immigrants or those with few language skills.

They feel they can't report crimes to police, said Barbara Brents, a University of Nevada, Las Vegas, sociology professor who studies the sex industry. "When they do, sex workers are not taken seriously and they're also subject to arrest themselves."

Researchers who spoke to more than 100 Chinese and Korean workers at illicit massage parlors for a 2019 study found that while some women did say they felt deceived or coerced into jobs that involved sex work, many more chose the profession after having bad experiences in the few other types of generally low-paying jobs available to them, like restaurants and nail salons.

While there were some reports of exploitation or mistreatment by managers, an "alarming" 40% of women told researchers that a client had forced them to have sex in the last year, the study said.

In the Atlanta shooting, the suspect's claims of sex addiction, meanwhile, ring hollow for some. It is not a condition recognized by the American Psychiatric Association, said David Ley, a clinical psychologist and author of "The Myth of Sex Addiction." And while it was cited by celebrities for a time, the Harvey Weinstein case became an emblem of how it can be used as an attempt to avoid taking responsibility

for abuse and assault, he said.

There's also a disturbing thread of racism in some online discussions of sex addiction, he said.

"They hold other people — the porn industry, sex workers, even women in general — responsible for triggering these sexual desires in them they are afraid of," he said.

Moral views can shape beliefs about sexuality, and friends described the Atlanta shooting suspect as being deeply Christian. He also told police he had planned to go to Florida to target the porn industry.

The sex-addiction claim is a way to redirect blame, Kao said. "He's absolutely taking no responsibility and putting all of that on the workers themselves and it also distracts from the race issue," she said.

Meanwhile, the suspect, Robert Aaron Long has been arrested on charges of murder and assault. It wasn't clear yet if he had a lawyer who would represent him.

Police said Long confessed to the crime and told officials about a "temptation for him that he wanted to eliminate."

Whitehurst reported from Salt Lake City and Price from Las Vegas.

Follow Lindsay Whitehurst at twitter.com/lwhitehurst and Michelle Price at twitter.com/michelleprice

Medicaid incentive so far not enough to sway holdout states

By GEOFF MULVIHILL and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Democrats' nearly \$2 trillion coronavirus relief package includes a big financial incentive for the states that have opted against expanding Medicaid to provide health coverage for more low-income Americans. It's proving to be a tough sell.

The Associated Press surveyed top Republican elected officials in the dozen states that have resisted expanding coverage under a key provision of former President Barack Obama's health care law. Some have softened their opposition, but the key gatekeepers—governors or legislative leaders—indicated they have no plans to change course.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster remains firmly opposed to the Medicaid expansion.

"Gov. McMaster isn't for sale, regardless of whatever ill-conceived 'incentives' congressional Democrats may come up with," spokesman Brian Symmes said in a statement. "What the federal spending plan does is attempt to offer a short term solution for a long term problem."

The federal government already pays 90% of the costs of expanding Medicaid coverage to more low-income adults. Thirty-six states have signed on to the expansion. Two more -- Missouri and Oklahoma -- are scheduled to begin their expansions in July.

Under the enticement included in the coronavirus relief bill adopted by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, the federal government would boost its share of costs in the regular Medicaid program, which offers coverage for the poorest Americans. The bump in federal funding would last two years for the states that join the Medicaid expansion.

An analysis by the Kaiser Family Foundation found the additional federal money would cover 150% to 400% of the cost for the holdout states to expand Medicaid, which is jointly funded with federal and state dollars.

In Texas, the incentives would send the state about \$5 billion over two years, and the state's share of expanding coverage would be about \$3.1 billion. More than 1.4 million people in the state could become eligible for coverage. For Georgia, the estimate says it would add a net \$710 million to state coffers and in Tennessee, \$900 million.

"It's the literal offer you can't refuse, but let's see if anyone refuses it, anyway," said Katherine Hempstead, a senior policy adviser at the nonpartisan Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Through interviews and public statements, AP found little change in the 12 states that have held out against the Medicaid expansion: Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin and Wyoming.

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In Mississippi, one of the nation's poorest states, advocates say up to 300,000 people — about one-tenth of the state's population — could become eligible for health coverage if the state adopted the expansion.

Gov. Tate Reeves, a Republican, said he's not going for it, noting that his stance was a major issue in his 2019 campaign. His GOP primary opponents supported a plan to expand, with the state's share being paid for by hospitals and a fee of up to \$20 a month for people who signed up. He opposed it, even as the Mississippi Hospital Association said it could bring up to 19,000 jobs to the state.

"My position has not changed," he said last week. "I am opposed to expanding Medicaid in Mississippi. I am opposed to Obamacare expansion."

In three of the states — Kansas, North Carolina and Wisconsin — the Democratic governor favors expansion but can't convince a Republican-controlled legislature.

Kansas Gov. Laura Kelley this year called for legalizing medical use of marijuana and using the tax revenue to pay for expanding Medicaid. But the Republicans who control the Legislature blocked hearings on the proposal.

Those lawmakers say they worry the federal government would eventually cut its share of expansion funding.

"It's not a big enough bribe," said Richard Hilderbrand, the chair of the state Senate health committee.

Many Republicans remain concerned about the long-term costs of the program and are ideologically opposed to expanding government health care to working-age adults.

"I acknowledge that there are some gaps in coverage that need to be addressed, but I think they can be addressed in ways that do not require us to create a whole new level of entitlement in the state of North Carolina," North Carolina Senate Leader Phil Berger, a Republican, told The Associated Press.

It's a similar story in Wisconsin, where the GOP-dominated Legislature and Democratic Gov. Tony Evers are at odds over the expansion. The Democrats' coronavirus aid package doesn't change that, Assembly Speaker Robin Vos said earlier this month.

"It's a nonstarter, and we will continue to oppose the liberal wish list item of Medicaid expansion," he said.

Hempstead, of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said Medicaid expansion is a way to address one of the biggest shortcomings in the national healthcare landscape: How to get coverage for a group of adults whose incomes put them below the poverty line -- \$12,880 for a person living alone.

In states that haven't expanded Medicaid, there are about 2.2 million such people, the Kaiser study found. They usually don't qualify for traditional Medicaid programs. They also do not make enough to be eligible to buy subsidized private coverage on the health insurance marketplaces established under Obama's overhaul.

Another 1.8 million people in those states who make slightly more -- up to about \$17,774 for an individual — qualify for subsidized coverage but often can't afford it. They also could be covered through an expansion of Medicaid.

Studies have found that adding coverage for these lower-income people reduces charity care in hospitals, allows some people to be healthy enough to work and creates additional health care industry jobs. The financial benefits partially or totally offset the states' share of the costs over time.

Even in the holdout states, those arguments catch the attention of some Republicans. In Texas, a Republican lawmaker has introduced a longshot bill calling for expansion, though the legislation has no other GOP co-sponsor and there is no indication that Republicans there have lessened their opposition. A similar measure has advanced through a legislative committee in Wyoming, though its prospects appear slim for passing the full Legislature.

In Alabama, Gov. Kay Ivey left open the possibility of expanding Medicaid at some point in the future, but there are no plans to do so.

"The problem has always been how to pay for it," Ivey spokeswoman Gina Maiola said. "She is open to the discussion, but right now, we simply do not have all the facts."

Mulvihill reported from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Follow him at <http://www.twitter.com/geoffmulvihill> and Collins at <http://www.twitter.com/JSCollinsAP>

Associated Press writers Scott Bauer in Madison, Wisconsin; Kimberly Chandler in Montgomery, Alabama; Brendan Farrington in Tallahassee, Florida; Stephen Groves in Sioux Falls, South Dakota; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Gary Robertson in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Emily Wagster Pettus in Jackson, Mississippi, contributed to this report.

I got the COVID-19 vaccine. What can I safely do?

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

I got the COVID-19 vaccine. What can I safely do?

You can enjoy small gatherings again, but should continue wearing a mask and social distancing in public. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says fully vaccinated people can gather maskless with other vaccinated people indoors. It also says you can meet with unvaccinated people from one household at a time, if those people are considered at low risk of severe COVID-19. In other countries, the guidance may vary.

In public, the CDC recommends that vaccinated people continue wearing masks, avoid large gatherings and stay apart from others.

A person is considered fully vaccinated two weeks after receiving the last required dose of vaccine.

Guidance on other activities for vaccinated people remains cautious. The CDC still discourages unnecessary travel, for example, and hasn't yet made a recommendation about going to restaurants or other places..

The CDC expects to update the guidance to allow more activities as infections decline and vaccinations increase.

One reason to keep your guard up after getting one dose of a two-dose vaccine: infection while having partial protection sets up the potential for the virus to mutate, said Dr. Joshua LaBaer, director of the Arizona State University's Biodesign Institute.

AP Medical Writer Mike Stobbe contributed to this report.

The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@ap.org.

Read previous Viral Questions:

Will the coronavirus ever go away?

When will children be able to get COVID-19 vaccines?

How do we know the COVID-19 vaccines are safe?

EU agency: AstraZeneca vaccine safe, will add clot warning

By MARIA CHENG and FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The European Union's drug regulatory agency said Thursday that the AstraZeneca vaccine doesn't increase the overall incidence of blood clots and that the benefits of using it outweigh the possible risks, paving the way for European countries to resume dispensing the shots.

France, Italy and Germany promptly announced they will start using the vaccine again on Friday. Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands said they will do so next week, though Spain said it might exclude certain groups to minimize any danger.

More than a dozen nations around the world had suspended their use of the vaccine over the past week following reports of clots in a few dozen of the millions of people across Europe who have gotten the shot. The question was whether the vaccine had anything to do with the clots and whether any action needed to be taken.

The safety committee of the European Medicines Agency "has come to a clear scientific conclusion," the head of the EMA, Emer Cooke, announced. "This is a safe and effective vaccine."

She added: "If it were me, I would be vaccinated tomorrow."

However, she said the agency "still cannot rule out definitively a link" between certain rare types of blood

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clots and the vaccine. The EMA recommended adding a description of these cases to the vaccine leaflets.

The debate raised fears that the safety questions would seriously undermine public confidence in AstraZeneca's vaccine, which is key to efforts to immunize some of the world's poorer countries, and further slow the lagging vaccination drive across the 27-nation EU at a moment when infections are rising at an alarming rate. Europe also relies on Pfizer's and Moderna's vaccines.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said he would be getting an AstraZeneca shot on Friday "to show we can have complete confidence" in it.

Clots that form in the arms, legs or elsewhere can break free and travel to the heart, brain or lungs, causing strokes, heart attacks or other deadly blockages.

In its findings Thursday, the EMA said the overall number of clotting events of various sorts reported since the rollout is lower than what would be expected in the general population.

But those very common clots aren't the kind causing concern. Instead, the EMA said it will continue to look closely at two rare types of blood clots. It cited seven reports of a type that appears in multiple blood vessels and 18 reports of a kind called cerebral venous thrombosis, which occurs in a vein that drains blood from the brain.

That's out of the 20 million people who have received at least one dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine in Britain and the EU.

Most of those cases were in people younger than 55 and the majority were women, the EMA said.

Experts said it will be critical to uncover if something predisposed those people to these rare clots. For example, before the pandemic, the brain-related clots almost always occurred in people with certain risk factors such as taking birth control pills, or any of a list of underlying conditions that affect clotting.

Sabine Straus, head of the EMA's safety committee, said birth control pills are "a distinct possibility" that will be investigated.

She also said experts found "no evidence of a quality or a batch issue" linked to any particular manufacturing site.

Ann Taylor, AstraZeneca's chief medical officer, welcomed the EMA's findings and added: "We trust that, after the regulators' careful decisions, vaccinations can once again resume across Europe."

The World Health Organization previously said it saw no evidence the vaccine was to blame for the clots. AstraZeneca's vaccine is central to COVAX, the U.N.-backed project to supply COVID-19 shots to poorer countries around the world.

AstraZeneca is expected to apply in the coming weeks for U.S. authorization for its vaccine. The U.S. now relies on vaccines from Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

Britain was not among the countries that suspended use of the vaccine. On Thursday, ahead of the EMA's announcement, Britain's drug regulatory agency said there is no evidence the formula causes clots, and it urged people to continue getting the shot.

Like the EMA, however, British regulators followed its counterparts on the continent in urging people to seek medical attention if they suffer headaches that last for more than four days after vaccination or bruising beyond the injection site after a few days.

The pause in vaccinations with AstraZeneca's formula comes as tens of thousands of new daily cases have prompted new lockdown measures in Italy, caused hospitalizations in France to spike and led German officials to announce a third surge of COVID-19 has begun.

"Rarely has an immunization program been more important to the well-being of a population," said Pauline Paterson, co-director of the Vaccine Confidence Project team at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

In yet another setback, however, British officials said the country is facing a shortfall in vaccine deliveries that may delay the start of shots for people under 50 in the coming weeks.

The EU has an estimated 7 million unused doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine.

Clinical trials are typically done in tens of thousands of participants. As a result, extremely rare side effects often aren't detected until a vaccine has been used in many millions of people, long after the product has reached the market.

For example, it took nearly a year after vaccination campaigns began against the 2009 swine flu pandemic for European officials to notice an increase in narcolepsy in children and teenagers who got the GlaxoSmithKline vaccine.

"It's right to investigate any potential signals of problems, but you can do that while you continue immunization," said Michael Head, a senior research fellow in global health at the University of Southampton. "If we pause the vaccine rollout every time there's a possible signal, it won't be much of a rollout."

Head cautioned that there are costs to going slowly: The longer the coronavirus is allowed to circulate widely, the more chance it has to mutate into a deadlier version.

"People may well be more hesitant to take an AstraZeneca vaccine when immunization resumes," he said. "And this is at a time when we need to stop the virus circulating to the reduce the chances of further variants emerging."

Jordans reported from Berlin. Associated Press writers Luran Neergaard in Washington; Elaine Ganley in Paris; Danica Kirka in London; and Nicole Winfield in Rome contributed.

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

Prepare the popcorn: AMC opening more movie theaters

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

It's showtime! AMC Theatres says it will have 98% of its U.S. movie theaters open on Friday as a bunch of theaters reopen in California. Even more theaters are expected to open by March 26.

AMC said that more than 40 of its locations in California are reopening beginning on Friday. California is expected to open 52 of its 54 locations by Monday. The Leawood, Kansas-based company is preparing to resume operations at the rest of its California locations once the proper local approvals are in place. AMC previously opened more than 500 of its theaters elsewhere around the country.

Movie theaters all over shuttered their doors a year ago as the coronavirus pandemic swept the globe. While some movie theaters have opened over the past few months with limited capacity and enhanced safety protocols, the announcement by AMC — the nation's largest movie chain — to open nearly all of its U.S. theaters by month's end means more people will have more locations to choose from if they want to see a film on the big screen.

AMC's announcement is welcomed by movie fans not only because more of them will get to return to AMC's reclining seats and stadium style format, but because it means the company has hopefully put the worst behind it. It was only in June that AMC cautioned it may not survive the coronavirus pandemic, as its theaters closed and film studios started releasing more movies directly to viewers on streaming services.

But AMC stayed the course, slowly opening its theaters in states over the past several months when it was allowed to and pivoting its business. One of its outside-the-box moves included renting out theaters for private movie screenings to a limited number of people.

Analyst Eric Wold of B. Riley Securities said in a recent client note that he continues "to see an attractive setup for an attendance and box office rebound into 2022 on an impressive, blockbuster-fueled film slate." He increased the company's price target to \$7 from \$5.50.

Shares of AMC Entertainment Holdings Inc. rose more than 3% to \$14.03 in afternoon trading on Thursday. In the year to date the stock is up over 500%.

More theaters opening will also mean more jobs for people to go to. AMC spokesman Ryan Noonan says the company is welcoming back employees who were working for it prior to theaters being shut down, as well as bringing in new workers. All will be trained on its cleaning and safety protocols, which include social distancing and automatic seat blocking in each theater, mandatory mask wearing, hand sanitizing stations, upgraded air filtration, contactless ticketing and mobile ordering for food and drinks.

AMC's theater reopenings are part of the entertainment industry's gradual road to recovery as states

begin loosening restrictions and more people receive vaccinations. Earlier this month, movies reopened in New York City, a top market both for blockbusters and smaller films looking to get good word of mouth. And last week California announced that Disneyland will be able to open next month and new public health rules would allow live concerts at stadiums and sports arenas to reopen with limited attendance April 1.

The industry reopenings were reflected in key economic data: the Bureau of Labor Statistics' latest report says that in February, most of the job gains that occurred were in the leisure and hospitality industries. Employment in those sectors increased by 355,000.

In Pope's homeland, ex-priest leaves church over gay unions

By DÉBORA REY Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina (AP) — A former priest and LGBTQ activist who has blessed same-sex unions in Pope Francis' home country, Argentina, is leaving the Roman Catholic Church after the Vatican issued a pronouncement this week that priests may not perform such blessings.

Andrés Gioeni delivered a letter disavowing his faith to the bishopric in a Buenos Aires suburb on Wednesday, the anniversary of his ordination as a priest in 2000 and two days after the declaration from the Holy See.

"I do not want to continue being an accomplice to this institution, because I realize the harm they are doing to people. I am not renouncing my faith in God but rather I am renouncing a role and a rite," said Gioeni, 49.

He spoke in an interview with The Associated Press at the home he shares with his husband, 50-year-old Luis Iarocci, and their three dogs, a few blocks from the cathedral in San Isidro north of the capital.

Like other LGBTQ Catholics, Gioeni was shocked by Monday's proclamation, which argued that clergy members cannot bless same-sex unions on the grounds that they are not part of the divine plan and God "cannot bless sin."

The Vatican says LGBTQ people should be treated with dignity and respect, but that gay sex is "intrinsically disordered" and same-sex unions are sinful.

The declaration from the Holy See's orthodoxy office, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, was authorized by Francis, who prior to assuming the papacy supported legal protection for gay people in civil unions in the country as Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, archbishop of Buenos Aires.

"There is no mention in any book (of the Bible) of consensual love between two people of the same sex and God telling them no," said Gioeni, who has blessed at least four such unions.

Born in Mendoza province some 600 miles (1,000 kilometers) west of Buenos Aires, Gioeni pursued a religious vocation as a young man despite being tormented by doubts about his sexuality. He even "outed" to his superiors three fellow seminarians who had confessed attraction to him.

"All throughout seminary I was terribly homophobic," Gioeni said. "It was a defense."

After ordination he rose quickly in the provincial church, while secretly exploring chatrooms for the local gay community. He had his first sexual encounter with another man, broke it off to continue the priesthood, but then saw the man again. Gioeni told the bishop he needed to leave.

The church did not offer him psychological help, just a room next to the organ of the Buenos Aires cathedral where he was to confront his supposed crisis of faith.

"That was my descent into hell. ... There I realized that I was considered like the Hunchback of Notre Dame — a defective being who could not go out into the world because he would be criticized and singled out," Gioeni recalled.

Gioeni's superiors became aware of his sexual identity in 2003, when he appeared nude on the cover of a gay magazine, and barred him from exercising priestly ministry.

He studied acting and worked as a waiter in a disco, where he met Iarocci. Together for 17 years now, they wed after Argentina became the first Latin American nation to legalize same-sex marriage in 2010.

In recent years Gioeni has become an LGBTQ activist lobbying for a more open Catholic Church.

Severing formal ties with the institution doesn't change his faith in God, he said.

"I continue believing in God and He will be my God. In that, my spirituality is unchanged," Gioeni said. "I no longer have a label. 'What religion are you?' I believe in God."

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

Vatican cardinals defend gay union blessing ban amid dissent

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Three cardinals close to Pope Francis defended a recent Holy See pronouncement that priests cannot bless same-sex unions as the Vatican faced outright dissent from some Catholic clergy and questions about the pontiff's approval of the document.

Cardinal Kevin Farrell, head of the Vatican's laity office, concurred Thursday with the pronouncement that a "blessing" is a sacramental action related to the sacrament of marriage, which the Catholic Church teaches can only be celebrated between a man and woman.

Farrell said civil unions are not "marriages" as the Catholic Church understands the term, but he stressed: "I do want to insist that nobody, nobody must ever be excluded from the pastoral care and love and concern of the church."

He was speaking at a news conference launching a yearlong celebration of Francis' view of family life, articulated in a 2016 document titled "The Joy of Love."

Later Thursday, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley and Cardinal Peter Turkson, head of the Vatican's development office, pointed to Francis' pastoral outreach to gay men and lesbians but repeated the church's position.

"The church has a very clear teaching about marriage that needs to be proclaimed," O'Malley said during an online panel discussion organized by Georgetown University.

Their comments came amid continuing criticism of the document released Monday by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which said the Catholic Church cannot bless same-sex unions because God "cannot bless sin."

In Austria, a group of dissident Catholic priests known as the Pfarrer-Initiative, or, the Pastors' Initiative, said they were "deeply appalled" by the new decree and would not follow it.

"This is a return to times we had hoped with Pope Francis to get past," the priests in Austria said in a statement. "We will, in solidarity with so many, not reject any loving couple in the future who asks to celebrate God's blessing, which they experience every day, also in a worship service."

The group, which was founded in 2006 by nine priests and today claims 350 members "from the official Roman Catholic Church," said the decree "discredits Jesus' liberating message."

A Belgian bishop, Antwerp Bishop Johan Bonny, apologized to the faithful on Wednesday for what he said was a "painful and incomprehensible" decision.

In Germany, Mainz Bishop Peter Kohlgraf also expressed dismay, saying he was "bothered" by the Vatican position and took seriously the criticism of it he had heard from his flock. In a statement on his diocesan website, Kohlgraf said he stood by views he expressed in writing last month that appeared to endorse various liturgical blessings for gay couples that some priests already were using.

"The blessing celebrations arose from pastoral accompaniment of the people affected. Most of them are not formulas replicating church marriage, nor is the intention to develop a uniform liturgy," he wrote. "No, I do not call for a form of blessing that is similar to marriage. But I do call for accompaniment — instead of judging."

The rollout of the document was unusual. The Vatican press office gave no advance notice that it was coming out. The document itself said Francis had only been "informed and gave his assent to the publication."

Other documents from the Vatican orthodoxy office have carried a much more authoritative-sounding endorsement from the pope. One issued June 24 on the validity of some baptisms, for example, said

Francis had “approved these responses and ordered their publication.”

David Rising contributed from Berlin.

Critics: Doctor’s note for vaccine unfairly penalizing poor

By KELLI KENNEDY Associated Press

FORT LAUDEDALE, Fla. (AP) — Claes Bell repeatedly called his doctor, leaving multiple messages and emails, desperate to get him to sign a state form to allow Bell to get a COVID-19 vaccine before traveling to be at his father’s bedside after heart surgery.

But the 39-year-old, who suffers from hypertension, said he couldn’t get through to his doctor and eventually called a private, 24-hour emergency doctors network where he paid \$45 for a virtual consult with a doctor who signed the form.

“I wasn’t able to get anyone on the phone. I wasn’t able to get an appointment. I’m privileged. I have the money to pay for that,” said Bell, a father of three. “It just sets up a scenario where your outcomes are going to be different depending on your income and employment.”

Currently in Florida, anyone over 60, plus residents and staff of long-term care facilities and health care workers are automatically eligible for the vaccines. Younger patients with underlying conditions such as diabetes and chronic lung disease have been able to get the vaccine at hospitals.

Gov. Ron DeSantis recently also opened it up for younger people with health conditions to get the jab at other vaccination sites, including pharmacies and community centers, but they’re required to have their doctor fill out a standard state form.

The form requires little more than a doctor’s signature and is aimed at preventing healthy younger people from jumping the line ahead of people who need the vaccine more urgently. But critics say it’s an onerous added barrier for minorities and low-income residents without health insurance or access to a doctor. The criticism has amplified recently as demand among the elderly has slowed at several vaccination sites across the state, which reported 4,727 new positive COVID-19 Tuesday, bringing the total to nearly 2 million. Thirty more residents were reported to have died from the virus, for a total of 32,255.

The inequitable distribution of COVID-19 vaccines has been an ongoing challenge for the governor. Of the 3.2 million people who have received one or two doses of the vaccines, less than 6% have been Black — about a third of their share of the state’s population.

Even those like Bell with insurance say they can’t reach their doctors because their offices have been flooded with requests.

In one of Miami’s historically Black neighborhoods, a one-day vaccine clinic on Saturday targeting at-risk groups will have physicians onsite to measure blood pressure and weigh all age groups so they can get the form and shot at the same time.

“The very people who are suffering the greatest from this pandemic — Black and brown communities — are the very ones that are being disenfranchised with this restriction,” said Dr. Tina Carroll-Scott, medical director for the South Miami Children’s Clinic.

Some vaccination sites are enforcing the doctor’s note inconsistently, requiring them one day but not the next.

Earlier this month, lawmakers said people with doctors’ notes were turned away at a Miami vaccination site because they didn’t have the state form. But later in the day, state lawmakers said doctors’ notes were reportedly also being accepted instead of the form.

Some places, like Jackson Health system in Miami, aren’t requiring any form, just verbal confirmation from patients.

Other states, including Georgia, have opened up vaccinations for younger people who merely are required to attest that they have an underlying medical condition.

Patrick Patterson, 34, accompanied his elderly parents to get the vaccine Tuesday at Valencia College in Orlando. His wife is eight months pregnant with his first child and he is fearful of catching the virus and

giving it to his wife.

Several others at the site were given the vaccine without the required doctor's form, but Patterson, who has high blood pressure and is obese, was turned away. He doesn't have insurance or access to a primary care doctor.

"You should not have to pay money to see a doctor to get the vaccine," he said. "There really wasn't a ton of people there and they still refused."

Adriana Gomez Licon in Miami contributed to this report.

Suu Kyi payments claimed as Myanmar junta raises pressure

MANDALAY, Myanmar (AP) — A Myanmar construction magnate with links to military rulers said he personally gave more than half a million dollars in cash to deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi in a broadcast on state television aimed at discrediting the ousted civilian government.

The statement by Maung Waik could pave the way for more serious charges against Suu Kyi, who has been detained since the Feb. 1 military takeover while security forces increasingly use lethal force against a popular uprising demanding the restoration of democratically elected leaders.

The military has already tried to implicate Suu Kyi in corruption, alleging she was given \$600,000 plus gold bars by a political ally. She and President Win Myint have been charged so far with inciting unrest, possession of walkie-talkies and violating a pandemic order limiting public gatherings.

In the latest salvo of allegations, Maung Waik, who has previously been convicted of drug trafficking, told state TV he gave cash to government ministers to help his businesses. He said the money included \$100,000 given to Suu Kyi in 2018 for a charitable foundation named after her mother, \$150,000 in 2019 for which he did not specify a reason, \$50,000 last February and \$250,000 in April, again with no purpose specified.

The country's Anti-Corruption Commission is investigating the allegations and vowed to take action against Suu Kyi under the Anti-Corruption Law, the state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar reported Thursday.

Meanwhile, a court has issued an arrest warrant for the country's U.N. ambassador, Kyaw Moe Tun, on charges of treason, the newspaper reported.

The charge stems from his remarks Feb. 26 at U.N. headquarters, in which he condemned the coup and appealed for "the strongest possible action from the international community" to restore democracy in his country.

Also charged with treason was Mahn Win Khaing Than, the civilian leader of Myanmar's government in hiding, the newspaper said. The acting vice president and member of Suu Kyi's political party on Saturday had vowed to continue supporting a "revolution" to eject the military from power.

On Thursday, residents of a Yangon suburb set street barricades ablaze to block riot police.

Video showed large palls of smoke rising over the Tha Mine area in the city's Hlaing township, with another barricade burning fiercely in the middle of a residential area. One resident, who did not want to be named for fear of retaliation, told The Associated Press that protesters set them alight after hearing that a column of police trucks was on its way.

Building barricades – and occasionally burning them – are now established tactics by opponents of the junta all over the country to impede police and army movement. The barriers also provide some protection from the now-frequent use of live ammunition against them.

On Wednesday, at least two people were shot dead in Kalay in northwestern Myanmar, according to media and social media posts that included photos of the victims. More than 200 people have been killed by security forces since the coup, according to credible tallies.

On Thursday, the head of the junta attended an online meeting of military leaders from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, or ASEAN.

It was a rare appearance by senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing before an international gathering since the coup.

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ASEAN's chairman earlier this month called for an end to violence in Myanmar and for talks to try to reach a peaceful settlement.

US jobless claims rise to 770,000 with layoffs still high

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits rose last week to 770,000, a sign that layoffs remain high even as much of the U.S. economy is steadily recovering from the coronavirus recession.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims climbed from 725,000 the week before. The numbers have dropped sharply since the depths of the recession last spring but still show that employers in some industries continue to lay off workers. Before the pandemic struck, applications for unemployment aid had never topped 700,000 in any one week.

The four-week average of claims, which smooths out weekly variations, dropped to 746,000, the lowest since late November.

A total of 4.1 million people are continuing to collect traditional state unemployment benefits, down 18,000 from the previous week. Including separate federal programs that are intended to help workers displaced by the health crisis, 18.2 million Americans were receiving some form of jobless aid in the week of Feb. 27, down by 1.9 million from the week before.

The continuing layoffs are occurring even as the overall job market has shown solid improvement. Last month, U.S. employers added a robust 379,000 jobs, the most since October and a sign that the economy is strengthening as consumers spend more and states and cities ease business restrictions.

No single factor fully explains the still-high level of weekly applications for state unemployment aid. The figures have been clouded by backlogs in processing and by evidence of fraud at the state level. In addition, the expansion of supplemental federal unemployment benefits has likely encouraged more jobless Americans to apply for aid.

In addition, last month's severe winter weather elevated jobless claims in Texas. And California has reported an uptick in applications because of layoffs at bars, restaurants, retailers and other services businesses — all of which have been hard hit by the pandemic.

Yet with vaccinations accelerating, hopes are rising that Americans will increasingly travel, shop, eat out and spend freely after a year of virus-induced restraint.

President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion relief package is also expected to help accelerate growth, especially with most adults this week receiving \$1,400 stimulus checks that should fuel more spending. An extension of \$300 weekly unemployment benefits into early September will provide support, too, along with money for vaccines and treatments, school re-openings, state and local governments and ailing industries ranging from airlines to concert halls.

"Labor market strains are ongoing, but we expect filings (for unemployment aid) to start declining as restrictions are lifted and more normal operations resume," Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics, said in a research note. "As businesses return to full capacity, job and income prospects will improve and, combined with fiscal support, will provide a powerful lift to the economy."

At the same time, the nation is still roughly 9.5 million short of the number of jobs it had in February 2020. And Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell suggested Wednesday after the Fed's latest policy meeting that the overall economic outlook remained cloudy.

"The state of the economy in two or three years is highly uncertain," Powell said at a news conference after the Fed signaled that it expects to keep its key interest rate near zero through 2023 despite some solid economic gains and concerns about rising inflation pressures.

By most barometers, business activity in the economy's vast and hard-hit service sector is still far from normal. The data firm Womply said, for example, that as of early last week 63% of movie theaters, galleries and other entertainment venues were closed. So were 39% of bars, 32% of gyms and other sports and recreation businesses and 30% of restaurants.

UK regulator: People should keep getting AstraZeneca shots

LONDON (AP) — British regulators said Thursday that people should keep getting AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine following its review of data on patients who suffered from blood clots after getting the shot.

The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency said there's no evidence that the vaccine causes blood clots in veins. A further review of five reports in the U.K. of a rare type of clot in the brain is continuing, but the condition, which can occur naturally, has been reported in less than 1 in a million people vaccinated so far and no causal link has been established, the agency said.

"The MHRA's advice remains that the benefits of the vaccines against COVID-19 continue to outweigh any risks and that the public should continue to get their vaccine when invited to do so," the agency said.

US schools prepare summer of learning to help kids catch up

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — After a dreary year spent largely at home in front of the computer, many U.S. children could be looking at summer school — and that's just what many parents want.

Although the last place most kids want to spend summer is in a classroom, experts say that after a year of interrupted study, it's crucial to do at least some sort of learning over the break, even if it's not in school and is incorporated into traditional camp offerings.

Several governors, including in California, Kansas and Virginia, are pushing for more summer learning. And some states are considering extending their 2021-22 academic year or starting the fall semester early. Many cities, meanwhile, are talking about beefing up their summer school programs, including Los Angeles, Hartford, Connecticut and Atlanta — the latter of which considered making summer school compulsory before settling for strongly recommending that kids who are struggling take part.

"People are exhausted right now, but they know that it is really important for our kids," said Randi Weingarten, the head of American Federation of Teachers, who has been calling for what she described as a voluntary "second second semester" and for districts to start recruiting for it.

The new \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package should help, as it allocates \$122 billion in aid to K-12 public schools, including \$30 billion specifically for summer school, after-school and other enrichment programs.

The influx of money and increase in summer offerings has come as a relief to parents of kids who struggled with remote learning during the coronavirus pandemic. Among them is Ashley Freeman, of St. Paul, Minnesota, who quit her nursing assistant job when the pandemic began so that she could help her kids learn from home and because a frightening past bout with the H1N1 flu that landed her on a ventilator.

Freeman, 32, is eager to get back to work after having to rely on food stamps and other benefits to get through the pandemic. She feels her kids have fallen behind academically and is hoping they'll catch up over the break — her district recently extended its summer program by two weeks.

"I need something where they keep their education going because they have lacked this entire last year," she said late last month about an hour after her 11-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son returned to in-person classes for the first time in nearly a year. "I feel like the kids have struggled tremendously."

Keri Rodrigues, a co-founder of the education advocacy group the National Parents Union, said her kids have floundered with remote learning even though she transformed the family's suburban Boston living room into a classroom and hired them a tutor. She said her family isn't unique.

"We don't have any time to waste here," she said. "We need to access where our kids are, determine what they need, and then get to work right away and not just put it off for three months for no apparent reason while our families continue to deteriorate and our kids continue to suffer."

Engaging poor children should be a priority, educators say. Summer has traditionally been one of the most inequitable times in education, with kids from upper and middle income households getting to attend camps or take part in other enrichment activities that often aren't an option for poorer ones, said Aaron Dworkin, the CEO of the National Summer Learning Association, a nonprofit focused on increasing

investment in summer learning.

"This has been an epic aha! moment for the country to understand what lower income families have to struggle with over the summer," Dworkin said. "Everything we are all dealing with in COVID is what they deal with every summer: 'I am working. My kids have nowhere to go. I need to figure out how to do it.' Now other people are seeing it."

Connecticut Sen. Chris Murphy, himself the father of a third- and sixth-grader, said in a tweet that it was a "big win for kids" that the summer learning money can be used for camps and recreational programs, too. He had argued in seeking the funding that "if we simply assume that kids will be able to 'snap back' when things return to normal, we are fooling ourselves."

Dworkin envisions summer programs offered through the YMCA or municipal park districts using the federal funding to expand their typical offerings of swim lessons and crafts by blending in academics.

That's what the Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Minnesota plans to do, said Geri Bechtold, the group's vice president of operations. It will combine music, dance, theater and other fun activities meant to lure students from two low-income St. Cloud elementary schools with academic help the district will provide.

"We find that kids eat up all of that," she said of the mixed approach.

There will be more scholarships this year to help lower income students attend camp, said Tom Rosenberg, president and CEO of the American Camp Association. He said more than two-thirds of camps already have science, technology, engineering and math components. But he said camp also provides nonacademic benefits that are particularly important after a year of social distancing.

"I think there is a lot of anxiety right now about just being near their peers," he said.

Students typically lose ground academically during the summer, which requires teachers to spend the first few weeks of the fall semester reteaching old material. The fall 2020 test results showed that students lost more ground than usual following the hasty shift to virtual instruction last spring, said Megan Kuhfeld, a researcher with one of the nation's major test-makers, NWEA.

Parents also have raised concerns, with 62% saying they think their children are behind where they would be during a normal school year, according to a survey conducted by the National PTA and Learning Heroes, a nonprofit that helps parents support their children's learning.

"It has been really painful for parents," said Bibb Hubbard, founder and president of Learning Heroes, which also conducted focus groups with parents. "Literally parents say, 'My child won't take the blanket off of his head. They won't get out of bed. They are in their pajamas all day.' The worlds between home and school have just so blurred that the kids are just having a really hard time finding the motivation to stay present and stay in it."

Tokyo Olympics: Yet another scandal over sexist comments

By STEPHEN WADE and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — In yet another setback for the postponed Tokyo Olympics — and another involving comments about women — games' creative director Hiroshi Sasaki resigned on Thursday after making demeaning comments about a well-known female celebrity in Japan.

The Tokyo Olympics are scheduled to open in just over four months, dogged by the coronavirus pandemic, record costs, and numerous scandals. And all of this converges as the Olympic torch relay starts next week from northeastern Japan, a risky venture with 10,000 runners set to crisscross Japan for four months.

When the International Olympic Committee awarded Japan the games 7 1/2 years ago, Tokyo billed itself as "a safe pair of hands." It has evolved into anything but that.

Japanese organizers did well with initial planning and organization. But they have been buffeted by the pandemic and seem snake-bitten with the Olympics causing new problems and more expenses almost daily. Support has plummeted with various polls suggesting about 80% of Japanese want the Olympics canceled or postponed again. They cite the costs and the risks of holding the mega-event during a pandemic.

"The IOC and Japanese politics are male-dominated territories," Dr. Barbara Holthus, deputy director of the German Institute for Japanese Studies in Tokyo, told The Associated Press. "Japanese politicians have

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a long history of furthering gender inequalities — besides many other inequalities.”

In February, the president of the organizing committee Yoshiro Mori was forced to resign after making sexist comments, saying women talk too much in meetings.

Two years ago, the head of the Japanese Olympic Committee Tsunekazu Takeda was also forced to step down in a bribery scandal connected to vote-buying involving IOC members.

Sasaki was in charge of the opening and closing ceremonies for the Olympics, which are scheduled to begin on July 23. He also designed the Tokyo handover ceremony at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, and arranged a one-year-to-go event in July at Tokyo’s new National Stadium.

Last year he suggested to planning staff members in online “brainstorming exchanges” that well-known entertainer Naomi Watanabe could perform in the ceremony as an “Olympig.”

Watanabe is a heavy-set young woman, a fashion icon, and very famous in Japan. Sasaki’s “Olympig” reference was an obvious play on the word “Olympic.”

The story was first reported by the weekly magazine Bunshun, and the corresponding controversy took off almost instantly.

Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike called Sasaki’s comments “extremely embarrassing,”

“When we are talking about what we deliver from Tokyo, or from Japan, we shouldn’t be sending a negative message,” Koike said Thursday.

Sasaki released a statement saying he was stepping down. He said he had also called Seiko Hashimoto, the president of the organizing committee, and tendered his resignation.

“For Ms. Naomi Watanabe, my idea and comments are a big insult. And it is unforgivable,” Sasaki said. “I offer my deepest regrets and apologize from the depth of my heart to her, and those who may have been offended by this.”

“It is truly regrettable, and I apologize from the bottom of my heart,”

Hashimoto said in a Thursday news conference that she had accepted his resignation. She said a replacement would come quickly, and also indicated she had tried to persuade him to stay.

“I did feel that way but he explained, and his intention was very strong,” Hashimoto said. “That is how I felt. For those reasons I decided to accept his resignation.”

Hashimoto also said she talked with IOC member John Coates, who oversees preparations for Tokyo.

“The IOC also received the (magazine) article and they were quite concerned,” Hashimoto said.

Hashimoto, who has appeared in seven Olympics and won a bronze medal in 1992, took over a month ago when Mori made similar sexist comments and was forced out. Hashimoto has acted quickly and appointed 12 women to the organizing committee’s executive board, increasing female membership to 42%. It had been 20%.

Sasaki formerly worked for the giant Japanese advertising company Dentsu Inc., which has been a key supporter of these Olympics. It is the official marketing partner and has helped to raise a record of \$3.5 billion in local sponsorship, almost three times as much as any previous Olympics.

The torch relay for the Olympics kicks off next week from northeastern Japan and will be a severe test with 10,000 runners crisscrossing Japan for four months, heading to the opening ceremony and trying to avoid spreading COVID-19. Japan has controlled the virus better than most countries and has attributed about 8,700 deaths to the virus.

Organizers and the IOC insist the Olympics will go forward during the pandemic with 11,000 Olympic and 4,400 Paralympic athletes entering Japan. Official costs for Tokyo are \$15.4 billion but several government audits show the real cost might be twice that much.

A University of Oxford study says Tokyo is the most expensive Olympics on record.

AP reporter Mari Yamaguchi also contributed to this story.

Olympics: <https://apnews.com/hub/olympic-games> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, March 19, the 78th day of 2021. There are 287 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 19, 2013, Pope Francis officially began his ministry as the 266th pope, receiving the ring symbolizing the papacy and a wool stole exemplifying his role as shepherd of his 1.2-billion strong flock during a Mass at the Vatican.

On this date:

In 1931, Nevada Gov. Fred B. Balzar signed a measure legalizing casino gambling.

In 1942, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered men between the ages of 45 and 64, inclusive, to register for non-military duty.

In 1945, during World War II, 724 people were killed when a Japanese dive bomber attacked the carrier USS Franklin off Japan (the ship was saved). Adolf Hitler ordered the destruction of German facilities that could fall into Allied hands in his so-called "Nero Decree," which was largely disregarded.

In 1962, Bob Dylan's first album, titled "Bob Dylan," was released by Columbia Records.

In 1966, the Texas Western Miners defeated the heavily favored Kentucky Wildcats, 72-65, to win the NCAA Championship played in College Park, Maryland; making the contest especially noteworthy was that Texas Western became the first basketball team to start five Black players in a national title game as it faced an all-white Kentucky squad.

In 1977, the series finale of "Mary Tyler Moore" aired on CBS-TV, ending the situation comedy's seven-season run.

In 1979, the U.S. House of Representatives began televising its floor proceedings; the live feed was carried by C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network), which was making its debut.

In 1987, televangelist Jim Bakker resigned as chairman of his PTL ministry organization amid a sex and money scandal involving Jessica Hahn, a former church secretary.

In 1991, Polish President Lech Walesa arrived in Washington for his first state visit to the United States.

In 1993, Supreme Court Justice Byron R. White announced plans to retire. (White's departure paved the way for Ruth Bader Ginsburg to become the court's second female justice.)

In 2003, President George W. Bush ordered the start of war against Iraq. (Because of the time difference, it was early March 20 in Iraq.)

In 2014, Toyota agreed to pay \$1.2 billion to settle an investigation by the U.S. government, admitting that it had hidden information about defects that caused Toyota and Lexus vehicles to accelerate unexpectedly, resulting in injuries and deaths.

Ten years ago: The U.S. fired more than 100 cruise missiles from the sea while French fighter jets targeted Moammar Gadhafi's forces from the air, launching the broadest international military effort since the Iraq war in support of an uprising. President Barack Obama arrived in Brazil for the start of a three-country, five-day tour of Latin America.

Five years ago: A FlyDubai Boeing 737 plunged into the ground near the airport in the Russian city of Rostov-on-Don, killing all 62 people on board. A Turkish suicide bomber killed five people, including two Americans, in Istanbul's main pedestrian shopping street; Turkish officials said the bomber was linked to Islamic State. Protesters blocked a main highway leading into the Phoenix suburb where Republican presidential front-runner Donald Trump was staging a campaign rally alongside Arizona's contentious sheriff, Joe Arpaio.

One year ago: Italy's coronavirus death toll surged past 3,400, surpassing China's; worldwide deaths topped 10,000. President Donald Trump focused attention on a malaria drug, chloroquine, as a possible virus treatment; the FDA issued a statement saying that there were "no FDA-approved therapeutics" to treat COVID-19. In a conference call, governors told Trump that their states were in immediate need of federal help to contain the virus. Trump called on states to do more to acquire masks, ventilators and

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testing supplies, saying that the federal government is not a "shipping clerk." Trump called off the G-7 meeting that had been scheduled at Camp David in June. The State Department issued a new alert urging Americans not to travel abroad under any circumstances. The Labor Department said the number of weekly unemployment claims had soared by 70,000 to 281,000. Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered California's 40 million residents to stay at home indefinitely, except for essential travel.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Renee Taylor is 88. Actor Ursula Andress is 85. Singer Clarence "Frogman" Henry is 84. Singer Ruth Pointer (The Pointer Sisters) is 75. Actor Glenn Close is 74. Actor Bruce Willis is 66. Actor-comedian Mary Scheer is 58. Playwright Neil LaBute is 58. Actor Connor Trinneer is 52. Rock musician Gert Bettens (K's Choice) is 51. Rapper Bun B is 48. Rock musician Zach Lind (Jimmy Eat World) is 45. Actor Virginia Williams is 43. Actor Abby Brammell is 42. MLB pitcher Clayton Kershaw is 33. Actor Craig Lamar Traylor is 32. Actor Philip Bolden is 26.