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"Our perfect companions never have fewer than four feet".

-Colette

Other School Board Decision

Hired Joie Spier as middle school language arts/social studies, JH Volleyball coach

Hired Kyle Gerlach as PE/Health Teacher and Assistant Boys Basketball Coach

Hired Jordyn Bortnem as MS/HS Special Education Teacher.

Hired Emily Van Gerpen as K-12 counselor

The district received \$410,000 in federal funding through the COVID-19 Relief Act in stage 2 and more will be coming in stage 3.

Health Insurance Premiums will increase by 1 percent. First increase in several years.

The Granary will be permanently closing and there are two life-size statues that will need to be moved. Don Donley is looking into options to bring them to Groton.



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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It's back to normal

DRAFT 1

2021-2022 Groton Area School District

Drafted 11/17/2020

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

August

- 23 - Faculty Inservice
- 24 - Faculty Inservice
- 25 - 1st Day of School

Student Contact: 5; Inservice: 2

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30		

September

- 3 - NO SCHOOL
- 6 - Labor Day - NO SCHOOL
- 17 - Homecoming

Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 0

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
				1	2	
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

October

- 7 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (4:00-8:00)
- 8 - Lake Region Marching Festival
- 8 - Conferences (8:00-12:00)/Faculty Inservice
- 11 - Native American Day - NO SCHOOL
- 22 - End of 1st Quarter (40)

Student Contact: 20; Inservice: 2

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

November

- 11 - Veterans Day Program
- 24-26 - Thanksgiving - NO SCHOOL

Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 0

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

December

- 9 - MS/HS Christmas Concert (7:00)
- 21 - Elementary Christmas Concert (1:00)
- 21 - Early Dismissal (2:00)
- 21 - End of 1st Semester (39/79)
- 22-31 Christmas Break - NO SCHOOL

Student Contact: 15; Inservice: 0

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

January

- 4 - School Resumes
- 14 - NCSEC Faculty Inservice - NO SCHOOL

Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 1

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

February

- 17 - Parent/Teacher Conferences (4:00-8:00)
- 18 - Conferences (8:00-12:00)/Faculty Inservice
- 21 - President's Day - NO SCHOOL

Student Contact: 18; Inservice: 2

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

March

- 10 - End of 3rd Quarter (45)
- 17-18 - Spring Break - NO SCHOOL

Student Contact: 21; Inservice: 0

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

April

- 3 - Pops Concert (2:00 & 5:00)
- 15 - Good Friday - NO SCHOOL
- 18 - Easter Monday - NO SCHOOL
- 23 - PROM
- 28 - Middle School Spring Concert (7:00)

Student Contact: 19; Inservice: 0

Su	M	Tu	W	Th	F	Sa
						1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

May

- 3 - Elementary Spring Concert (7:00)
- 5 - HS Concert/Awards Night (7:00)
- 15 - Graduation (2:00)
- 18 - End of 2nd Semester (45/90)
- 19 - Faculty Inservice

Student Contact: 13; Inservice: 1

- Faculty Inservice
- No School
- Important Dates
- End of Quarter/Semester
- Early Dismissal

All make-up days will be added to the end of the school calendar.

The Groton Area Board of Education voted 5-1 with Tigh Fliehs voting no to adopt the normal 5-day school calendar for the 2021-22 school year. The only exception from the above calendar is that there will be school on December 22 with all events scheduled for December 21 being moved back to December 22. The reason is that there was a miscalculation in the number of student contact days in October as Native American Day was considered an in-session day, despite it being red on the calendar. That day will continue to be a no-school day. Fliehs had opted for a modified four-day week.

With the adopted calendar, school hours will return to normal and the first day of school will be August 25 with the last day, if there are no school days, will be May 18th with 169 days of student contact days. There were a few parents that spoke on this subject with all of them wanting the return to a five-day week.

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Groton's Music Department remains in tact

A very large crowd was on hand Monday night at the Board of Education meeting to show support for the music department.

President Steve Smith said the recommendation to have a reduction in force for the instrumental music was not brought up by the administration, but rather by school board members. Smith talked first and he said this is not the time to make a change. Board Member Marty Weismantel echoed the same thoughts and said this was bad timing to make this type of a decision.

It was board members Deb Gengerke and Kara Pharis that spoke in favor of the RIF; however, both were very uncomfortable talking about it. Gengerke said, "It just feels icky, but we still need to have this discussion. This is nothing personal." Currently, the general fund is being supplemented from the Capital Outlay Fund by the tune of \$500,000, primarily because the district does not qualify for state aid.

Many members of the audience spoke in favor of keeping the music department in tact as the community and students rallied behind their music department. At the end, Superintendent Joe Schwan talked how there was discussion for reducing the music department. "In all of the cuts that have been made, the music department has remained untouched and that has to say something about the program," he said. All three music instructors spoke and said when they hired, the board was looking for people for the long haul. The board, just last year, filled the third position as a full time instructor and Schwan asked and just a year later, you want to cut it. "I don't like that," he said.

The board took not action in the RIF proposal so the music department will remain in tact, for now.

#393 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Nothing's really changing. We reported 53,500 new cases today, bringing us to 29,895,800, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. Hospitalizations are lower than yesterday at 38,969. And we have now lost 542,561 people to this virus, which is 0.1% more than yesterday. We reported 626 deaths today.

One year ago today, on March 22, 2020, the US had 32,722 cases, a huge increase driven largely by a 46 percent increase in New York to over 15,000 cases, which had five percent of the world's cases. There'd been 416 deaths, and New York took the lead in this category too for the first time, a spot they would hold for months. Their hospital system was entering crisis, another situation that went on for a very long time. Some states were releasing prisoners convicted of low-level crimes and elderly and sick prisoners to ease crowding. Many states had stay-at-home orders in effect, and they were having to compete with one another for medical supplies, sometimes paying exorbitant prices for them. Police departments in many cities were forming party-busting units to deal with illegal gatherings. More prisons were turning up with cases; this continued to be a theme right up to the present day. There had been 211 military cases, 111 of those in active-duty personnel and the others in contractors, civilian employees, and dependents. Three carmakers signed on to make ventilators.

Worldwide, cases had doubled in a week; so had deaths. More than 335,000 cases had been reported with 14,641 deaths. Italy was up to 60,000 cases and 5000 deaths and appealed to the US military for help with masks and ventilators. According to the DOD website, the military provided an "en route patient staging system" (whatever that is), but there is no mention of the masks and ventilators. I will note that Russia did come through with those items a few days later. Spain clocked in with some 25,000 cases and over 1700 deaths. Germany banned gatherings of more than two people. More and more countries went into lockdown. Health care workers were falling ill in droves; far too many were dying.

The Prime Minister of Japan, for the first time, acknowledged it was possible the Olympics would be postponed as the IOC was contemplating taking action; the reality was setting in everywhere. Cancellations and closures: the Cherry Blossom Festival in Washington, DC, UAE's borders, McDonald's restaurants in the UK and Ireland, the Men's World Ice Hockey Championship.

Here's an interesting tidbit: Researchers at the University of California San Diego's School of Medicine used molecular dating tools to estimate that this virus was probably circulating undetected in Wuhan, China, for up to two months before the first cases were described. So they're figuring the virus may have been spreading by early November. Most studies on this point have involved tracing early cases to sources; but this work is another thing entirely.

Molecular dating is done using the mutation rate of genes to work backward from the first identified cases to sort out when a novel virus emerged from its predecessor line. They use epidemic simulations based on what we know about the virus's transmissibility and other characteristics, modeling how it likely behaved early on. Their estimates place the median number of infected persons at less than one until November 4, with numbers infected rising to four at 13 days and nine by December 1. The first people were hospitalized in Wuhan by the middle of that month. An additional surprising indication from these modeling simulations was how often a virus that emerges which is capable of jumping species to humans doesn't manage to start an epidemic at all. In a high-density population, such as we see in urban areas like Wuhan, the emerging virus fails to get an epidemic underway about two-thirds of the time; in a low-density population, such as a rural area, the incipient epidemic went extinct between 94.5 and 99.6 percent of the time. The takeaway here is not so much that we've been extraordinarily unlucky, but rather that we'd been extraordinarily lucky for a long time—and that at some point, your luck gives out.

This work may inform pandemic surveillance in the future—or at least, we can hope it does. Looks like we can't just be looking for the next highly lethal virus; we also need to be paying more attention to transmissibility. You may recall our conversation a few weeks ago about the fact that a highly-transmissible variant can kill a whole lot more people than a highly lethal one. If you missed that, have a look at my Update #357 posted February 14 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4436334386382933>;

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we talked about how that works. Here we have a virus far less lethal than SARS-CoV that caused SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) or MERS-CoV that causes MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome). The reason this one killed so many people is that it is so very transmissible and, worse yet, fairly early on, we had the emergence of the currently-but-not-for-long predominant D614G variant which is far more transmissible than the original wild-type virus. Recipe for disaster: We need to be watching for this in the future. I wonder whether we'll be smart enough to do the right things to prepare for the future when this is over or we'll just go back to our old ways that involve doing what we've always done—which, of course, means we're likely to have another round with the next cool new virus one day soon. Remains to be seen, I guess.

We have all kinds of news about the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine candidate. The late-stage clinical trials run in other countries for this one had been plagued by inconsistencies and design problems, which is why the US regulators weren't about to make a move without waiting for results of US phase 3 trials. More recently, the rollout of this EU-authorized vaccine in European countries has been plagued with questions about its efficacy in the elderly and its safety. This is an adenovirus-vectored DNA vaccine like the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine currently authorized in the US, but unlike it, is a two-dose candidate. It has the advantage of being stable under refrigeration (36 to 46 degrees Fahrenheit/2 to 8 degrees Celsius) for up to six months, which makes the logistics of distribution vastly easier than most of what's on the market here. It is also among the least expensive vaccines developed so far, partly because the technology is less expensive to employ and partly because the company has pledged to forego profits in these early stages, selling it, on a sliding scale based on a country's ability to pay, for as little as \$2.15 per dose in some places. [Compare this to the US government's cost of \$19.50 per dose for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, \$15 for the Moderna vaccine (below market because the company received taxpayer support), and \$8.50 for the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine (cheaper because of the technology and because they also pledged not to take a profit early on). The US is paying \$4 for this Oxford/AstraZeneca candidate, having locked in pricing early.]

The clinical trials in other countries, however, were problematic. There were design flaws, errors in execution, and a lack of transparency about those issues. I described the situation in my Update #277 posted November 26 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4208100762539631>. There was also a serious shortage of older people included in those trials. Despite these problems, the candidate received authorization in the European Union and various other countries. Meanwhile, enrollment in the US phase 3 trial was completed in late January with a data readout expected within a couple of months.

But then a rumor started to circulate in Europe that the vaccine was only eight percent effective in the elderly, which would be fairly terrible; but that was the result of twisting the facts. The facts are that only eight percent of trial participants were elderly, not that the efficacy was eight percent in that group. There were serious questions whether there were enough elderly in the trial to draw any firm conclusion as to efficacy in this group, but it is completely off-base to suggest eight percent is the number. Some countries did restrict administration of this vaccine to younger age groups until more data became available; but vaccinations got underway.

Then this whole blood clot thing came up. The early reports of thromboembolic events (abnormal clots that block blood vessels) were belied by data sets showing the rate of thromboembolic events was not higher in vaccine recipients than the background rate in the population, which would tend to indicate the vaccine is not causing the thromboembolic events after all. But then, some very few (in Europe, 25 reports out of 20 million doses given) recipients of the vaccine were developing a specific rare condition associated with cerebral (brain) blood clots called cerebral venous sinus thrombosis, or CVST. For the record, cerebral embolism is a big deal; it deprives brain tissue of a blood supply, causing strokes. There has been a question about just what's going on with this since these events were occurring in a segment of the population in whom thromboembolic events are not very common at all—almost entirely women under 55 years of age. There have been a small number of associated deaths. Some countries suspended vaccination; others suspended and then restarted. Still a mess.

Now a group of researchers in Germany think they may have figured this thing out. Short answer: Yes,

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the vaccine may be causing these events, but no, it may not be that big a deal if we're watching for it. Here's the thing: In four of these patients, they isolated and identified antibodies that appeared to be provoking a reaction activating platelets (little cell fragments involved in clotting), which could lead to just such an event. Another group in Norway looking at three more patients is coming to similar conclusions. These are patients with no medical history which would lead one to expect these outcomes, making it likely these antibodies are the cause of the clotting, and as Professor Pal Andre Holme put it in the Norwegian newspaper VG, "I see no other reason than that it's the vaccine that triggers it." This isn't proof, but it certainly is suggestive when two separate groups come to the same conclusion independently.

So why would I say this isn't this such a big deal? Because if these folks are right—and that's still if—then it's fairly easy to identify and treat before it causes big problems. Recipients should be watching for unusual bruising, swelling, or headaches starting four or more days after the vaccine dose is received. If they seek medical care at that point, the problem can be managed fairly easily. Given how rare it is (just over one event per million doses)—and how many people would, without vaccine, get Covid-19 and have all kinds of trouble with abnormal blood clotting, among other things—this is not necessarily an unacceptable risk. We know we need every vaccine on the market we can get. Yes, vaccines need to be safe, but we also have to assess relative risk and benefit here. It's better if you never need a vaccine at all because every dose given carries risk; giving a medical product to a perfectly healthy person always exposes that patient to risks that wouldn't exist if the product was not given—as true for an aspirin as it is for a vaccine. It's just that, in the face of a pandemic with a lethal virus, leaving the patient unvaccinated exposes the patient to much greater risks of infection, severe disease, hospitalization, and death and also exposes the entire society to the risks of continued outbreaks of the infection and the globe to the possibility of continuing transmission, mutation, and emergence of scary new variants. There is clearly a risk every day you remain unvaccinated that you will get Covid-19 and become seriously ill from it, even die. It is quite possible, even likely, that your risk with this vaccine is far less than your risk without it.

Now, AstraZeneca has announced it has data from the phase 3 trial in the US, Chile, and Peru, and it looks pretty good, indeed. Bottom line: It had an efficacy of 100 percent at preventing severe disease and hospitalization. In the 32,000 participants, one-third of whom received placebo and two-thirds of whom received vaccine, this candidate provided 79 percent protection against symptomatic infection. Those numbers put this candidate in the same class as our already-authorized vaccines. Elderly were well-represented in this trial, and the protection was robust in this age group too, as good as in younger age groups. There were no serious safety issues noted in the trial data, even after a special effort was made to find evidence of blood clotting events like those noted in Europe, although we should point out that, if this clotting thing turns out to be a real thing (and I think it probably is), it appears to be rare enough that it wouldn't be very likely to turn up in a trial with only 32,000 participants. The trial was for a four-week interval between doses, but there are other data indicating they can be spaced up to three months apart without compromising the immune response. The company expects to finish analyzing their data and then make application to the FDA for an emergency use authorization (EUA) by early next month. Although the US has an order in for 300 million doses, it doesn't seem likely that is going to make a great deal of difference here because we expect to have sufficient doses of the other three currently-authorized vaccines shortly after the time this one might receive its EUA. Also for that reason, it may be less likely the FDA will provide an expedited review process as it did with the first three candidates to come across their desks—not certain, but a possibility. The company is prepared to deliver 30 million doses immediately upon authorization and another 20 million doses within a month.

If the US might not need their doses at all, why bother applying? Well, turns out we're known to be hard to please on the regulatory front. If the vaccine can get approval from our FDA, it seems likely that will send a signal to the rest of the world about its quality and boost confidence in it at a time when we seriously needs billions of doses of vaccine to fan out across the globe just as soon as possible. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told the New York Times, "This was a very big, well-powered study that I think confirms now that this vaccine is a good vaccine." And he said to the Washington Post, "The one thing that one can say for sure is that this is good for the

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world, because it's a cheap vaccine. It's got good results. They will likely be able to produce enough for a lot of different countries." If the FDA concurs, this helps to give the world another avenue to ending this nightmare. I hope it works out.

Data reported as of yesterday show that just about 157 million doses of vaccine have been distributed in the US with nearly 125 million of those administered. Nearly a quarter of US residents have received at least one dose of vaccine, about half of those have been fully vaccinated, and we are averaging around 2.5 million doses per day. The 22nd federal vaccination center is slated to open soon; these centers have been targeting people of color, delivering around 60 percent of their doses in these communities. This is a real step toward remedying serious and important inequities in the distribution effort so far. Several states have or have announced they will soon open vaccination to everyone over 16. This is an extraordinarily good situation to be in about three months after our first vaccine was granted EUA. Having three authorized with a fourth nearing that point and hundreds of millions of doses on order and slated for delivery in the next two or three months puts us in a position to vaccinate everyone who wants to be vaccinated in the relatively near future with doses leftover to share around the world. I hope there is a plan being made to do that sharing. The four million doses already shared with Canada and Mexico should be a down payment on a whole lot more we can do to help the world get this virus under control. We should push our policy makers to be working on that. As I've said more than once here, no one's safe until we're all safe.

We talked a few nights ago about the various classifications of newly emerging variants of this virus. According to new CDC definitions, Variant of Interest designates one with genetic markers we think may affect transmissibility, diagnostics, lethality, or antigenic make-up or one which is increasing in proportion of cases or creating unique outbreak clusters. A Variant of Concern is one for which we have actual evidence of increased transmissibility, diagnostic detection failures, more severe disease or increased lethality, and/or reduced neutralization by antibodies. And then there's what I described as the hair-on-fire Variant of High Consequence. If you're interested in that whole round-up from the other night, check out my Update #388 posted March 17 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4531713686845002>. I revisit this because today, a CDC spokesperson told CNN that "At this time, none of the known SARS-CoV-2 variants rise to the level of high consequence, and none are close to that threshold." He explained that the new classification system discussed the other night now includes this scary category "so that health officials can be prepared to respond appropriately in the event that a SARS-CoV-2 variant crosses that threshold." While this bit of reassurance doesn't mean we have no troubles and the pandemic is over, I thought I should a little good news about variants.

Rabbit Hash, Kentucky, is an unincorporated community listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It has a population of 315. The general store, a historic building built in 1831 was largely destroyed by fire in 2016, and restored the following year, and there are several other historic buildings around town. Rabbit Hash used to be named Carlton, but because there were frequent mail mix-ups with the larger town of Carrollton just down the Ohio River, it was required to change its name. It is said the new name reflects the local populace's historic reliance on the local rabbit population for food; the town was once so well-known for its rabbit hash that steamboats on the Ohio River would stop just to order the dish.

Despite the deliciousness of the hash, this is not what the community is best known for, not at all. Their real claim to fame is their electoral process—and their mayors. They had an election just last week, and the voters chose Wilbur Beast in a landslide. He beat his opponent, the incumbent by garnering 13,143 out of the 22,985 votes cast. In a town of 351. That happens because the elections are actually fundraisers where you quite literally buy votes. Not your average election. But of course, Wilbur isn't your average mayor; you see, he's a French bulldog. His opponent, the ex-mayor? Brynneth Pawltro, a pitbull mix. Beast, whose statement upon his election said, "I am humbled and beyond thankful for all of the support from far away and right here at home," is the latest in a long line of canine mayors in Rabbit Hash. There have been Goofy Borneman-Calhoun, a dog "of unknown parentage;" Junior Cochran, a black Labrador; and Lucy Lou, a border collie. The runners-up in Tuesday's election, Jack Rabbit the Beagle and Poppy, a golden retriever, became Rabbit Hash Ambassadors, whose duties are to fill in for the mayor when he is unavailable for an official event. Ambassador Lady Stone, who became an Ambassador after the 2016

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election, retains her position as well.

For the record, the money raised is used to maintain the historic buildings in town. According to WCBO News, "Organizers say they run the 'only honest election in the country.'" I think I'd like to visit Rabbit Hash: see the store, meet the mayor, maybe eat a little hash. Life goals.

Take care. We'll talk again.

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County	Total Cases	Recovered Cases	Negative Persons	Deceased Among Cases	Community Spread	% PCR Test Positivity Rate (Weekly)
Aurora	455	434	886	15	Minimal	6.3%
Beadle	2841	2736	6053	39	Substantial	6.9%
Bennett	385	371	1194	9	Minimal	0.0%
Bon Homme	1512	1482	2129	26	Minimal	3.3%
Brookings	3714	3579	12343	37	Substantial	2.9%
Brown	5242	5087	13039	91	Moderate	6.4%
Brule	700	684	1908	9	Minimal	13.3%
Buffalo	422	407	904	13	Minimal	0.0%
Butte	1007	976	3278	20	Moderate	6.7%
Campbell	131	127	263	4	None	0.0%
Charles Mix	1328	1262	4031	21	Substantial	8.6%
Clark	395	370	963	5	Substantial	34.5%
Clay	1842	1796	5542	15	Substantial	5.6%
Codington	4142	3953	9869	79	Substantial	14.5%
Corson	475	460	1014	12	Minimal	9.5%
Custer	775	751	2773	12	Moderate	10.9%
Davison	3035	2918	6721	66	Substantial	11.6%
Day	682	643	1822	29	Moderate	3.0%
Deuel	488	466	1161	8	Moderate	22.7%
Dewey	1435	1407	3897	26	Moderate	0.0%
Douglas	439	427	935	9	Minimal	8.3%
Edmunds	489	470	1086	13	Minimal	5.3%
Fall River	558	536	2691	15	Moderate	2.8%
Faulk	363	348	708	13	Minimal	0.0%
Grant	995	936	2303	40	Moderate	9.4%
Gregory	566	518	1318	30	Moderate	8.8%
Haakon	260	247	548	10	Minimal	0.0%
Hamlin	737	685	1835	38	Moderate	18.5%
Hand	356	336	844	6	Moderate	4.0%
Hanson	374	364	744	4	Moderate	6.3%
Harding	92	91	187	1	None	0.0%
Hughes	2346	2285	6740	36	Moderate	4.7%
Hutchinson	803	764	2443	26	Moderate	1.9%

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Hyde	140	138	421	1	Minimal	10.0%
Jackson	284	268	920	14	Minimal	0.0%
Jerauld	275	253	568	16	None	0.0%
Jones	89	88	229	0	Minimal	28.6%
Kingsbury	673	634	1710	14	Substantial	20.8%
Lake	1266	1189	3474	18	Substantial	15.1%
Lawrence	2878	2816	8655	45	Moderate	1.5%
Lincoln	8073	7792	20813	77	Substantial	13.6%
Lyman	613	592	1904	10	Moderate	4.5%
Marshall	362	329	1242	6	Substantial	7.2%
McCook	771	730	1687	24	Substantial	11.5%
McPherson	240	234	567	4	None	0.0%
Meade	2675	2608	7889	31	Moderate	6.2%
Mellette	255	250	748	2	None	0.0%
Miner	282	261	592	9	Moderate	6.3%
Minnehaha	29067	28067	80351	340	Substantial	11.6%
Moody	623	602	1792	17	Minimal	1.7%
Oglala Lakota	2082	2013	6709	49	Moderate	4.0%
Pennington	13174	12829	40248	191	Moderate	7.5%
Perkins	351	333	836	14	Minimal	10.5%
Potter	387	375	857	4	Moderate	3.4%
Roberts	1290	1207	4246	36	Substantial	18.1%
Sanborn	336	328	704	3	Minimal	0.0%
Spink	820	783	2177	26	Moderate	8.7%
Stanley	339	337	959	2	Minimal	8.7%
Sully	137	134	325	3	None	0.0%
Todd	1221	1190	4178	29	Minimal	8.3%
Tripp	729	697	1514	16	Moderate	17.1%
Turner	1117	1026	2794	53	Substantial	13.5%
Union	2084	1965	6460	40	Substantial	15.0%
Walworth	741	709	1854	15	Moderate	15.1%
Yankton	2877	2785	9551	28	Substantial	9.5%
Ziebach	337	327	878	9	Minimal	0.0%
Unassigned	0	0	1914	0		

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South Dakota



RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
White, Non-Hispanic	86766	75%
Native American, Non-Hispanic	13671	12%
Unknown, Non-Hispanic	5570	5%
Hispanic	4203	4%
Black, Non-Hispanic	2575	2%
Other, Non-Hispanic	1692	1%
Asian, Non-Hispanic	1495	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	60352	905
Male	55620	1018

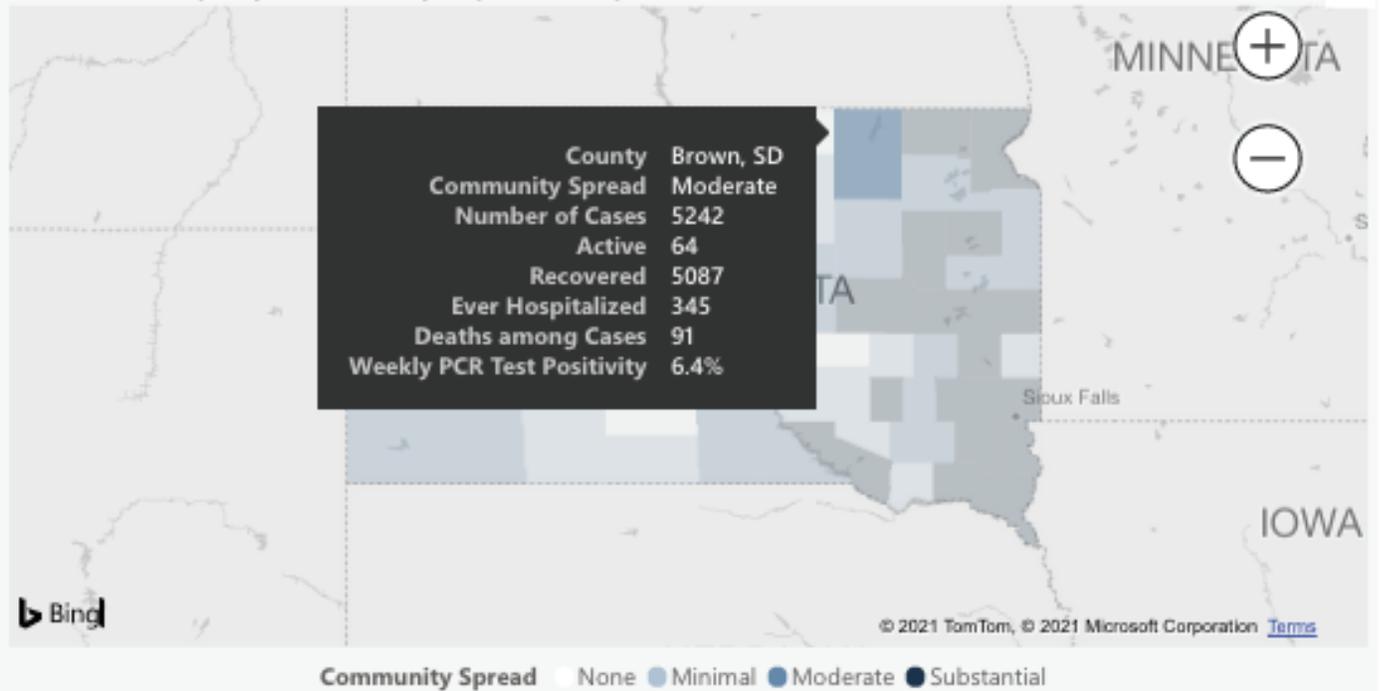
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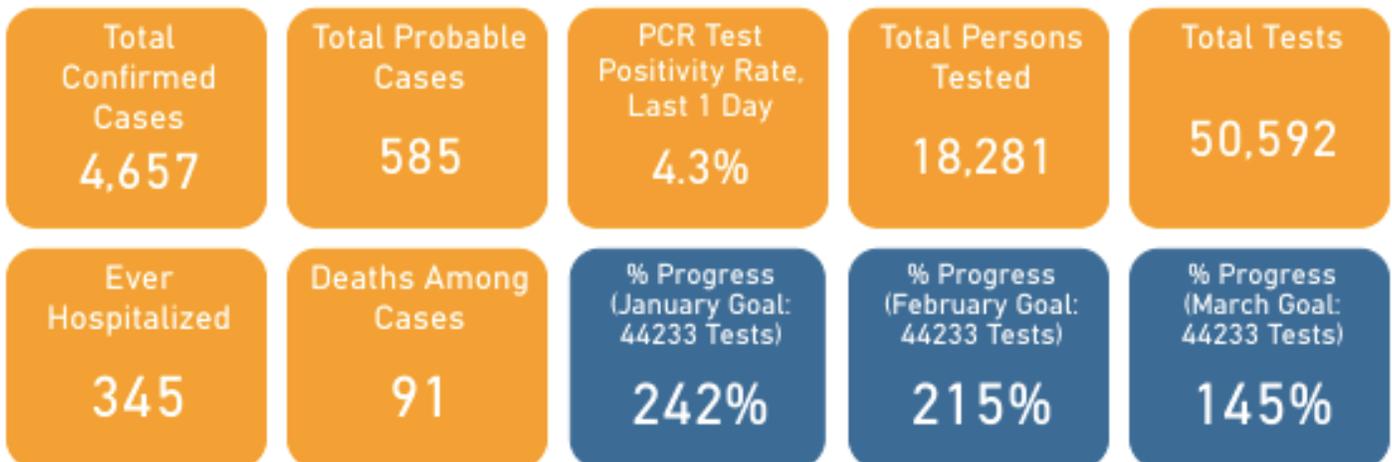
Brown County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



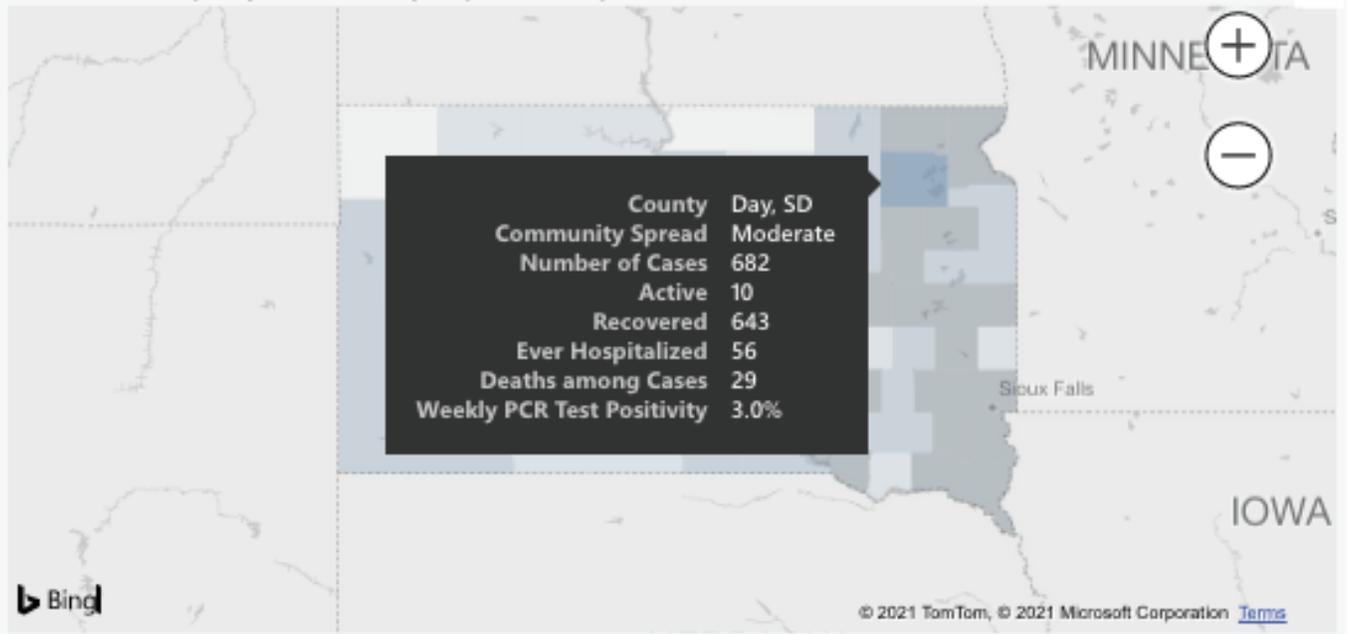
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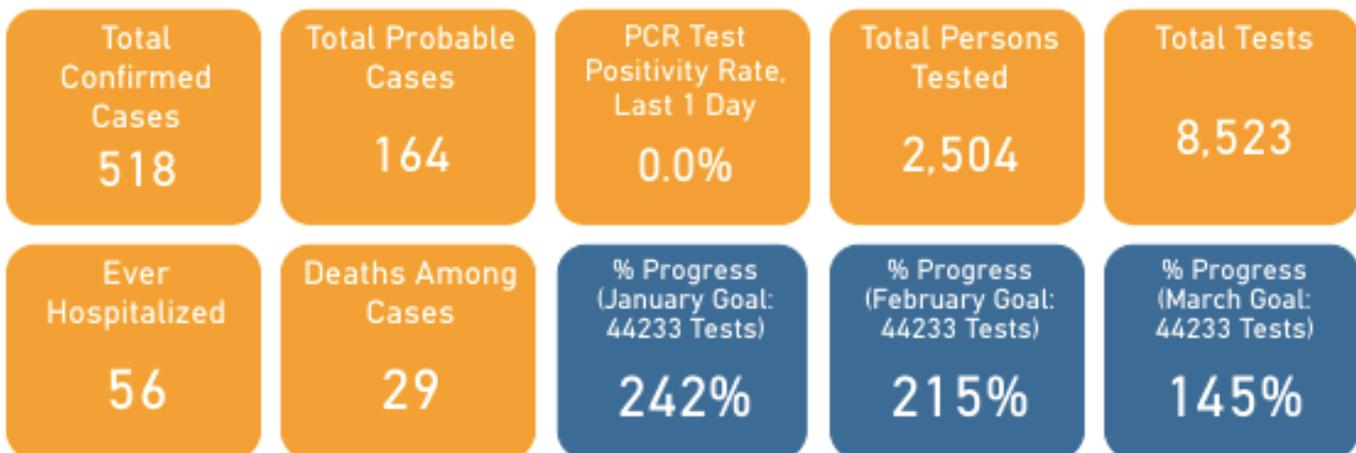
Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



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Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered

350,149

State Allocation

Manufacturer	# of Doses
Janssen	4,876
Moderna	168,459
Pfizer	176,814

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine

218,702

State Allocation

Doses	# of Recipients
Janssen - Series Complete	4,876
Moderna - 1 dose	43,307
Moderna - Series Complete	62,576
Pfizer - 1 dose	39,088
Pfizer - Series Complete	68,863

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose

37%

State & Federal Allocation

Doses	% of Pop.
1 dose	37.33%
Series Complete	23.36%

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

County	# Doses	# Persons (1 dose)	# Persons (2 doses)	Total # Persons
Aurora	1,054	358	348	706
Beadle	7,270	2,097	2,586	4,683
Bennett*	486	132	177	309
Bon Homme*	4,022	884	1,569	2,453
Brookings	10,810	4,236	3,287	7,523
Brown	16,314	4,290	6,012	10,302
Brule*	1,989	491	749	1,240
Buffalo*	136	78	29	107
Butte	2,436	904	766	1,670
Campbell	1,192	186	503	689
Charles Mix*	3,546	1,162	1,192	2,354
Clark	1,415	457	479	936
Clay	5,759	1,717	2,021	3,738
Codington*	10,855	2,931	3,962	6,893
Corson*	313	71	121	192
Custer*	3,130	858	1,136	1,994
Davison	8,489	2,325	3,082	5,407
Day*	2,863	863	1,000	1,863
Deuel	1,688	504	592	1,096
Dewey*	388	64	162	226
Douglas*	1,357	375	491	866
Edmunds	1,501	423	539	962
Fall River*	2,785	683	1,051	1,734
Faulk	1,171	341	415	756
Grant*	2,902	1,060	921	1,981
Gregory*	1,956	536	710	1,246
Haakon*	569	147	211	358

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Hamlin	1,964	552	706	1,258
Hand	1,601	511	545	1,056
Hanson	558	182	188	370
Harding	119	51	34	85
Hughes*	8,730	1,976	3,377	5,353
Hutchinson*	3,875	974	1,450	2,424
Hyde*	587	161	213	374
Jackson*	433	117	158	275
Jerauld	1,012	312	350	662
Jones*	686	148	269	417
Kingsbury	2,753	949	902	1,851
Lake	4,628	1,578	1,525	3,103
Lawrence	9,315	3,153	3,081	6,234
Lincoln	28,295	5,574	11,360	16,934
Lyman*	883	259	312	571
Marshall*	2,054	664	695	1,359
McCook	2,372	592	890	1,482
McPherson	281	71	105	176
Meade*	7,043	1,793	2,625	4,418
Mellette*	52	14	19	33
Miner	975	279	348	627
Minnehaha*	89,421	18,870	35,273	54,143
Moody*	2,039	731	654	1,385
Oglala Lakota*	188	56	66	122
Pennington*	41,138	8,874	16,132	25,006
Perkins*	745	255	245	500
Potter	1,006	332	337	669
Roberts*	4,784	1,134	1,825	2,959
Sanborn	1,135	353	391	744
Spink	3,382	880	1,251	2,131
Stanley*	1,336	274	531	805
Sully	416	92	162	254
Todd*	178	44	67	111
Tripp*	2,212	472	870	1,342
Turner	3,946	798	1,574	2,372
Union	3,586	1,350	1,118	2,468
Walworth*	2,039	393	823	1,216
Yankton	11,281	2,459	4,411	6,870
Ziebach*	59	13	23	36
Other	6,646	1,800	2,423	4,223

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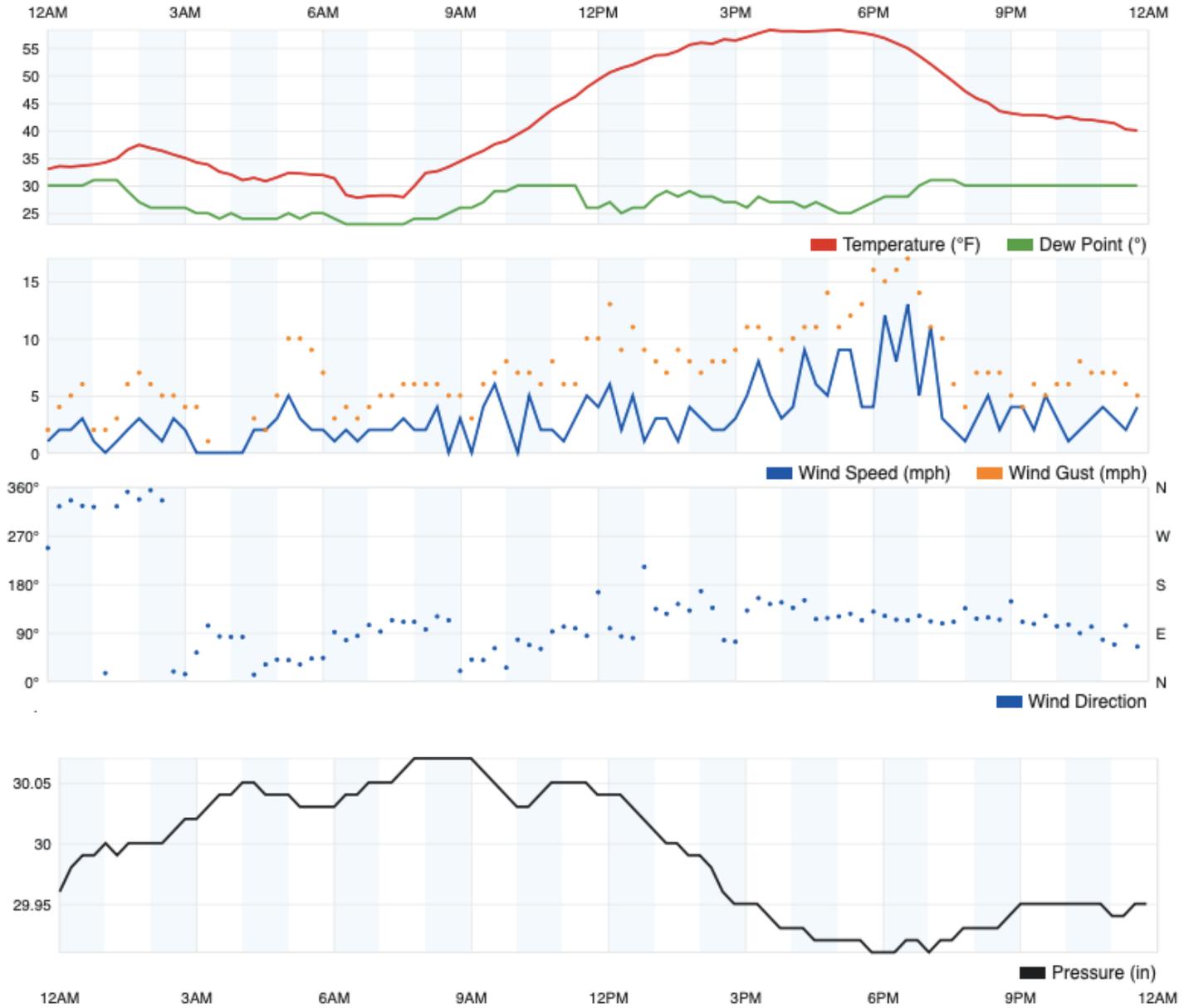
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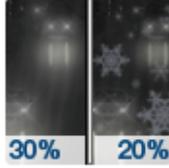
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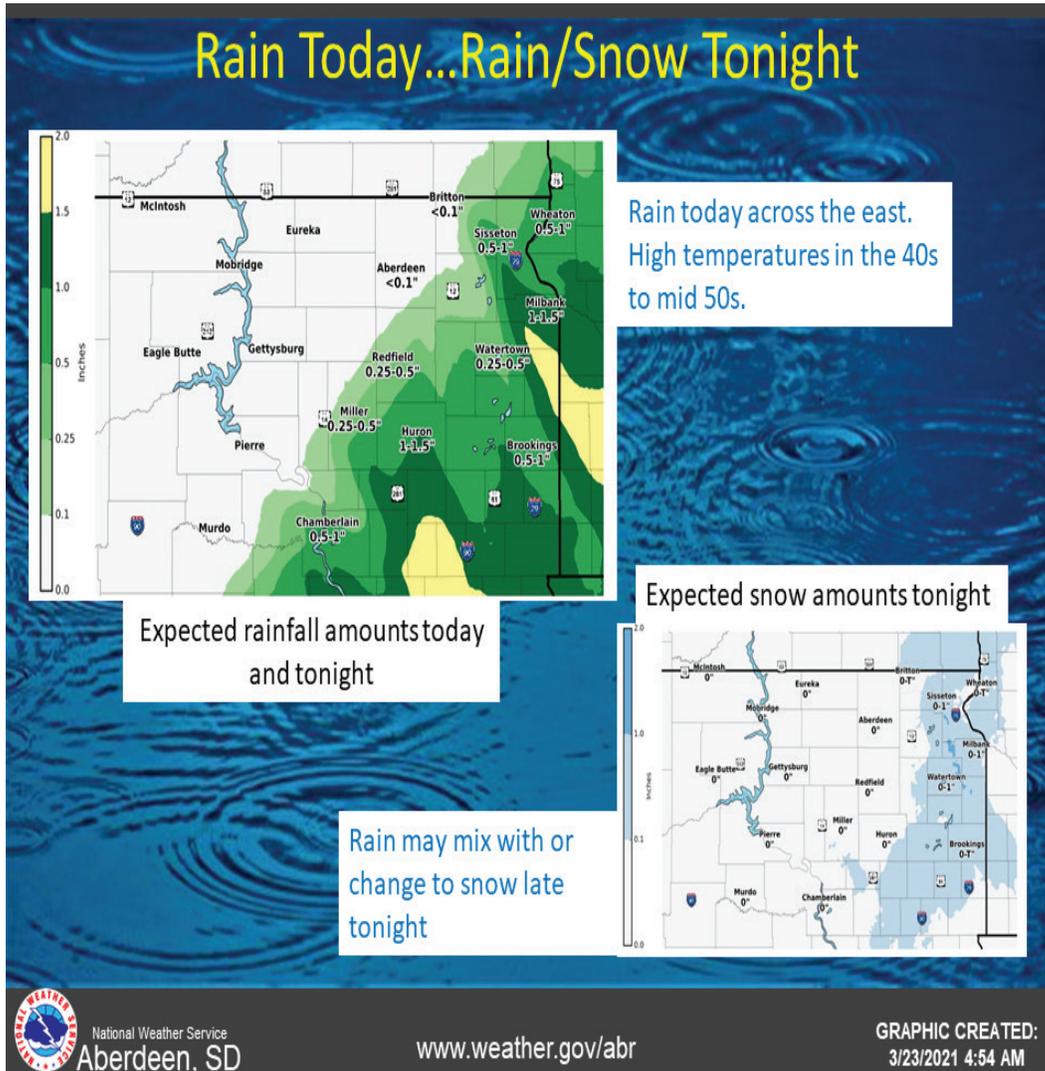
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Wednesday	Wednesday Night	Thursday
				
Cloudy then Chance Rain	Blustery. Chance Rain then Slight Chance Rain/Snow	Partly Sunny and Breezy	Mostly Clear	Sunny
High: 51 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 48 °F	Low: 27 °F	High: 55 °F



Rain will overspread the eastern part of the region today and tonight. The rain may mix with or change to snow late tonight along and east of Interstate 29.

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Today in Weather History

March 23, 1987: Strong winds and heavy snow produced blizzard conditions across South Dakota March 23rd through the 25th. Snow amounts ranged from 6 to 19 inches. Snow totals included 19" at Winner (in Tripp County), 15" at Murdo (in Jones County), and 12" at Woonsocket (in Sanborn County) and Platte (in Charles Mix County). The wind piled the snow into drifts up to 10 feet deep. The heavy, wet snow broke power lines in several counties in the south-central and east-central parts of the state knocking out power for up to a few days.

March 23, 2011: A low-pressure system brought a variety of precipitation to central and eastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota on March 22nd and 23rd. Areas experienced rain, hail, sleet, snow and in some cases thundersnow.

1907: Today was the warmest March day ever recorded in Washington, DC with a maximum temperature of 93 degrees. Washington DC has seen three, 90 degrees days in March, all of which occurred in 1907.

1913 - A vicious tornado hit the city of Omaha, NE. The tornado struck during the late afternoon on Easter Sunday, and in just twelve minutes cut a swath of total destruction five miles long and two blocks wide across the city killing 94 persons and causing 3.5 million dollars property damage. (David Ludlum)

1916 - Pocatello, ID, received a record 14.6 inches of snow in 24 hours. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A blizzard raged across western Kansas, and the panhandle of Texas and Oklahoma. Pampa TX received 21 inches of snow, and winds gusted to 78 mph at Dodge City KS Altus OK. Governor Hayden declared forty-six counties in western Kansas a disaster area. In southwest Kansas, the storm was described as the worst in thirty years. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Thunderstorms developing along a strong cold front spawned tornadoes near Roberts ID and Bridger MT. Strong and gusty winds prevailed in the western U.S. Wind gusts in the southwest part of Reno NV reached 89 mph. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Charlotte and Wilmington, NC, reported rainfall records for the date as showers and thunderstorms prevailed in the southeastern U.S. Freezing rain glazed parts of North Carolina and southern Virginia. Gale force winds produced a heavy surf along the coast of North Carolina. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - An upper level storm system produced heavy snow in the Lower Missouri Valley. Snowfall totals ranged up to nine inches at Kansas City MO, with eight inches reported at Falls City NE, Columbia MO and Saint Louis MO. Thunderstorms produced heavy snow in the Kansas City area during the evening rush hour. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2007 - A trailer is thrown through a bowling alley as a tornado moves through Clovis, NM. About 100 homes and businesses are destroyed, at least three schools are damaged and telephone poles are snapped. Thirteen tornadoes struck a dozen communities along the New Mexico/Texas border. Two people were critically injured.

2011 - A series of tornados are spawned from severe thunderstorms in Pennsylvania. In Hempfield Township dozens of homes and a high school auditorium where students are rehearsing a play are severely damaged.

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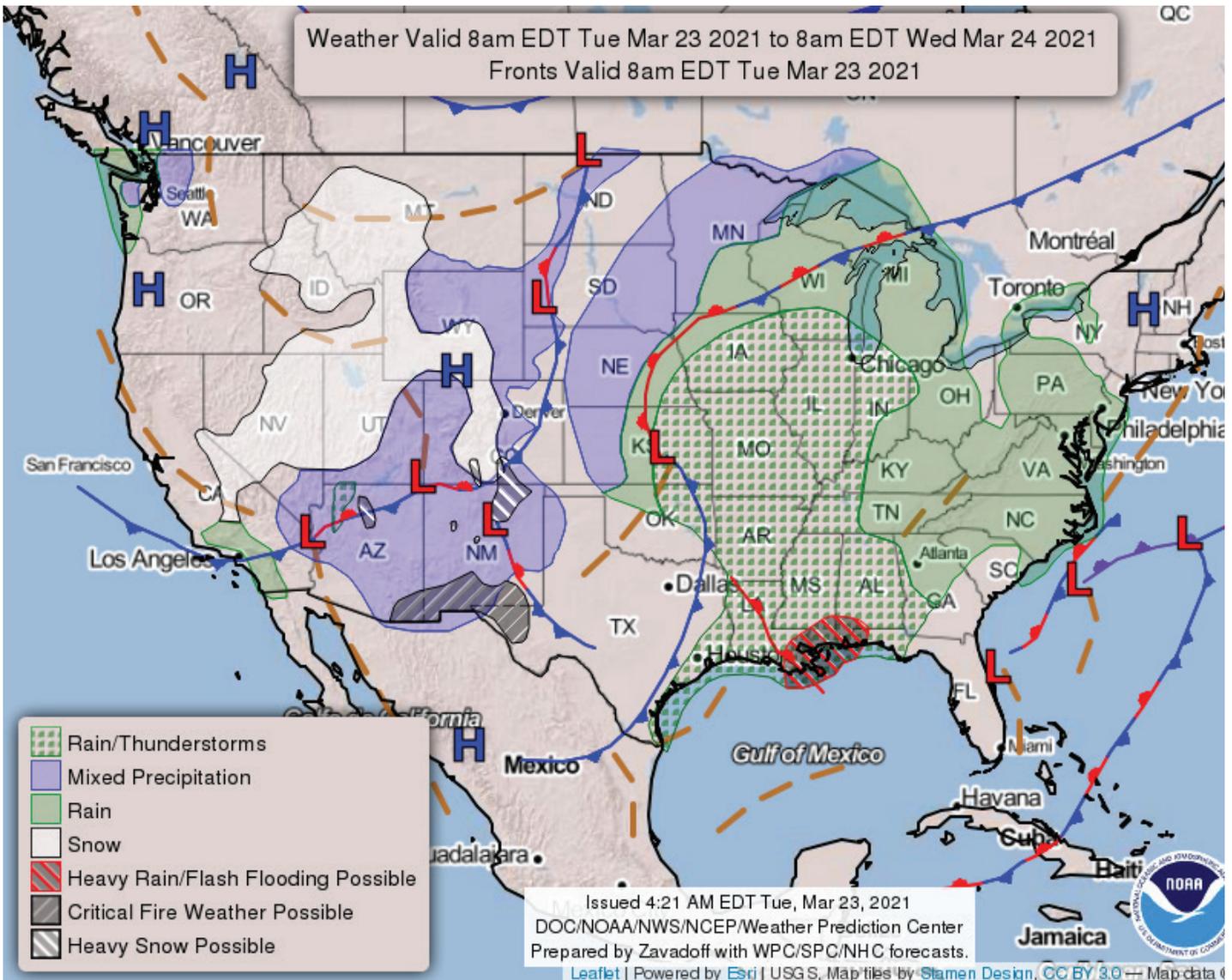
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 58 °F at 4:03 PM
Low Temp: 28 °F at 6:40 AM
Wind: 18 mph at 5:18 PM
Precip:

Today's Info

Record High: 81° in 1963
Record Low: -21° in 1899
Average High: 44°F
Average Low: 23°F
Average Precip in Mar.: 0.75
Precip to date in Mar.: 0.35
Average Precip to date: 1.77
Precip Year to Date: 0.53
Sunset Tonight: 7:51 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:29 a.m.



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TEACH ME AND LEAD ME, LORD

Success in the Christian life begins with our being willing to be willing. It is our willingness, our innermost desire, to want to know God, understand Him and do His will that makes the difference in who we become, what we live for, and give our lives to.

David set the example and gives us an excellent program for being willing to be willing to become a "man after God's own heart." He asked God to "Teach me how to live, O Lord, (and) Lead me along right paths." This short, simple, and specific prayer expose David's desire: to know God and to make Him known.

When he asked God to "teach" him, David was pleading for God to guide him. This prayer did not arise out of a need to confess his sins. It came from a deep desire to have an intimate relationship with God – to experience Him as a friend and confidant. David was well aware of the fact that if he did not allow God to be his teacher, he would not enjoy God's protection and would not be "led along right paths." And if he did not travel on "right paths," he certainly could not make God known to those seeking Him.

David, in this verse, also prays for "victory over his enemies" who were waiting to destroy him. David knew that if God was with him no force was powerful enough to harm him or hurt him. Regardless of who the enemy might be, those who believe in God have nothing to fear. No one or nothing can undo the work or wisdom of God. What He has done for us gives us confidence that He will be with us to withstand any attack.

Prayer: Give us Your assurance, Lord, that as we know You and do Your way, You will always guard us. Increase our faith to overcome our doubts. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Teach me how to live, O Lord. Lead me along the right path, for my enemies are waiting for me. Psalm 27:11

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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

News from the Associated Press

In South Dakota, Noem bends — partially — on transgender ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem initially appeared eager to deliver a win to social conservatives on a top, culture war issue.

Just minutes after the GOP-led state legislature passed a bill banning transgender women and girls participating in women's sports leagues, the Republican governor fired off a tweet declaring herself "excited to sign" the bill.

Noem's enthusiasm faded surprisingly fast. Within days, the governor, who is widely viewed as eyeing a run for higher office, found herself caught in a political mess, facing tough lobbying from business interests, legal threats and talk of betrayal from social conservatives who had been reassured she was on their side.

The governor shied away from the bill when her office showed signs of turmoil — a key member of her staff who oversaw both policy and communications announced she was leaving. Ultimately, Noem crafted an escape plan that left plenty angry and tarnished her hard-charging reputation: a partial veto.

Noem's missteps have landed her at the center of a rift within the GOP. Its leaders find themselves caught between trying to please both business groups and hard-line social conservatives. Even Noem, who has built a reputation of not backing down from fights, has struggled to articulate a clear position on the ban.

"She was considered a shining star in the GOP with a bright future. No more," Michael Farris, the head of an advocacy group, Alliance Defending Freedom, that backed the bill, wrote on Facebook after Noem announced her partial veto.

"We don't need leaders who lack the courage to stand up to the corporate bullies who want to turn our country into an amoral wasteland filled with compliant consumers," Farris added.

Noem's move Friday limits the ban to elementary and high school sports and excludes collegiate athletics. The decision was meant to placate business groups and key political backers who did not want to see the NCAA pull tournaments from the state.

Students and families affected by the bill say their requests to meet with the governor have been ignored, and their opposition has received scant attention from GOP lawmakers during the debate.

"I'm just really exhausted with lawmakers targeting my community for political favor," said Louise Snodgrass, a transgender person who protested outside the governor's mansion this month. "I would welcome a conversation with (Noem)."

GOP lawmakers are also enraged with Noem, complaining that she left them out of the calculations in her about-face and has now overstepped the bounds of her office.

Noem on Monday attempted to undo some of the damage, unveiling a website where people could sign on to show their support for using Title IX, the federal law that forbids sex discrimination in education, to ban transgender women from women's sports. At a news conference, she declared her allegiance to the cause of "protecting women's sports" and enlisted a lineup of local female athletes and former professional athletes, including former football player Herschel Walker, to praise her efforts.

The news conference, held in a hotel conference room, appeared to be a hastily assembled affair: One attendee got into an argument with the governor over marijuana legalization and none of the promised celebrity endorsers was physically present, instead offering support through video messages and a statement.

"Let's take action that really gives us the result of protecting women's sports," Noem said, likening the bill to a "participation trophy" that would inevitably be struck down if the NCAA sued.

But it is not clear if the bill, even as rewritten by Noem, would stand up to legal scrutiny. A similar law enacted in Idaho last year was temporarily blocked by a federal court, though Noem has proposed taking out some sections that could lead to legal battles.

In a statement before the news conference, Alliance Defending Freedom dismissed Noem's effort as

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nothing more than damage control.

"Politicians launch belated 'initiatives' for political theater and to create distractions," said the group's general counsel Kristen Waggoner.

Noem attempted to salvage her record, saying: "I'm still excited to sign the bill. Nothing's changed."

But she is trying to change many parts of the bill. Besides the exclusion of collegiate athletics, Noem is proposing two sections be struck from it entirely, using a move known as a "style and form veto." Such vetoes are usually used to clean up technical language in the bill, not alter its scope or power.

That has led state lawmakers who passed it to call Noem's move unconstitutional. They are striking at another aspect of Noem's record that has been at the heart of her political rise — her claim that she would never overstep the bounds of her office, even during a crisis like a global pandemic.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican, released a statement saying he was "greatly concerned" that the governor did not have the authority to make substantive changes to the bill.

But Noem argued at the news conference that as long as the Legislature accepted her proposal, it could fit within the bounds of the state constitution.

Republican state Rep. Rhonda Milstead, the bill's primary sponsor, said she met with an attorney from the governor's office in December, before the legislative session, and received an assurance that if the bill made it to the governor's desk, she would sign it. But while lawmakers debated the bill, the governor's office did not weigh in, according to Milstead.

However, key business groups and figures lobbied heavily against the bill, including the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce. One member of the board of First Premier Bank, which recently worked with Noem to donate \$100 million to a state scholarship endowment, traveled to the Capitol, in Pierre, to testify against the bill. If the NCAA canceled its tournaments, it would cost millions of dollars, putting up to 100 full- and part-time jobs at risk, warned the board member, David Zimbeck. Others worried that Amazon would cancel plans for a distribution facility in the state.

Meanwhile, the group of people perhaps most affected by the bill — transgender children and their families — say they have been left out of the conversation entirely.

Susan Williams, the director of the advocacy organization Transformation Project, said she has tried to set up a meeting between the governor and families of transgender children but has heard nothing from Noem's office. The bill could be devastating for transgender teens, they say, but Noem denied her initiative has anything to do with transgender people.

"We believe Gov. Noem cannot make an informed decision without meeting with transgender South Dakotans to learn about their experiences, the daily challenges they face, and the damage this bill will inflict on their lives," Williams said.

Oregon women hold South Dakota to 9 1st-half points, cruise

SAN ANTONIO (AP) — The school that could have won the canceled women's NCAA Tournament last year stumbled into tournament this year with a whole new cast.

Except for Erin Boley and she made sure Oregon, which had lost five of six games, ended its funk.

Boley scored 22 points and the 23rd-ranked Ducks closed out the first round of the women's NCAA Tournament late Monday night with a sleeper, downing South Dakota 67-47.

"We said from the time we left Vegas, from the Pac-12 tournament, that we were going to turn this around and end this season strong," Bole said. "And I'm really really proud of this team. We came out and played so hard tonight."

The 11th-seeded Coyotes missed their last 25 shots of the first half and were held to a near-record low in trailing 34-9 at the break.

"We just felt that this was the kind of team that, if we were just going to stay back and play kind of soft defense, they were going to pick us apart," Oregon coach Kelly Graves said. "So we had to be the aggressive team."

Nyara Sabally added 17 points and Sedona Prince 12 as the sixth-seeded Ducks (14-8) took advantage

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of their size on both ends of the floor to head into a second-round matchup Wednesday with third-seeded and 10th-ranked Georgia in the Alamo Region.

Boley, a senior who spent her freshman year at Notre Dame, surpassed 1,000 points with the Ducks.

Hannah Sjerven scored 18 points and grabbed 12 rebounds for the Summit League champion Coyotes (19-6). Liv Korngable added 15 points for the Coyotes, who were in their fourth NCAA Tournament.

Oregon made quick work of this one, The Coyotes made their first two shots before Prince and Sabally both made two baskets and a Boley 3-pointer capped an 11-0 run for a 13-4 lead.

After Korngable scored at the 4:15 mark of the first quarter, the Coyotes missed their next 25 field goals. And after Sjerven made two free throws a minute later, they didn't score again until she made another free throw four seconds before the half.

South Dakota was just 3-for-32 shooting.

"It's hard to get a flow of the game going when your shots aren't falling and that's something, obviously, no one expects coming into a game," Sjerven said.

The Coyotes ended their drought with their first shot of the third, making 8 of 20 shots and outscoring Oregon 20-16 in the quarter but the damage was done.

Oregon finished the game at 60% (27 of 45), making 6 of 12 from 3-point range and all seven free throws but had an unsightly 23 turnovers. South Dakota was 13 of 33 (42.4%) in the second half.

PROGRAM RECORD

Oregon got an addition to its record book, allowing just nine points in the first half. The previous record was 10 scored by Saint Francis 15 years ago. Meanwhile, it was the second-fewest allowed in a half of an NCAA Tournament game. Prairie View scored eight in the first half against Baylor in 2011.

TALL TIMBER

Oregon chose to go tall — as in 6-foot-7 Prince, 6-5 Sabally and 6-2 Boley — across the front line against the Coyotes, whose only 6-foot starter is Sjerven at 6-3. South Dakota's second-tallest player is 5-11, the size of the Ducks' two guards.

IN THAT OTHER TOURNAMENT

Graves had to mention the men's tournament, where his old school Gonzaga, "starring" walk-on Will Graves, was on a collision course to possibly meet Oregon in the Elite Eight.

"You know what? I'm kind of anticipating an Elite 8 battle against the Ducks and my son, who plays for the Zags. Wouldn't that be something? Don't ask me who I'm cheering for in that, but I'm really proud of them. I think it's great for our whole athletic department."

More AP women's college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/womens-college-basketball>

Williams' wish is for a long Stanford stay in her hometown

By JANIE McCAULEY AP Sports Writer

Kiana Williams had one wish all along: She wants top-seeded Stanford to keep playing in her hometown for as long as possible.

No stopping until the NCAA Tournament nets come down. Step one is done.

Williams looked up to the stands and acknowledged parents LaChelle and Michael during a lopsided first-round victory against Utah Valley in San Antonio. She briefly got to celebrate her latest milestone that her parents treasured getting to witness while finally watching her play in person this season.

And after the game, the senior point guard held up a white T-shirt someone had made reading "SHE'S COMING HOME!!!"

"I told my teammates I want you guys to stay here in my hometown as long as possible," said Williams, noting she had "50-plus people in the stands."

Next up for the Cardinal (26-2) is a Tuesday night date with eighth-seeded Oklahoma State (19-8), an 84-61 winner Sunday against No. 9 seed Wake Forest.

Other teams in the Alamo Region advancing to the second round for Wednesday games include: No. 3

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seed Georgia (21-6) after it beat No. 14 seed Drexel 67-53 on Monday and will take on sixth-seeded Oregon (14-8) with the Ducks defeating South Dakota 67-47; No. 13 Wright State advanced with a 66-62 upset of No. 4 Arkansas and will play No. 5 Missouri State, which defeated No. 12 UC Davis 70-51 on Monday night; and seventh-seeded Northwestern moved on after the Wildcats' 62-51 win over 10 seed UCF.

It's a long time coming for Northwestern (16-8), which returned to the tournament for the first time since 2015 and just the third time since 1993. Now the Wildcats will play No. 2 Louisville (24-3) after its 74-43 win against 15th-seeded Marist.

Oklahoma State didn't plan to celebrate the first-round win for long.

"Stanford's got one of the premier programs in the country," Cowgirls coach Jim Littell said. "They're just high level every phase of the game. ... I told our kids in the locker room: 'Let's play loose, let's play comfortable, enjoy the fact that you got here, and let's turn it into March Madness. Expect to win and expect high things of yourselves.' So that's the way we're going to approach it."

Dealing with Williams' hot hand will be on the to-do list.

She became Stanford's career 3-point leader in the win by passing Candice Wiggins' 295 made 3s from 2005-08.

Williams' entire family campaigned for her Stanford team to come to San Antonio for an extended visit.

"We want to stay as long as we can, I'm with Ki," Hall of Fame coach Tara VanDerveer said.

Stanford won national titles in 1990 and '92 and lost in the championship game in 2008 and '10 — and no question VanDerveer would love nothing more than to cut down the nets and hoist a trophy one more time.

The Cardinal have won 15 straight since a surprising two-game skid.

It will get harder from here.

Senior forward Natasha Mack carried the Cowgirls into the second round with 27 points, 15 rebounds, four blocks and two steals in the opener.

"She's going to be a handful down there," Williams said.

The 6-4 Mack averages 4.1 blocks per game.

"It's just a comforting feeling to know you've got the leading shot blocker in the country sitting back there waiting on people," Littell said.

Dealing with Mack will be a tough chore for Stanford, with VanDerveer noting: "Mack put on a show. She scores, she rebounds. You've really got to defend her."

THAT'S WRIGHT

For Angel Baker and Wright State (19-7), underdog status hardly mattered. The Raiders are on to the second round with the program's first NCAA Tournament win ever — and a stunning upset at that.

Thanks to tenacious Wright State, the Horizon League shined on the big stage.

"We knew we were going to be counted out, so we just played our game and made a couple upsets, busted a couple brackets," Baker said. "We can compete with anybody, believe in ourselves, count on your teammate, believe in your teammate, the one next to you and we will get it done."

The Raiders' result marked the first win by a No. 13 seed over a No. 4 since 2012 and earned their first tournament win in school history. In fact, No. 13 seeds were just 9-104 all-time as the 2021 tournament began.

WILDCATS MOVE ON

Watch out, Northwestern coach Joe McKeown has some serious moves.

McKeown offered a celebratory dance on national TV during his postgame interview after the Wildcats' special win. He shuffled right, then shuffled left, flapping his arms all the while.

"We're going this way, we're going this way. Tough to hang with me, you gotta have some game to hang with me!" McKeown said on ESPN.

If Northwestern has its way, Coach will keep dancin'.

More AP women's basketball: <https://apnews.com/Womenscollegebasketball> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Lakota Mount Rushmore protester says charges being dropped

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Lakota activist who was arrested while leading a protest before former president Donald Trump's visit to Mount Rushmore last year said he has negotiated with prosecutors to drop charges against him, which carried a punishment of nearly 17 years in prison.

Nick Tilsen, the president of an Indigenous advocacy organization called NDN Collective, told The Associated Press that he will participate in a prison diversion program in exchange for all but one charge against him being dropped. He cast the deal as a victory for Indigenous organizers who have been calling for public lands that once belonged to tribes to be returned to tribal control.

"It's a victory for the movement," Tilsen said. "Any time you try to prosecute organizers and leaders of this movement it's a strategy to try to weaken the movement."

The final charge, simple assault of a law enforcement officer, will be dropped once he completes the program, he said, adding that charges against other protesters will also be dropped as well.

The Pennington County State's Attorney's office did not immediately respond to a request to confirm the charges were dropped.

Tilsen had helped organize the demonstration near Mount Rushmore on July 3 to call for the Black Hills, which were seized from the Lakota despite treaties with the United States, to be returned to Indigenous control. For the Lakota people, the area is sacred and known as Paha Sapa — "the heart of everything that is."

Law enforcement officers, including the South Dakota National Guard, confronted the protesters after they used vans to form a blockade on a road leading to Mount Rushmore. As law enforcement officers advanced on the blockade, protesters scuffled with the officers and Tilsen took a shield from one officer, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Tilsen was not charged with physically assaulting officers, but instead using "physical menace or credible threat" to put them "in fear of imminent bodily harm," according to the Rapid City Journal.

But Tilsen said the move by prosecutors to dismiss most charges showed the effectiveness of a campaign organized by NDN Collective. They had gathered over 20,000 signatures from an online petition and sent hundreds of letters and phone calls to the prosecutor's office, according to Tilsen.

"It's great that we're having a social and racial reckoning in this country," Tilsen said. "For Indigenous people and for the Lakota, it's really about land because you take Mount Rushmore — well, Mount Rushmore is built on stolen land, carved by a member of the KKK."

The monument was conceived in the 1920s as a tourist draw for the new fad in vacationing called the road trip. South Dakota historian Doane Robinson recruited sculptor Gutzon Borglum to abandon his work creating the Stone Mountain Confederate Memorial in Georgia, which was to feature Robert E. Lee, Jefferson Davis and Stonewall Jackson.

Borglum was affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan as he raised money for the Confederate monument, according to historians.

Tilsen's calls to close Mount Rushmore put him at odds with Gov. Kristi Noem and other top Republicans in the state. She has ardently defended the monument, which is so connected to the state's identity that it adorns most license plates.

"Those four men are etched into Mount Rushmore are incredibly important to our history," the governor told Fox News this month. "We saw a movement to tear them down earlier this year. They needed to be protected."

However, the National Park Service has said it will not allow the state to have another fireworks display on July 4 this year, due to both safety concerns and the objections of local objections. But Noem has indicated she will keep battling for the Independence Day display.

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North Dakota Indian Affairs Commission leader stepping down

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The head of North Dakota's Indian Affairs Commission is stepping down, Gov. Doug Burgum announced Monday.

Scott Davis has been executive director of the commission since 2009, when he was appointed by then-Gov. John Hoeven. Davis plans to join Sanford Health as head of Native American outreach.

Davis has served three governors, 23 tribal chairs and five tribal nations. He has also worked with numerous state and federal agencies in his cabinet-level position.

"This decision does not come easy," Davis said in his resignation letter. "Throughout my entire career, my heart directs me to strengthen opportunities for my tribal members across the state. There is still much work to be done."

Burgum said Davis has tackled issues including education, court systems, economic development, social services, gaming, energy, law enforcement, transportation, health care, veterans and youth.

"Scott's role is one of the most challenging and important in our state," Burgum said in a statement. "He has been fearless in advocating for closing the serious gaps that exist for enrolled tribal members who are citizens of North Dakota."

Sioux Falls, South Dakota-based Sanford Health bills itself as the nation's largest rural nonprofit health care system.

Additional priority group eligible for COVID-19 vaccine

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Tens of thousands of additional people in South Dakota are eligible for the coronavirus vaccine.

The state Department of Health opened vaccinations to another priority group Monday.

Group 1E includes fire personnel and critical infrastructure workers, which covers employees in industries like water and wastewater, energy, finance, food service, food and agriculture, legal, manufacturing, shelter and housing, transportation and logistics, information technology and communications.

The group includes approximately 227,000 South Dakotans.

Currently, 37% of South Dakotans have received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose, while 23% are fully vaccinated.

South Dakota health officials on Sunday reported no change in the number of active COVID-19 cases and a drop in hospitalizations.

The update showed 145 positive tests in the last day, increasing the total to 115,867 cases since the start of the pandemic. Active cases remained at 2,233, the report showed.

Hospitalizations dropped by 10 since Saturday, to 59. Of those patients, 13 are being treated in intensive care units and five are on ventilators.

The report listed one new death, a Brown County man in his 60s, upping the total number of fatalities to 1,923.

Police investigate shooting in downtown Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Police are investigating a shooting in downtown Sioux Falls that left one man injured.

Officers responded to reports of gunfire about 1:30 a.m. Sunday, according to Sioux Falls Sgt. Cullen McClure.

McClure said the man was found in a vehicle with a gunshot wound to his leg. He was transported to the hospital and treated for non-life-threatening injuries.

No arrests have been made and the investigation is ongoing.

US: AstraZeneca may have used outdated info in vaccine trial

WASHINGTON (AP) — Results from a U.S. trial of AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine may have included

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“outdated information” and that could mean the company provided an incomplete view of efficacy data, American federal health officials said early Tuesday.

A spokesman from the drug company said Tuesday it was “looking into it.”

AstraZeneca reported Monday that its COVID-19 vaccine provided strong protection among adults of all ages in a long-anticipated U.S. study, a finding that some experts hoped would help rebuild public confidence in the shot around the world and move it a step closer to clearance in the U.S.

In the study of more than 30,000 people, the company reported that the vaccine was found to be 79% effective at preventing symptomatic cases of COVID-19 — including in older adults. There were no severe illnesses or hospitalizations among vaccinated volunteers, compared with five such cases in participants who received dummy shots — a small number, but consistent with findings from Britain and other countries that the vaccine protects against the worst of the disease.

AstraZeneca also said the study’s independent safety monitors found no serious side effects, including no increased risk of rare blood clots like those identified in Europe, a scare that led numerous countries to briefly suspend vaccinations last week.

But just hours after those encouraging results were reported, the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases issued an unusual statement.

The agency said the Data and Safety Monitoring Board “expressed concern that AstraZeneca may have included outdated information from that trial, which may have provided an incomplete view of the efficacy data.”

“We urge the company to work with the DSMB to review the efficacy data and ensure the most accurate, up-to-date efficacy data be made public as quickly as possible,” the statement added.

The company aims to file an application with the Food and Drug Administration in the coming weeks, and the government’s outside advisers will then publicly debate the evidence.

Authorization and guidelines for use of the vaccine in the United States will be determined by the FDA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention after thorough review of the data by independent advisory committees.

Reputation of AstraZeneca’s COVID vaccine marred by missteps

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — AstraZeneca’s release Monday of encouraging data about its coronavirus vaccine from its U.S. trial raised hopes that the drug company could put a troubled rollout behind it. But just hours later, U.S. officials issued an unusual statement expressing concern the company had included “outdated information” from its study and that it may have provided “an incomplete view of the efficacy data.”

A company spokesman said Tuesday it was “looking into it.”

Coupled with earlier missteps in reporting data and a recent blood clot scare, experts said the new stumble could cause lasting harm to the shot that is key to global efforts to stop the pandemic and erode vaccine confidence more broadly.

“I doubt it was (U.S. officials’) intention to deliberately undermine trust in the AstraZeneca vaccine,” said Dr. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia. “But this will likely cause more vaccine hesitancy.”

Hunter emphasized that it was unclear how significant this issue might be. But it’s not the first time the company has run into problems.

Partial results from its first major trial — which Britain used to authorize the vaccine — were clouded by a manufacturing mistake that researchers didn’t immediately acknowledge. Insufficient data about how well the vaccine protected older people led some countries to initially restrict its use to younger populations before reversing course. And U.S. officials suspended an AstraZeneca study for an unusual six weeks while they sought details about problems reported in Britain before deciding the vaccine wasn’t to blame.

Then last week, more than a dozen countries temporarily halted their use of the AstraZeneca shot — against the advice of international health agencies — after reports of rare blood clots in some people who

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received it. The European Medicines Agency concluded the shot did not increase the overall incidence of clots, but the unwanted attention appears to have nonetheless left a mark.

In Norway, a top official warned on Monday it might not be able to resume its use of the vaccine because so many people were rejecting it.

"People clearly say that they do not want the AstraZeneca vaccine," Marte Kvittum Tangen, who heads a Norwegian doctors' association, told broadcaster NRK.

Last week in Bucharest, Romania, vaccination coordinator Valeriu Gheorghita said 33,000 AstraZeneca immunization appointments had been canceled in 24 hours and that about a third of the 10,000 people scheduled to receive the vaccine did not show up. In Belgrade, Serbia, a sprawling exhibition center set up for people to get the AstraZeneca vaccine was mostly deserted on Monday.

"This is unfortunately more about perception than it is the science," said Dr. Bharat Pankhania, an infectious diseases specialist at Britain's University of Exeter.

"We have now seen, on several parameters, that the AstraZeneca vaccine provides protection and is safe," he said. "But the narrative for the public has not been as clear."

France is a prime example of the confusion.

French President Emmanuel Macron initially suggested the vaccine wasn't effective for older people, before backtracking. Still, France only authorized AstraZeneca's vaccine for use in adults 65 and under, citing a lack of data. Then the government changed its mind, based on new data, and said it's fine for all adults. But when there were reports of rare blood clots in some vaccine recipients, the government suspended use of the shot all together. When France restarted AstraZeneca, it for anyone under 55.

The whiplash-inducing messages come at a time when France — like much of continental Europe — is struggling to speed up its vaccination drive while also facing a spike in cases that is close to overwhelming its hospitals and prompting threats of new lockdowns.

On Monday, experts expressed hope the company could move past its troubles, when it announced that the shot was about 79% effective in stopping symptomatic COVID-19 and that there were no severe illnesses or hospitalizations among vaccinated volunteers, compared with five such cases in participants who received dummy shots.

Mene Pangalos, head of AstraZeneca's research and development in biopharmaceuticals, said the data "puts to bed any doubts."

But then in the early hours of Tuesday, the Data and Safety Monitoring Board experts from the U.S. National Institutes of Health said they were concerned by the information released.

"We urge the company to work with the DSMB to review the efficacy data and ensure the most accurate, up-to-date efficacy data be made public," according to a statement released by a branch of the NIH.

Even if the company clears up the misunderstanding, it could have a lasting impact.

Julian Tang, a virologist at the University of Leicester, pointed to the decades-old controversy over the measles vaccine as a cautionary tale.

"There was absolutely no evidence to prove the (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine caused autism," he said. But despite the retraction of the paper that made that claim, Tang said some people still worry about the vaccine.

The tepid support for the AstraZeneca vaccine in Europe stands in contrast to governments in the developing world that are desperate for supplies. Because the shot is cheaper and easier to store than those of many rivals, AstraZeneca's vaccine is expected to be used widely in the poorer countries.

Dr. Bruce Aylward, a senior adviser at the World Health Organization, said the U.N. agency has a long list of countries "very keen" to get the shot as soon as possible. "We simply cannot get enough of it," he said.

But some experts have worried that the skepticism in Europe could eventually cast a pall over the vaccine worldwide. They suggested one measure that could reassure a jittery public about the shot: a green light from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"If the U.S. regulator looks at this data and authorizes AstraZeneca, that will carry a lot of weight," said Jimmy Whitworth, a professor of international public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

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AstraZeneca said it would be submitting its data to the FDA within weeks.

It's still possible the vaccine can bury the doubts. At a vaccination center in Lisbon, 68-year-old Rui Manuel Martins dismissed the concerns, saying millions had been immunized with very few ill effects.

"There's always some cases of people rejecting any medications," he said before receiving his first dose. "It's better to be vaccinated rather than not."

Jan M. Olsen in Copenhagen, Angela Charlton in Paris, Stephen McGrath in Bucharest, Romania, Jamey Keaten in Geneva, Dusan Stojanovic in Belgrade, Serbia, Helena Alves in Lisbon, Samuel Petrequin in Brussels and Luran Neergaard in Washington contributed to this report.

Report: Extremist groups thrive on Facebook despite bans

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Technology Writer

A new outside report found that Facebook has allowed groups — many tied to QAnon, boogaloo and militia movements — to glorify violence during the 2020 election and in the weeks leading up to the deadly riots on the U.S. Capitol in January.

Avaaz, a nonprofit advocacy group that says it seeks to protect democracies from misinformation, identified 267 pages and groups on Facebook that it says spread violence-glorifying material in the heat of the 2020 election to a combined following of 32 million users.

More than two-thirds of the groups and pages had names that aligned with several domestic extremist movements, the report found. The first, boogaloo, promotes a second U.S. civil war and the breakdown of modern society. The second is the QAnon conspiracy, which claims that Donald Trump is waging a secret battle against the "deep state" and a sect of powerful Satan-worshipping pedophiles who dominate Hollywood, big business, the media and government. The rest are various anti-government militias. All have been largely banned from Facebook since 2020.

But despite what Avaaz called "clear violations" of Facebook's policies, it found that 119 of these pages and groups were still active on the platform as of March 18 and had just under 27 million followers.

Facebook acknowledged that its policy enforcement "isn't perfect," but said the report distorts its work against violent extremism and misinformation.

The company said in a statement that it has done more than any other internet company to stanch the flow of harmful material, citing its bans of "nearly 900 militarized social movements" and the removal of tens of thousands of QAnon pages, groups, and accounts. It added that it is always improving its efforts against misinformation.

On Thursday, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey and Alphabet CEO Sundar Pichai are slated to testify before Congress about extremism and misinformation on their platforms.

Facebook has tightened its rules against violence, hate and misinformation in the past year. In October, it banned QAnon groups across its platform. Before that, it would remove them only if they expressly supported violence. It has also banned extremist and militia movements and boogaloo groups with varying degrees of success.

For instance, while Facebook banned "Stop the Steal" groups from its platform, Avaaz — like The Associated Press — found that such groups and the #stopthesteal hashtag remained active on the platform after the purge.

Facebook's failures, Avaaz said, "helped sweep America down the path from election to insurrection."

According to the report, the social network provided a "fertile ground" for misinformation and toxicity that contributed to radicalizing millions of Americans, helping create the conditions in which the storming of the Capitol became a reality.

Biden to talk up health insurance cost cuts in visit to Ohio

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden will showcase health insurance cost cuts in a speech in Ohio on Tuesday during what may be the best time for Democrats to talk up the Affordable Care Act since it became law.

Biden's COVID-19 relief law pumps up "Obamacare" premium subsidies to address longstanding problems of affordability, particularly for people with solid middle-class incomes. More taxpayer assistance means, in effect, that consumers who buy their own policies through HealthCare.gov will pay hundreds of dollars less out of their own pockets.

"The ACA is over a decade old and this is literally the first time that Democrats have been successful at improving it," said analyst Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation. "Democrats have succeeded politically by selling the ACA's protections for preexisting conditions, but affordability has always been a challenge. And now Democrats have successfully improved the premium help available under the law."

Biden's speech Tuesday in Columbus, the capital of a political battleground state, is part of a mini-blitz by the White House. Newly minted Health Secretary Xavier Becerra will echo Biden's comments Tuesday in Carson City, Nevada, and join a Florida-themed Zoom event. Second gentleman Douglas Emhoff will pitch the relief bill in Omaha, Nebraska.

The numbers show that the Biden administration does have a product that consumers may want to hear about.

The COVID-19 legislation cuts premiums paid by a hypothetical 64-year-old making \$58,000 from \$1,075 a month to about \$413, based on Congressional Budget Office estimates. A 45-year-old making \$19,300 would pay zero in premiums as compared with about \$67 on average before the law. People who have even a brief spell of unemployment this year can get a standard plan for zero premium and reduced co-pays and deductibles.

New and existing customers will be able to take advantage of the savings starting April 1 by going to HealthCare.gov. States that run their own health insurance markets will offer the same enhanced assistance, although timetables for implementation may vary.

Biden has opened a special sign-up period for uninsured people to get coverage through HealthCare.gov through May 15, and the early response has been strong. By spreading the word about the higher subsidies, the White House is hoping to super-charge enrollment. But the 11 million people who already have private plans through the health law will also benefit.

Republicans see Biden's sweeter subsidies as an example of Democratic overreach on the COVID-19 bill. Policy consultant Brian Blase, a former health care adviser in the Trump White House, expects most of the additional taxpayer assistance will merely substitute for what private households would have otherwise paid.

Their complaints notwithstanding, Republicans may face a political dilemma. The higher health care subsidies are keyed to the pandemic and expire by the end of 2022. That will let Democrats set up election-year votes to make the new benefits permanent, or add even more.

The COVID-19 bill follows Biden's strategy of building on the Obama-era health law to move the U.S. toward coverage for all.

Another provision offers a dozen or so holdout states led by Republicans a financial inducement to expand Medicaid to more low-income adults. So far there have been no takers.

It's unclear how big a dent the Biden legislation will make in the number of uninsured people, which has risen to an estimated 33 million or more.

But it represents the biggest expansion of federal help for health insurance since the ACA's enactment. Obamacare not only survived President Donald Trump's repeated attempts to tear it down, it's now getting new life.

Because health insurance is so complicated, consumers are going to have to do their homework to figure out if there's something in the legislation for them. But people who qualify for higher tax credits won't lose out. If they don't claim the enhanced assistance immediately, they're still entitled to the money when they file their 2021 tax returns next year.

Tuesday marks the 11th anniversary of then-President Barack Obama signing the Affordable Care Act. Biden, who as vice president was at Obama's side at the signing ceremony, is scheduled to tour the James

Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute before his speech.

Rivals seeking to gain as Biden mulls approach to Syrian war

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

The Biden administration is mulling over America's role in Syria's ongoing conflict as the U.S. tries to break away from Middle East wars, but Vladimir Putin's top diplomat already has been busy on the ground, trying to win support for a Syria approach that could establish Russia as a broker of security and power in the region.

The new U.S. administration has yet to say how it plans to handle Syria, which is now fragmented among a half-dozen militaries — including U.S. troops — owing to a war that has killed and has displaced millions. The conflict includes al-Qaida affiliates, Islamic State forces and other jihadist groups eager to use Syria as a base.

Russia and Iran have intervened to prevent the collapse of Syrian President Bashar Assad, who has wielded chemical attacks, barrel bombs and starvation to crush what had started out as a peaceful uprising. The conflict just entered its 11th year.

Dealing with Syria's war will test the Biden administration's determination to focus on Asia and not the Middle East. If the United States diminishes its presence, Russia and other hostile U.S. rivals are poised to step in and boost their regional stature and resources.

Hence Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Middle East tour this month.

Lavrov stood by as the foreign minister of a Gulf state generally friendly to Washington, the United Arab Emirates, delivered a message in line with Moscow's position: U.S. sanctions on Syria's Russia-supported regime were blocking international efforts to rebuild Syria. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan said it is time to welcome Syria back into the fold of Arab nations.

In other words, Russia's message is "the Syria war is over, Assad has won, Assad will be in power as long as he is breathing oxygen," said Frederic Hof, who served as a U.S. Syria adviser and envoy in the Obama administration.

Hof said there was an unstated part of the message: Russia plans to be on hand as "Syria is built from the ashes," benefiting from any international reconstruction resources coming in, and positioning itself as the broker to manage the security threats that Syria poses to the region.

Hof and James F. Jeffrey, a career diplomat under Republican and Democratic administrations who served as President Donald Trump's Syria envoy, argue for the United States to remain a significant presence in the country, citing Russia's ambitions.

"If this is the security future of the Middle East, we're all in trouble," Jeffrey warns. "That's what Putin and Lavrov are pushing."

The Biden administration is reviewing whether it should consider Syria as one of America's most important national security problems.

It's shown no sign yet of doing so. Notably, where President Joe Biden has spelled out some other Middle East problems as priorities — including Yemen's war and Iran's nuclear program, for which Biden appointed envoys — he and his officials have said and done little publicly on Syria.

In Congress, Syria is at the heart of a congressional debate over whether to reduce or end the authorities given to presidents to conduct military strikes in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

It was the Syrian war that sparked that debate, when President Barack Obama first considered military strikes there, said Rep. Joaquin Castro, a Texas Democrat and member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "Congress has sidelined itself in some of the most important decisions that a country can take."

One of Biden's few public mentions of Syria since taking office came last week, when he listed it among international problems that the U.N. Security Council should do more on.

Marking the 10th anniversary of the start of the Syrian conflict last week, Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement with European counterparts emphasized the need for humanitarian aid for Syrian civilians and accountability for the Assad regime.

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U.S. troops are helping protect an opposition enclave in northeast Syria, in an area that includes oil and natural gas. During Biden's campaign last year, Blinken framed the military role as a "point of leverage" in negotiations over the international handling of Syria, rather than an ongoing force.

Spokespeople with the National Security Council and State Department declined to answer specific questions on Biden's Syria policy, including whether the administration sees the Syria conflict as a major national security threat or plans to appoint an envoy.

Biden follows Obama and Trump in seeking to minimize the United States' military role in the Middle East and shift the focus of U.S. foreign policy to Asia, where China has been increasingly aggressive.

But the Middle East's conflicts and the United States' own strategic schemes have a way of pulling Americans back. Biden last month became the sixth consecutive U.S. president to bomb a Middle East target, hitting an Iranian-allied militia in Syria that had attacked American and allied personnel in neighboring Iraq.

Some current and former U.S. diplomats for the Middle East have argued Syria is not a top security threat for the United States.

Robert S. Ford, an Obama administration ambassador to Syria with years of diplomatic experience in the region, concluded in a Foreign Affairs article last year that Washington should move toward pulling its troops out of northeast Syria, arrange for Russia and others to deal with jihadist fighters, and put the United States' money toward helping the war's refugees.

But Hof and Jeffrey, two others who dealt with Syria for past administrations, argue against withdrawal.

"If I were an ISIS leader now trying desperately to organize an insurgency to come back" in Syria, "I would pray that that advice be taken," Hof said. For the Islamic State group, "if you can have as your enemies the (Syrian) regime, the Iranians and the Russians, it doesn't get any better than that."

A test of Biden administration intentions is looming, as Russia seeks to use its U.N. Security Council position to shut down a humanitarian aid route into part of Syria not under control of the Russia-supported Syrian government, notes Mona Yacoubian, senior Syria adviser for the U.S. Institute for Peace think tank.

Maintaining or bolstering the U.S. footprint in Syria will be important, Yacoubian said — not just as leverage in political negotiations, but also to shape the rules of the game for Russia's presence in the Middle East. And other immediate goals for the international community remain: making life "more manageable and less miserable for Syrians," she said.

Israel votes: Netanyahu's fate hangs on Tuesday's elections

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israelis began voting on Tuesday in the country's fourth parliamentary election in two years — a highly charged referendum on the divisive rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Opinion polls forecast a tight race between those who support Israel's longest-serving premier and those who want "anyone but Bibi," as he is widely known.

"Vote, vote, vote, vote, vote," Netanyahu said after casting his ballot in Jerusalem, his wife, Sara, at his side. He called the occasion a "festival of democracy."

"This the moment of truth for the State of Israel," said his rival Yair Lapid as he voted in Tel Aviv.

One truth: Israelis are weary of the do-overs. The balloting, like Israel's world-leading vaccination campaign, got good reviews for organization — if only because everyone involved has had lots of practice, with the potential of even more if the results don't produce a governing majority. That answer might not be clear for weeks.

"It would be better if we didn't have to vote, you know, four times in two years," said Jerusalem resident Bruse Rosen after casting his ballot. "It's a little bit tiring."

Candidates made their final push in recent days with a series of TV interviews and public appearances at shopping malls and outdoor marketplaces. The campaigns increasingly reached into people's personal space with a constant barrage of get-out-and-vote texts that made cell phones ding and buzz at all hours.

At issue more than ideology is Netanyahu. He's portrayed himself as a global statesman uniquely qualified to lead the country through its many security and diplomatic challenges. He has made Israel's suc-

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successful coronavirus-vaccination campaign the centerpiece of his reelection bid, and pointed to last year's diplomatic agreements with four Arab states.

The reality is more nuanced. Some 80% of the nation's 9.3 million people are vaccinated and Israel is reopening, but more than 6,000 have died of COVID-19. Israel came under international criticism for failing to quickly send significant quantities of vaccines to Palestinians to fight the virus' surge in the West Bank and Gaza.

And one of the four Arab nations, the United Arab Emirates, recently poured cold water on the relationship with Israel because its leaders did not want Netanyahu to draw them into electioneering. The new administration of President Joe Biden, too, has given Netanyahu a cool reception.

Opponents accuse Netanyahu of bungling the management of the coronavirus pandemic for most of the past year. They say he failed to enforce lockdown restrictions on his ultra-Orthodox political allies, allowing the virus to spread, and point to the still-dire state of the economy and its double-digit unemployment rate. They also say Netanyahu is unfit to rule at a time when he is on trial for multiple corruption charges, a case he dismisses as a witch hunt.

Up to 15% of the electorate is expected to vote outside their home districts, a batch of absentee balloting that's larger than usual to accommodate those with coronavirus or in quarantine. The government is dispatching special polling stations, including bringing voting boxes to patients' bedsides, to provide ways for them to cast ballots safely.

Those votes are tallied separately in Jerusalem, meaning final results may not be known for days. Given the tight race, the large number of undecided voters and a number of small parties struggling to cross the 3.25% threshold for entry into parliament, it could be difficult to predict the outcome before the final count is complete.

The nearly constant campaigning has a price, said Israel's president.

"Four elections in two years erode public trust in the democratic process," Reuven Rivlin said as he cast his ballot in Jerusalem, urging Israeli's to cast theirs yet again. "There is no other way."

Israelis vote for parties, not individual candidates. No single party list of candidates has been able to form a governing majority in Israel's 72-year history.

Netanyahu's Likud party and those led by his rivals will be looking to smaller, allied parties as potential coalition partners. The party that can cobble together a majority coalition gets to form the next government — a process that is expected to take weeks.

Tuesday's election was triggered by the disintegration of an emergency government formed last May between Netanyahu and his chief rival to manage the coronavirus pandemic. The alliance was plagued by infighting, and elections were triggered by the government's failure in December to agree on a budget.

Netanyahu is hoping to form a government with his traditional religious and hard-line nationalist allies. These include a pair of ultra-Orthodox parties and a small religious party that includes openly racist and homophobic candidates.

Netanyahu's rivals have accused him of causing the past two years of paralysis in hopes of forming a more favorable government that would grant him immunity or protect him from prosecution.

His challengers include Yair Lapid, Israel's opposition leader whose Yesh Atid party has emerged as the main centrist alternative to Netanyahu.

Lapid reflected the race's stark rhetoric Tuesday when he offered himself as an alternative to a "government of darkness and racism."

Netanyahu also faces challenges from a number of onetime allies who have formed their own parties after bitter break-ups with the prime minister.

They include former protege Gideon Saar, who broke away from Likud to form "New Hope." He says the party is a nationalist alternative unburdened by corruption charges and what he says is a cult of personality that keeps Likud in power.

Yamina party leader Naftali Bennett, another former Netanyahu aide, could emerge as the kingmaker. A hard-line nationalist politician who was formerly Netanyahu's education and defense minister, Bennett

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The personality politics have so overtaken the race that there's been almost no mention of the Palestinians, after years of frozen peace talks.

Analysts expect voter fatigue to contribute to lower turnout, which had been at 71% in the most recent election a year ago.

Netanyahu's religious and nationalist allies tend to be highly motivated voters. In contrast, Arab voters, disappointed with the disintegration of the umbrella "Joint List" party, are expected to stay home in larger numbers this time. Voters in the more liberal and secular areas around Tel Aviv also tend to have lower rates of participation.

Netanyahu could benefit if these trends materialize. But unlike last year's elections, the prime minister is without one key ally: former President Donald Trump, whose support he leveraged in previous elections with massive billboards on highways and high-rises showing them together.

In contrast, Netanyahu has barely mentioned Biden. The new U.S. president called the prime minister only after reaching out to leaders of several other countries and Israel's supporters began to complain that the delay smacked of a snub. The two men insist their alliance remains close.

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

Israel votes: Netanyahu's fate hangs on Tuesday's elections

By LAURIE KELLMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israelis began voting on Tuesday in the country's fourth parliamentary election in two years — a highly charged referendum on the divisive rule of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Opinion polls forecast a tight race between those who support Israel's longest-serving premier and those who want "anyone but Bibi," as he is widely known.

"Vote, vote, vote, vote, vote," Netanyahu said after casting his ballot in Jerusalem, his wife, Sara, at his side. He called the occasion a "festival of democracy."

"This the moment of truth for the State of Israel," said his rival Yair Lapid as he voted in Tel Aviv.

One truth: Israelis are weary of the do-overs. The balloting, like Israel's world-leading vaccination campaign, got good reviews for organization — if only because everyone involved has had lots of practice, with the potential of even more if the results don't produce a governing majority. That answer might not be clear for weeks.

"It would be better if we didn't have to vote, you know, four times in two years," said Jerusalem resident Bruse Rosen after casting his ballot. "It's a little bit tiring."

Candidates made their final push in recent days with a series of TV interviews and public appearances at shopping malls and outdoor marketplaces. The campaigns increasingly reached into people's personal space with a constant barrage of get-out-and-vote texts that made cell phones ding and buzz at all hours.

At issue more than ideology is Netanyahu. He's portrayed himself as a global statesman uniquely qualified to lead the country through its many security and diplomatic challenges. He has made Israel's successful coronavirus-vaccination campaign the centerpiece of his reelection bid, and pointed to last year's diplomatic agreements with four Arab states.

The reality is more nuanced. Some 80% of the nation's 9.3 million people are vaccinated and Israel is reopening, but more than 6,000 have died of COVID-19. Israel came under international criticism for failing to quickly send significant quantities of vaccines to Palestinians to fight the virus' surge in the West Bank and Gaza.

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Tensions mount between Afghan government, powerful warlord

By RAHIM FAIEZ Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Tensions are mounting between Afghanistan's government and a powerful local warlord, with deadly clashes erupting in a rural province between his fighters and government troops. The fear is that the violence could be a harbinger of more chaos as U.S. troops head toward the exits.

The government has launched an assault in central Maidan Wardak province, vowing to punish the warlord, Abdul Ghani Alipoor, after the defense minister accused his fighters of shooting down a military helicopter last week, killing nine personnel.

It's the latest in a long history of frictions with Alipoor that are increasingly turning bloody. In January, security forces killed at least 11 civilians when they opened fire on protesters, including many Alipoor supporters, in the province's Behsud district.

Alipoor holds widespread loyalty among ethnic Hazaras, a mainly Shiite community who are a minority in Afghanistan but make up most of the population in Maidan Wardak. Alipoor is one of the many warlords backed by heavily armed militias who hold local power across Afghanistan. The government is allied with some them, but others, like Alipoor, are in frequent confrontation with Kabul, resisting its control.

These warlords are a potential wild card as Afghanistan enters a new phase after decades of war. The United States has committed to removing the last of its troops — though whether it will meet a May 1 deadline remains unclear. It is trying to push the government and the Taliban into a peace deal to ensure the country does not collapse into greater violence or an outright Taliban takeover after the U.S. pullout.

That is proving difficult enough amid continued Taliban offensives. Many fear the warlords could also lash out if they see their many, often conflicting interests being harmed in the peace process.

But if Kabul considers warlords as agents of turmoil, their supporters see them as their only protection and support in the face of a notoriously corrupt government and violent insurgents.

Many Hazaras, who face attacks by Sunni militants and discrimination by the government, see Alipoor as a hero, defending them against the Taliban and keeping local institutions running.

"The government is incompetent, so people depend on Alipoor and support him," said Mohammed Jan, whose brother was among those killed in the Jan. 29 shooting of protesters in Behsud. "Alipoor serves his people. If our government would serve the people, everyone would support it and there wouldn't be any need for an Alipoor."

The Jan. 29 protest was sparked by the appointment by Kabul of new local officials, seen in the district as a challenge to Alipoor.

Mohammad Baqir Joyenda, a local elder, said he and a group of other elders from the district went to meet the provincial police chief to try to reverse the appointments. Meanwhile, protesters had been gathering outside. After the meeting, as the elders stepped out of the building, special forces started shooting at the protesters, Joyenda said.

"We could see shooting, could hear people shouting," he said. He said he took video of a wounded man shouting for help who was then shot again by security forces, and of another wounded man run over by a military vehicle. He said security officers forced him to delete the videos off his phone.

At 10:30 that night, Joyenda learned that his son was among the dead. The 18-year-old, who had just graduated from high school, was shot from behind, Joyenda said.

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The deaths have left families reeling, even months later. Her eyes full of tears, Musouma Rahimi said her brother, Baqer, a farmer with eight children, was among the dead. One witness told her he was run over by a security vehicle after being shot.

"We don't have enough income for our own family, we can't support my brother's family," said Rahimi, who has five children and works as a bank guard in Kabul. "I don't know what will happen to them."

The shooting deepened longtime resentments between Alipoor and his supporters and Kabul. The Interior Ministry initially claimed that Alipoor's fighters opened fire from among the protesters, prompting security forces to return fire. But details of the government investigation have not been released, other than noting that all the casualties were civilians.

Authorities have said Alipoor — known among his supporters as Commander Shamsheer, "Commander Sword" in the Dari language — faces trial on a number of charges, including past clashes with security forces. Attempts to arrest him in 2018 prompted clashes that left seven civilians and four police dead as well as large protests by Hazaras in Kabul.

The two sides appear to be heading into a new confrontation after a military helicopter crashed on Wednesday in Behsud, killing all nine personnel on board.

At a press conference Saturday, the newly appointed acting Defense Minister Gen. Yasin Zia accused Alipoor's fighters of downing the helicopter with a rocket. He said the helicopter was heading there to ferry out troops wounded in earlier clashes with the warlord.

President Ashraf Ghani spoke over the phone with families of the dead military personnel and afterward vowed: "Revenge will be taken because they were attacked while defending the country."

Later Saturday, the ministry said security forces battled Alipoor's fighters in Behsud, killing at least 12 and wounding six. There was no word on government casualties. The troops also found a weapons cache and cleared away a number of checkpoints run by Alipoor's militia, it said.

Some in the government, however, are trying to prevent a greater escalation. One of Ghani's security advisers, Mohammad Mohaqiq called on the government to avoid military action and "solve the issue in a peaceful way."

Mohammed Karim Khalili, a former vice president and ally of Alipoor, warned in a social media post that operations will provoke civilians. "It will only prolong problems and social and political crises."

Australian east coast rain to ease but flooding continues

SYDNEY (AP) — Heavy rainfall was forecast to ease across Australia's east coast but floodwaters will linger for days across New South Wales state where 15,000 people were nervously waiting on Tuesday for potential orders to evacuate.

Some 18,000 residents of Australia's most populous state have fled their homes since last week, with warnings the cleanup could stretch into April.

New South Wales Premier Gladys Berejiklian on Tuesday said several weather fronts continued to effect large swaths of the state.

Some parts of the state had recorded two-thirds of their annual rainfall in less than a week.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the rain emergency was expected to ease by late Wednesday, but the "floodwaters remain persistent for some time."

"I'm advised that the rain and flood situation does remain dynamic and extremely complex," Morrison said.

Skies were forecast to clear over parts of Sydney and the coast to the north by late Tuesday.

"It is almost impossible to believe but we will see blue skies and sunshine just later this afternoon in western Sydney and on the Mid North Coast," government meteorologist Agata Imielska said.

"It is very important to remember that even though we'll have blue sky and sunshine returning, flooding will continue and the flood risk will continue," Imielska added.

Morrison said the New South Wales government had already requested 1,000 defense personnel to help clean up after the floods.

The flooding rain had extended along the New South Wales coast across the Queensland state border

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in the north and almost as far as Victoria border to the south.

EXPLAINER: Israelis vote in fourth election in 2 years

By ILAN BEN ZION Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel is holding its fourth election in two years on Tuesday, with nearly 6.6 million citizens eligible to vote for the 24th Knesset, or parliament. It is widely seen as a one-issue referendum, with the electorate almost evenly divided on whether longtime Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu should remain in power.

Here is a closer look at what to expect:

GOING FOURTH

The March 23 vote is Israel's fourth parliamentary election in two years. The national unity government formed in May 2020 by Netanyahu and his rival-turned-ally-turned-rival Benny Gantz collapsed in December after seven months of bitter infighting. The two had struck a power-sharing agreement that would have seen Gantz take over as prime minister in November 2021, but parliament automatically dissolved after the fractious government failed to pass a budget by a legally mandated deadline.

THE MAIN CONTENDERS

Netanyahu, who has been prime minister since 2009, seeks a decisive victory and promises to form a "full-on right-wing" government supported by his traditional ultra-Orthodox allies and hard-line nationalists. The long-serving leader has campaigned aggressively as Israel's vaccinator-in-chief, claiming sole credit for the country's successful efforts to vaccinate the vast majority of the adult population against the coronavirus.

Against him stands a loose coalition of opposition parties and disgruntled former lieutenants who seek to oust him. Yair Lapid, leader of the opposition in the Knesset, is projected to head the largest of those parties, and has cast himself in the final week of the election campaign as Netanyahu's main challenger. But his potential coalition partners in the anti-Netanyahu camp come from hawkish and dovish sides of the political spectrum, and only share disdain for the prime minister. Uniting them in a government may prove impossible.

FITNESS TO RULE

Netanyahu has refused to step down while on trial for fraud, breach of trust and bribery charges. He was indicted in late 2019 and proceedings began shortly after he swore in his unity government last May. He has denied wrongdoing and says he's the victim of a witch hunt by police, prosecutors and the media.

Demonstrators have staged weekly protests outside his residence in Jerusalem, calling on him to resign, for the past nine months. While voters may be weighing other issues — such as the economy, the conflict with the Palestinians, religion and state, relations with the U.S. and Diaspora Jewry — this election more than anything is a referendum on Netanyahu's fitness to rule and management of the past year of the pandemic.

OPEN FIELD

All 120 seats in the Knesset, Israel's parliament, are at stake. Thirty-eight parties are in the running, but only a handful are expected to break the threshold of 3.25% of the vote needed to win the minimum four seats in parliament. These parties include electoral shoo-ins Likud, Lapid's Yesh Atid, and New Hope, a party founded by a former Netanyahu confidant who shares his hard-line ideology but despises his autocratic style of rule. There are also the midsize stalwarts such as the ultra-Orthodox Shas and United Torah Judaism parties, the Joint List of Arab parties, a constellation of smaller parties, and an assortment of minuscule and often eccentric factions that have little chance of getting in.

TURNOUT AND FATIGUE

Compared to the United States, Israel often has a relatively high voter turnout. Election day is a national holiday, a measure aimed at getting people to participate.

Turnout in the past three elections has crept up from 67.9% in April 2019 to 71% in March 2020. But voter fatigue in this fourth election cycle is high, and many voters are reported to still be undecided in

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the days before polls open.

ROUND FIVE?

No Israeli party has ever won an outright majority in parliament, which forces larger parties to cobble together ruling coalitions with smaller allies.

Reaching a final tally is expected to take longer than usual — perhaps up to a week — because of the extraordinary number of absentee ballots and the beginning of the Passover holiday next Sunday, normally a work day. Unlike previous elections, people sick with coronavirus or in quarantine will be casting “double envelope” ballots along with Israeli diplomats overseas, soldiers and prisoners. Those take longer to count because they’re sent to Jerusalem for tallying.

After the election, Israel’s president will meet with party heads and select the party he deems most capable of forming a coalition. That party, which is usually but not always the largest faction, then has four weeks to form a coalition. A new government will be given a four-year term, but disagreements between coalition parties often result in early elections.

Polls published in the run-up to Tuesday’s vote indicate the pro-Netanyahu and anti-Netanyahu blocs running neck and neck, albeit without a clear majority. The hard-line nationalist Yemina party has not vowed to join either camp, and its alliance with either side could prove decisive.

But if neither side manages to form a coalition, the country’s two-year-long political crisis could drag out into a fifth election.

Follow Ilan Ben Zion on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/IlanBenZion>

One Good Thing: An artist preserves Wuhan’s COVID memories

By EMILY WANG FUJIYAMA Associated Press

WUHAN, China (AP) — Scribbled instructions for incoming patients plastered on the window of a silent hospital reception counter. A lone worker in a hazmat suit, steadily spraying disinfectant in an empty hospital hallway.

Such scenes from the height of the coronavirus pandemic in Wuhan — moments of fear and desperation as well as unity and resilience — are etched in the mind of artist Yang Qian.

One year on, she is channeling those memories into artwork to preserve the memory of the central Chinese city’s 76-day lockdown that upturned the lives of some 11 million people. In a way, that’s an extension of her work as a volunteer delivering vital supplies to hospitals and residents during the traumatic period, while also reflecting the pride many residents take in having weathered the outbreak and draconian measures taken to bring it under control.

“To express what I’ve seen in a realistic way, this is the responsibility I’ve given myself. I also hope that much of the history should not be forgotten,” Yang said.

A painter by trade, she felt helpless in the face of an unknown virus ravaging her beloved hometown in January 2020. Fear gripped the city as authorities abruptly shut its residents in their homes and froze transport links on Jan. 23.

Two days later, she began volunteering with a group delivering protective clothing, masks and other supplies around hospitals. Over the course of 4 months, she and a fellow volunteer delivered some 90,000 sets of protective clothing and around 450,000 face masks.

As she made her rounds, she took on requests from residents and strangers, delivering much needed supplies from medicine and disinfectant to food. Sleep was at a premium as deliveries at times ran into the early morning hours.

Her first post-pandemic artwork, “Reception,” grew out of the experience of accompanying a mother and daughter to a hospital in early February. The two had developed COVID-19 symptoms after the father died at home from the disease and, desperate, took to social media for help.

Yang saw the post and found a hospital willing to accept the pair, but was told that no ambulances were available.

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With public transportation closed, the only solution was to bicycle to the hospital, with Yang leading the way.

At the reception desk, she saw instructions for new patients haphazardly taped on its window, some scribbled by hand. Stretched to their limit, hospital staff would point to the window instead of answering questions.

"It made me feel a kind of oppression, a kind of fear," Yang said. "Everyone, especially the doctors, are spending time only to rescue patients."

She meticulously reproduced the scene in an oil painting, right down to its torn papers and scribbled notices.

A second oil painting followed based on a photograph of a worker disinfecting a hospital hallway, rendered in shadowy hues of deep blue and black.

"It is in such a severe situation (but) even in this atmosphere, there are still people who stand up for us and protect us," Yang said.

Soon after sending the mother-daughter pair to hospital, Yang came down with a fever and cough and feared she had the virus. In tears, she went to a hospital to get tested and began writing her will. After what she calls the longest hour of her life waiting for the results, she was given the all-clear.

One year on, Wuhan has largely returned to normal, its streets bustling with shoppers, its nightclubs throbbing until dawn and pensioners dancing to a Chinese rendition of a Katy Perry song along the neon-lit Yangtze River. Only the face masks that residents dutifully wear provide a visual reminder of the pandemic's impact.

"What I see is the unity of our city, our nation. I find that I am really very proud of being a Chinese" Yang said, expressing a widely held sentiment that has been strongly encouraged by the government, which some have accused of mishandling the initial stage of the outbreak and allowing it to spread around the world.

An exhibition she organized last year at a gallery she runs brought together 23 artists with 60 pieces of artwork related to the coronavirus.

Her efforts have won plaudits from Wuhan media and residents. The exhibition "crystallized every touching moment of the pandemic," said entrepreneur and friend Michael Liu.

"Unifying art and thoughts, and taking action, is something that many of us cannot do," he said.

Yang is currently working on a wall-size aerial view of Wuhan under lockdown, with individual residents represented by black ink dots. It's an expression of their unity in pulling through the crisis, as well as unseen pain.

She senses that pain still in speaking with residents and survivors who have become depressed or re-treated from social life.

"Some people are slowly trying to recover, just to come out of this shadow. Then there are some who can't get out, because this virus and disaster really took away those closest to them," Yang said.

For now, she is focused on making up for the pandemic's lost time, working on her painting, managing her gallery and preparing for upcoming exhibits. The pandemic, she said, is a reminder of how precious that time can be: "Life is really very fragile and small."

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

"One Good Thing" is a series that highlights individuals whose actions provide glimmers of joy in hard times — stories of people who find a way to make a difference, no matter how small. Read the collection of stories at <https://apnews.com/hub/one-good-thing>

Colorado marks latest mass tragedy after 10 killed

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By PATTY NIEBERG and THOMAS PEIPERT Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — A shooting at a crowded Colorado supermarket that killed 10 people, including the first police officer to arrive, sent terrorized shoppers and workers scrambling for safety and stunned a state that has grieved several mass killings. A lone suspect was in custody, authorities said.

Hundreds of police officers from throughout the Denver metropolitan area responded to the Monday afternoon attack, converging on a King Soopers supermarket in a busy shopping plaza in southern Boulder. SWAT officers carrying ballistic shields slowly approached the store as others quickly escorted frightened people away from the building, some of its windows shattered. Customers and employees fled through a back loading dock to safety. Others took refuge in nearby shops.

One suspect was in custody, a tearful Boulder Police Chief Maris Herold said late Monday. Authorities didn't identify the suspect, though Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty said the suspect was the only person injured and was receiving medical care.

Officers had escorted a shirtless man in handcuffs, blood running down his leg, from the store during the siege. Authorities would not say if he was the suspect. Foothills Hospital in Boulder was treating one person from the shooting scene but refused further comment, said Rich Sheehan, spokesman for Boulder Community Health, which operates the hospital.

"This is a tragedy and a nightmare for Boulder County," Dougherty said. "These were people going about their day, doing their shopping. I promise the victims and the people of the state of Colorado that we will secure justice."

Herold identified the slain officer as Eric Talley, 51, who had been with Boulder police since 2010. He was the first to arrive after responding to a call about shots fired and someone carrying a rifle, she said.

"He was by all accounts one of the outstanding officers of the Boulder Police Department, and his life was cut too short," Dougherty said.

Dozens of police and emergency vehicles, their lights flashing, escorted an ambulance carrying the officer from the shooting scene after nightfall. Some residents stood along the route, their arms raised in salute.

Identities of the other nine victims were not disclosed as police were still notifying their family members.

Dougherty said it was too early to speculate on a motive and that the investigation involving local, state and federal agencies would take days.

The attack in Boulder, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) northwest of Denver and home to the University of Colorado, stunned a state that has seen several mass shootings, including the 1999 Columbine High School massacre and the 2012 Aurora movie theater shooting.

Monday's midafternoon attack was the seventh mass killing this year in the U.S., following the March 16 shooting that left eight people dead at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, according to a database compiled by The Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University.

It follows a lull in mass killings during the pandemic in 2020, which had the smallest number of such attacks in more than a decade, according to the database, which tracks mass killings defined as four or more dead, not including the shooter.

Dean Schiller said he had just left the supermarket when he heard gunshots. He saw three people lying face down — one in a doorway and two in the parking lot. Schiller said he couldn't tell if they were breathing.

Sarah Moonshadow and her son, Nicolas Edwards, had just bought strawberries when they heard gunfire. Moonshadow told The Denver Post they ducked and "just ran." Outside, Edwards said, arriving police pulled up next to a body in the parking lot.

"I knew we couldn't do anything for the guy," he said. "We had to go."

Video posted on YouTube showed one person on the floor inside the store and two more outside on the ground. What sounds like two gunshots are heard at the beginning of the video.

Investigators had just started sorting through the crime scene and conducting witness interviews, Dougherty said. Matthew Kirsch, the acting U.S. attorney for Colorado, pledged that "the full weight of federal law enforcement" will support the investigation. He said investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were at the crime scene, along with FBI agents.

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White House press secretary Jen Psaki tweeted that President Joe Biden had been briefed on the shooting. Gov. Jared Polis, meanwhile, said in a statement that "Today we saw the face of evil. I am grieving with my community and all Coloradans." The King Soopers chain said in a statement that it was offering prayers and support "to our associates, customers, and the first responders who so bravely responded to this tragic situation."

Associated Press writers Colleen Slevin and Jim Anderson in Denver contributed. Nieberg is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Miami's South Beach confronts disastrous spring break

By KELLI KENNEDY and CODY JACKSON Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) — Florida's famed South Beach is desperately seeking a new image.

With more than 1,000 arrests and nearly 100 gun seizures already during this year's spring break season, officials are thinking it may finally be time to cleanse the hip neighborhood of its law-breaking, party-all-night vibe.

The move comes after years of increasingly stringent measures — banning alcohol from beaches, canceling concerts and food festivals — have failed to stop the city from being overrun with out-of-control parties and anything-goes antics.

This weekend alone, spring breakers and pandemic-weary tourists drawn by Florida's loose virus-control rules gathered by the thousands along famed Ocean Drive, at times breaking into street fights, destroying restaurant property and causing several dangerous stampedes. The situation got so out of hand that Miami Beach Police brought in SWAT teams to disperse pepper bullets and called in law enforcement officers from at least four other agencies. Ultimately, the city decided to order an emergency 8 p.m. curfew that will likely extend well into April after the spring break season is over.

"We definitely want people to come and have fun," Miami Beach Commissioner Ricky Arriola said Monday. "It's a nightlife city. We want people of all races, genders, sexual orientation. But we can't tolerate people thinking they can come here and act out a scene from 'Fast and the Furious,' speeding down the streets and shooting guns in the air."

Some tourists are angry about the curfew, which they say has put a damper on long-sought vacations for which they paid good money. Meanwhile, some officials say they should have enacted more stringent measures sooner — as was done in New Orleans prior to Mardi Gras last month — instead of reacting in the middle of the chaos.

But Arriola and other commissioners argued the city may need an entirely different approach.

They note that over the past few seasons, the city has been steadily upping the ante with new rules and regulations, such as banning scooter rentals after 7 p.m. restricting alcohol sales after 8 p.m. and cracking down on loud music — to no avail.

"Every year we come up with new restrictions and they have no impact, so at what point are we going to try something new?" asked Arriola, who suggested hosting more family-oriented and business-friendly events.

The pandemic provided the perfect storm for large crowds: an unseasonably cold winter, pent-up demand from being quarantined at home and the lure of a sunny climate with miles of sandy beaches in a state with few COVID-19 restrictions.

New Orleans, which attracts thousand of tourists every year for Mardi Gras, successfully avoided the mayhem that erupted in Miami. Gov. John Bel Edwards, a Democrat, had already put a statewide mask mandate in place as well as occupancy limits on bars, restaurants and other businesses.

New Orleans Democratic Mayor LaToya Cantrell, also a Democrat, went even further by closing bars completely in the city, even those allowed to operate as restaurants. City officials also closed iconic Bour-

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bon Street to cars and limited pedestrian access for the final weekend of the season.

Despite strong opposition from Republicans and business leaders, Edwards and Cantrell were determined not to repeat Mardi Gras 2020, which state officials later said contributed to New Orleans being an early Southern hot spot in the coronavirus pandemic.

"If people think they're going to come to Louisiana, anywhere ... and engage in the kind of activities they would have pre-pandemic, then they are mistaken and, quite frankly, they are not welcome here to do that," Edwards said in a news conference ahead of Mardi Gras.

Miami Beach took less proactive measures under Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, who has refused to implement a mask-wearing rule and has insisted on letting businesses stay open. Instead, city officials this year sent text messages that warned tourists to "Vacation Responsibly or Be Arrested" and spelled out a lengthy list of rules. The city also canceled all concerts and food festivals, trying to avoid large crowds, but that only left the throngs of people who showed up anyway to congregate aimlessly in impromptu street parties.

Some visitors were frustrated by the mixed messages after being lured to the state by a \$5 million national tourism advertising campaign, the largest in 20 years.

Reg Mac, a paralegal from Orlando, spent \$800 on his trip to Miami, which he said was a bust thanks to the 8 p.m. curfew. He'd been looking forward to letting loose — and had even set aside special outfits for the after-hours scene.

"I was expecting to go out to enjoy the nightlife," said Mac, who instead returned to his hotel room to sleep. "The food was horrible and the service sucked."

Added Deaja Atwaters, who traveled from Harker Heights, Texas: "It's unfortunate that you can't do everything that we want to do, that we plan to do, but we're going to make the best of it."

Miami Beach officials said the crowd of partiers consisted mostly of adults from out of state, not college students. They said many of them didn't even patronize restaurants and local businesses.

"Not all people that visit Miami beach are bad and come to Miami Beach with the intent of breaking the law and disrupting our quality of life, but this is a different situation and it calls for drastic measures," said interim City Manager Raul Aguila, who enacted the emergency curfew.

This story has been corrected to show that New Orleans officials, not Edwards, closed Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras.

Kennedy reported from Fort Lauderdale. Associated Press writers Kevin McGill in New Orleans and Anila Yoganathan in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Police: 10 people killed in Colorado supermarket shooting

By PATTY NIEBERG, JAMES ANDERSON and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

BOULDER, Colo. (AP) — A shooting at a Colorado supermarket killed 10 people Monday, including a police officer who was the first to respond to the scene, authorities said.

Police arrested a suspect, but didn't reveal his name or any details about the shooting at an evening news conference where Boulder police Chief Maris Herold fought back tears.

Investigators had just begun sorting through evidence and witness interviews and didn't have details on a motive for the shooting at the King Soopers store in Boulder, which is about 25 miles (40 kilometers) northwest of Denver and home to the University of Colorado, said Boulder County District Attorney Michael Dougherty.

"This is a tragedy and a nightmare for Boulder County," Dougherty said. "These were people going about their day, doing their shopping. I promise the victims and the people of the state of Colorado that we will secure justice."

The attack was the seventh mass killing this year in the U.S., following the March 16 shooting that left eight people dead at three Atlanta-area massage businesses, according to a database compiled by The

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Associated Press, USA Today and Northeastern University.

It follows a lull in mass killings during the pandemic in 2020, which had the smallest number of such attacks in more than a decade, according to the database, which tracks mass killings defined as four or more dead, not including the shooter.

The slain officer was identified as Eric Talley, 51, who had been with Boulder police since 2010, Herold said. He went to the store after a call about shots fired and someone carrying a rifle, she said.

"He was by all accounts one of the outstanding officers of the Boulder Police Department, and his life was cut too short," Dougherty said of Talley.

Identities of the other nine victims were not disclosed Monday night as police were still notifying their family members.

Matthew Kirsch, the acting U.S. attorney for Colorado, pledged that "the full weight of federal law enforcement" will support the investigation. He said investigators from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives were at the crime scene, along with FBI agents.

Officers had escorted a shirtless man with blood running down his leg out of the store in handcuffs but authorities would not say if he was the suspect. They did say the suspect was receiving medical care and was the only person injured who did not die.

Officials have not said whether the suspect is the person who was taken from the shooting scene to Foothills Hospital in Boulder. The hospital will not release any further information on the patient, said Rich Sheehan, spokesman for Boulder Community Health, which operates the hospital.

Dean Schiller told The Associated Press that he had just left the supermarket when he heard gunshots and saw three people lying face down, two in the parking lot and one near the doorway. He said he "couldn't tell if they were breathing."

Video posted on YouTube showed one person on the floor inside the store and two more outside on the ground. What sounds like two gunshots are also heard at the beginning of the video.

Law enforcement vehicles and officers massed outside the store, including SWAT teams, and at least three helicopters landed on the roof. Some windows at the front of the store were broken.

At one point, authorities said over a loudspeaker that the building was surrounded and that "you need to surrender."

Sarah Moonshadow told the Denver Post that two shots rang out just after she and her son, Nicolas Edwards, finished buying strawberries. She said she told her son to get down and then "we just ran."

Once they got outside, she said they saw a body in the parking lot. Edwards said police were speeding into the lot and pulled up next to the body.

"I knew we couldn't do anything for the guy," he said. "We had to go."

James Bentz told the Post that he was in the meat section when he heard what he thought was a misfire, then a series of pops.

"I was then at the front of a stampede," he said.

Bentz said he jumped off a loading dock out back to escape and that younger people were helping older people off of it.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis tweeted a statement that his "heart is breaking as we watch this unspeakable event unfold in our Boulder community."

Police had told people to shelter in place amid a report of an "armed, dangerous individual" about 3 miles (5 kilometers) away from the grocery store but said at the news conference later that it wasn't related to the shooting.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki tweeted that President Joe Biden had been briefed on the shooting.

In a statement, the King Soopers chain offered "thoughts, prayers and support to our associates, customers, and the first responders who so bravely responded to this tragic situation. We will continue to cooperate with local law enforcement and our store will remain closed during the police investigation."

Kevin Daly, owner of Under the Sun Eatery and Pizzeria Restaurant a block or so from the supermarket, said he was in his shop when he saw police cars arriving and shoppers running from the grocery store. He said he took in several people to keep them warm, and others boarded a bus provided by Boulder

police and were taken away.

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

Photos of migrant detention highlight Biden's border secrecy

By NOMAAN MERCHANT, JONATHAN LEMIRE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration has tried for weeks to keep the public from seeing images like those released Monday of immigrant children in U.S. custody at the border sleeping on mats under foil blankets, separated in groups by plastic partitions.

Administration officials have steadfastly refused to call the detention of more than 15,000 children in U.S. custody, or the conditions they're living under, a crisis. But they have stymied most efforts by outsiders to decide for themselves.

Officials barred nonprofit lawyers who conduct oversight from entering a Border Patrol tent where thousands of children and teenagers are detained. And federal agencies have refused or ignored dozens of requests from the media for access to detention sites. Such access was granted several times by the administration of President Donald Trump, whose restrictive immigration approach Biden vowed to reverse.

The new president faces growing criticism for the apparent secrecy at the border, including from fellow Democrats.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said Monday "the administration has a commitment to transparency to make sure that the news media gets the chance to report on every aspect of what's happening at the border."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki added that the White House was working with homeland security officials and the Health and Human Services Department to "finalize details" and that she hoped to have an update in the "coming days."

Axios on Monday first published a series of photos taken inside the largest Border Patrol detention center, a sprawling tent facility in the South Texas city of Donna. The photos were released by Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat from the border city of Laredo.

Cuellar said he released the photos in part because the administration has refused media access to the Donna tent. He said he also wanted to draw attention to the extreme challenges that border agents face in watching so many children, sometimes for a week or longer despite the Border Patrol's three-day limit on detaining minors.

"We ought to take care of those kids like they're our own kids," Cuellar said.

Thomas Saenz, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said the U.S. should allow media access to border facilities while respecting the privacy of immigrants detained inside. He noted the risk of sharing without permission images of children who have already faced trauma.

"We ought to be aware of these conditions," Saenz said. "People have to see them so that they can assess the inhumanity and hopefully embark on more humane policies."

The White House has prided itself on its methodical rollout of policy during its first 50-plus days but West Wing aides privately acknowledge they were caught off guard by the surge of migrants at the border and the resulting media furor.

Republican lawmakers largely sat out the debate over administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill. While none of them voted for the package, their opposition was muted and they instead focused on culture war issues, like the debate over racial stereotypes in some Dr. Seuss books, rather than a bill that was broadly popular with GOP voters.

But the GOP has grabbed on to the border situation with both hands, reviving the issue that was key to propelling Trump to the top of the Republican field in 2016. In 2018, the Trump administration detained hundreds of children in many of the same facilities being used now after separating them from their parents. The following year, hundreds of families and children detained at one West Texas border station

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went days without adequate food, water or soap.

Biden has kept in place a Trump-era public health order and expelled thousands of immigrant adults and families, but he declined to expel immigrant children without a parent after a federal appeals court in January cleared the way for him to do so. He also moved to speed up the reunification of hundreds of separated immigrant families.

"What Trump did was horrible," Cuellar said. "These pictures show you that even under our best intentions, and the Biden administration has the best intentions, it's still very difficult."

Cuellar said the White House needs to work more with Mexico and Central America to prevent people from leaving their home countries. The White House said Monday that key officials would go this week to Mexico and Guatemala.

Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat who visited a facility in El Paso, Texas, last week, told NPR, "We want to make sure that the press has access to hold the administration accountable."

The Associated Press has requested access to border facilities for more than a month. Reporters first asked Health and Human Services on Feb. 4 to allow entry into a surge facility re-opened at Carrizo Springs, Texas, holding hundreds of teenagers. And they have asked Homeland Security officials for access at least seven times to Border Patrol facilities, with no response. The AP has also petitioned Psaki to open border facilities.

Border agencies under Trump allowed limited media tours of both Homeland Security and Health and Human Services facilities. Several of those visits revealed troubling conditions inside, including the detention of large numbers of children as young as 5 separated from their parents.

Under Biden, the agencies also have denied full access to nonprofit lawyers who conduct oversight of facilities where children are detained. Those oversight visits occur under a federal court settlement.

When lawyers this month visited the Border Patrol facility at Donna, where thousands of children are now detained, agents refused to let them inside and the Justice Department said they were not entitled to gain access. The lawyers were forced to interview children outside. The Justice Department declined to comment.

The newly published photos released by Cuellar's office show groups of children crowded together inside the partitions. Some appear to be watching television while others are lying on floor mats, some side by side. Children are shown wearing surgical masks but are close to each other.

The Donna facility consists of large interconnected tents. Overhead photos taken by AP show enclosed outdoor areas where children can go. But lawyers who have interviewed children detained at Donna say some can go days without being allowed outside.

The administration is rushing to open more space to get roughly 5,000 children out of Border Patrol detention and into Health and Human Services facilities that are better suited for youth. It has also tried to expedite the releases of children in HHS custody to parents and other sponsors in the U.S. But border agents continue to apprehend far more children daily than HHS is releasing, even though more than 40% of youths in the system have a parent or legal guardian who could take them.

Meanwhile, the administration is seeing its emergency facilities for immigrant children approach capacity almost as quickly as it can open them. The downtown Dallas convention center has 1,500 teenagers less than a week after opening and is expected to take in 500 more teens Monday, according to HHS. Its current capacity is 2,300 people.

Lemire reported from New York and Merchant from Houston.

Biden eyes \$3T package for infrastructure, schools, families

By LISA MASCARO and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fresh off passage of the COVID-19 relief bill, President Joe Biden is assembling the next big White House priority, a sweeping \$3 trillion package of investments on infrastructure and domestic needs.

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Biden huddled privately late Monday with Senate Democrats as Congress has already begun laying the groundwork with legislation for developing roads, hospitals and green energy systems as part of Biden's "Build Back Better" campaign promise. Much like the \$1.9 trillion virus rescue plan signed into law earlier this month, the new package would also include family-friendly policies, this time focusing on education and paid family leave.

The White House plans are still preliminary, with a combined \$3 trillion in spending proposed to boost the economy and improve quality of life, according to a person familiar with the options who insisted on anonymity to discuss private conversations.

While the goal is a bipartisan package, Democrats in Congress have signaled a willingness to go it alone if they are blocked by Republicans.

"We need to get it done," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., ahead of the virtual meeting with Biden at the senators' annual retreat Monday evening.

Biden's outreach to Senate Democrats comes as the White House is under fire for its handling of the U.S.-Mexico border. Migrant crossings are skyrocketing, with images of cramped holding facilities posing a humanitarian and political dilemma for the administration and its allies in Congress. The focus on infrastructure shifts attention back toward priorities that are potentially more popular with Americans and potentially bipartisan.

An infrastructure package would include roughly \$1 trillion for roads, bridges, rail lines, electrical vehicle charging stations and the cellular network, among other items. The goal would be to facilitate the shift to cleaner energy while improving economic competitiveness.

A second component would include investments in workers with free community college, universal pre-kindergarten and paid family leave.

No part of the proposal has been finalized and the eventual details of any spending could change.

The overall price tag first reported Monday by The New York Times has been circulating on Capitol Hill for weeks, since the start of the Biden presidency. With the House and Senate under Democratic control, the proposals are expected to draw support from all corners of Congress.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asked Democratic committee chairmen earlier this month to start working with their Republican counterparts to begin "to craft a big, bold and transformational infrastructure package."

Pelosi said the goal is to build swiftly on the coronavirus rescue plan by developing an economic relief plan to help "people in every zip code by creating good-paying jobs for the future."

The administration is positioning its priorities at a politically and fiscally sensitive time, after funding its \$1.9 trillion relief package entirely with debt. The Federal Reserve estimates that spending could push growth this year to 6.5%, and additional spending would only add pressure to an economy already expected to run hot.

Biden's campaign proposed higher corporate taxes and increases on people making more than \$400,000 annually, effectively undoing much of the 2017 tax cuts by his predecessor, Donald Trump.

A White House official said the president has been very clear about his agenda, even though the details are only just starting to surface. The official insisted on anonymity to discuss private conversations.

On Monday, the House Energy and Commerce Committee debated a \$300 billion-plus measure to invest in drinking water, broadband and other priorities. On Thursday, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is set to appear before the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Next week, the Senate Finance Committee is scheduled to release a white paper revisiting the overseas tax code as a way to pay for some of the spending.

Republican leader Mitch McConnell used his opening remarks Monday in the Senate to trash the infrastructure proposal, warning it would only lead to tax hikes and what he called "left-wing policies."

"We're hearing the next few months might bring a so-called infrastructure proposal that may actually be a Trojan horse for massive tax hikes and other job-killing, left-wing policies," he said.

He derided the Democratic proposals as similar to the Green New Deal, a sweeping plan to address climate change that he said would cost "unbelievable sums."

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Biden is expected to roll out his budget in the weeks ahead as Congress presses forward on the infrastructure package, which lawmakers have said could be ready by summer.

Big Ten comeback: Michigan topples LSU 86-78

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — What the Big Ten needed was someone, anyone, to start playing like it came from the Big Ten.

Thanks to Michigan, the conference is still part of March Madness.

Longer, taller and deeper than LSU, the top-seeded Wolverines slowly wore down the Tigers. They got 21 points each from Eli Brooks and Chaundee Brown Jr., in a roller-coaster 86-78 victory that salvaged some hope for the hurting conference at the NCAA Tournament.

By the time coach Juwan Howard and Co. had returned to the hotel after their second-round game, Maryland had lost to Alabama, leaving the Wolverines as the only ones remaining of the nation-leading nine Big Ten teams who came to Indy.

And though they can't undo what's happened to the rest of the conference, that Big Ten seasoning came in handy in this one — a game Michigan (22-4) trailed in by nine early and had to fight to stay in range.

"That's the test of the Big Ten, honestly," Brooks said. "We get tested every night."

In a game full of big runs, the Wolverines used the biggest -- 14-1 over the decisive stretch midway through the second half -- to pull away and save face for a conference that has otherwise tanked these four days in Indianapolis.

The Wolverines moved on to their fourth straight Sweet 16, where they'll play No. 4 Florida State next weekend. They'll represent the only chance left for a conference that has lost everyone, from No. 1 seed (Illinois), to No. 2 Ohio State, all the way down to 11th-seeded Michigan State, a perennial power that went out in the play-in round.

"I mean, it's March Madness for a reason," Brooks said. "You're going to get the best shot from everyone. I still think the Big Ten is a really good conference. We just had some losses."

After the Wolverines took a one-point lead into halftime, this game had massive momentum swings: an 8-0 run early for LSU; a 10-0 streak for Michigan; another 5-0 run for the Tigers.

But during the 14-1 stretch that opened things up, Michigan did what typical Big Ten teams are supposed to do. Even without injured guard Isaiah Livers, they were able to wear down a smaller, less-deep opponent with height and shooting.

Most-telling stat of the night was points off the bench: Michigan 26, LSU 2.

"They're a tremendous, tremendous team," LSU coach Will Wade said. "Coach Howard and their staff, their offensive execution, the way they moved, the way they guard, they're a very, very good team. They're going to be an extremely tough out for anybody."

Brown, the 6-foot-5 guard, did the most-lasting damage, making six free throws and a 3-pointer during the decisive stretch that gave the Wolverines a 72-64 lead with 5:55 left.

Then it was 7-1 freshman Hunter Dickenson (12 points, 11 rebounds) and 6-9 projected first-round NBA pick Franz Wagner (15 and seven) who shut down LSU with defense.

LSU's Cameron Thomas went from lighting up Michigan to barely being able to get a shot off. He finished with 30 points but it took 23 shots, and he went 3 for 10 in the second half.

One of the misses came on a rejection underneath by Dickenson, and moments later, Javonte Smart suffered the same fate. His 27 points kept LSU in range in the second half, but Wagner altered his shot underneath at the end of that stretch.

The Tigers (19-10) finished shooting 39 percent from the floor, and didn't have many answers on the other end. Michigan shot 53 percent and made 10 of 25 3-pointers.

Though the Tigers lost, the bulk of this game must have induced some head-scratching by bracket watchers across the country.

Nobody with eyes and a cable sports package could have thought Loyola Chicago, which beat the Illini

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by 13 on Sunday, was an 8 seed. LSU clearly had better than eighth-seeded talent, too.

But Michigan looked like a legit 1, especially once Howard started slamming the table, pulling down his mask and begging for a defensive effort that went lacking, especially in the opening minutes. Thomas got into heat-check territory with 12 points over the first 8 minutes, and not a single of them coming from inside of 15 feet.

Once the Wolverines started defending the perimeter, things changed. They started looking like a Big Ten team again. And the Big Ten's hopes looked much better than they had a few hours earlier.

"The motto today was... 'Empty the tank. Empty the tank.' And our guys did that," Howard said. "Now, unfortunately, for the teams that didn't advance, they had earned the right to be here, play in this tournament. But all we do is look at what we can control."

INJURY UPDATE

Livers is out with a stress fracture in his foot, and Howard was direct when asked what his status might be for next weekend: "Out indefinitely."

SWEET STREAK

With four straight Sweet 16 appearances, the Wolverines have the second-longest active streak, behind Gonzaga with six.

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

Germany extends virus lockdown till mid-April as cases rise

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany has extended its lockdown measures by another month and imposed several new restrictions, including largely shutting down public life over Easter, in an effort to drive down the rate of coronavirus infections.

Speaking early Tuesday after a lengthy video call with the country's 16 state governors, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that restrictions previously set to run through March 28 will now remain in place until April 18.

Coronavirus infections have increased steadily in Germany as the more contagious variant first detected in Britain has become dominant, and the country's daily number of cases per capita has passed that of the United States.

"We basically have a new pandemic," Merkel told reporters in Berlin.

"Essentially we have a new virus, obviously of the same type but with completely different characteristics," she added. "Significantly more deadly, significantly more infectious (and) infectious for longer."

Since their last meeting three weeks ago, which saw the two sides agree a multi-step plan to relax restrictions, several states have tried to avoid going back into tougher lockdowns when the weekly number of new infections exceeds 100 per 100,000 residents on three consecutive days.

Merkel made clear that she wouldn't accept that.

"Unfortunately, we will have to make use of this emergency brake," she said.

The weekly infection rate per 100,000 people stood at 107 nationwide on Monday, up from the mid-60s three weeks ago.

Officials agreed to largely shut down public life from April 1-3, adding a public holiday and shutting down most stores for the period. Public gatherings will be banned from April 1-5, to encourage people to stay at home.

Amid concern over the rise in Germans traveling abroad on holidays, authorities also agreed on a blanket requirement for air travelers to be tested for COVID-19 before boarding a flight to Germany.

Drawing up legally watertight rules has proved a headache at times. A court in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, said Monday it struck down rules requiring people to get appointments to visit shops. It said they violated a requirement that businesses get equal treatment.

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The state government promptly reinstated the rules, tightening them for some businesses — such as bookshops and garden centers — that were previously exempt.

According to Tuesday's agreement, authorities will aim to offer free tests to all students and teachers in German schools, many of which have only recently reopened after months of remote teaching.

Merkel said Germany, which had comparatively low deaths during the first phase of the pandemic last spring, has seen "successes but also of setbacks" and insisted that the situation would improve as more people get vaccinated.

Germany's vaccination campaign has so far lagged behind expectations, with only about 9% of the population receiving at least a first shot and 4% receiving both doses by Sunday.

"It's difficult for longer than we thought," said Merkel. "But there's definitely light visible at the end of the tunnel."

Asked about the EU's plans to restrict the export of vaccines and components, Merkel said she supported efforts by the bloc's executive Commission to ensure contracts are fulfilled, citing the supply problems the EU has had with the AstraZeneca shot.

Britain, which left the EU last year, has strongly protested against the plans, fearing it could get cut off from deliveries.

Merkel said she and French President Emmanuel Macron had each spoken to Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson about the issue in recent days and EU leaders would aim to reach a decision "in a responsible way" at a virtual summit Thursday.

AP journalist Geir Moulson contributed to this report.

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Republican leader Mitch McConnell used his opening remarks Monday in the Senate to trash the infrastructure proposal, warning it would only lead to tax hikes and what he called "left-wing policies."

"We're hearing the next few months might bring a so-called infrastructure proposal that may actually be a Trojan horse for massive tax hikes and other job-killing, left-wing policies," he said.

He derided the Democratic proposals as similar to the Green New Deal, a sweeping plan to address climate change that he said would cost "unbelievable sums."

Biden is expected to roll out his budget in the weeks ahead as Congress presses forward on the infrastructure package, which lawmakers have said could be ready by summer.

Colombian town uses discipline, speakers to stay virus-free

By MARKO ALVÁREZ AND ASTRID SUAREZ Associated Press

CAMPOHERMOSO, Colombia (AP) — When customers enter his hardware store Nelson Avila asks them to wear a mask and wash their hands. He sprays alcohol over the bills and coins they give him before putting them in the till.

Avila's shop is in Campohermoso, a town of 3,000 people in Boyaca state in the mountains of central Colombia that has no reported cases of the coronavirus. According to the Health Ministry, Campohermoso county - which consists of the town and surrounding farms and villages - is one of just two counties in the country that are COVID-19-free. Colombia has more than 1,100 counties.

"Those bills can carry the virus" said Avila, 49, as he disinfects a wad of wrinkled Colombian pesos. "They go from hand to hand, so we have to be careful."

Officials and locals say the town has been able to keep the virus away thanks to the disciplined behavior of its residents and constant campaigns urging people to social distance and wear masks.

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The town's remote location ringed by mountains, far from major roads, has also helped it to stay coronavirus-free. It has just seven streets and six avenues laid out in a neat grid. It is nestled at the bottom of a green valley, 3300 feet (about 1,000 meters) above sea level.

"Campohermosos has a low population density and little contact with big cities," said Jairo Mauricio Santoyo, the health secretary for Boyaca state.

Given that Colombia, with a population of about 50 million people, has reported more than 2.3 million confirmed cases of the coronavirus, many consider the lack of infections here a small miracle.

During the first decade of this century, Campohermoso was affected by fighting between paramilitary groups and leftist rebels, says the town's mayor, Jaime Rodríguez. The coffee-growing area has been peaceful for more than a decade but it is seldom visited by outsiders.

Rodríguez says communication has been crucial in keeping the pandemic away from Campohermoso. Messages about the virus and how to prevent it are broadcast three times a day on speakers perched on the town's lampposts.

The local radio station also broadcasts daily shows that talk about prevention. To ensure everyone gets the message, the mayor's office distributed 1,000 radios to farmers who live in Campohermoso's rural areas.

"The whole town has come together" Rodríguez said. "The police, the health center, church personnel and the mayor's office all go on the radio station to talk about the virus."

Rodríguez said his message to townsfolk has been simple: "Its' up to every family to stop it."

He has also tried to lead by example. The mayor says he began to feel ill during a recent visit to Bogota, where he tested positive for the virus. He did not return to Campohermoso until he tested negative.

"We've put 60 families in town in quarantine because they showed some symptoms," Rodríguez said. "But all of them have tested negative."

Businesses are now open in Campohermoso and only allow customers wearing masks. The town has not banned visitors from other parts of the country but those who arrive and wish to stay have been asked to quarantine in a relative's home, and receive a daily call from the local nurse.

Campohermoso's only school is running at half of its usual capacity. Students have been divided by shifts and attend school every other day.

And in the largely Roman Catholic town, the local priest has also gotten involved in prevention efforts.

"We pray to Saint Roch, who is our patron saint and the protector of the sick," says Father Camilo Monroy, who has also gone on radio to talk about ways to prevent the spread of the virus.

The only other town in Colombia that is reportedly coronavirus-free is San Juanito, which is also located in a remote valley in the Andes mountains.

Officials consider the two cases striking because the virus has even appeared in Amazon jungle villages that can only be reached by boat or small plane.

Campohermoso has vaccinated 80 people so far, most of them senior citizens over the age of 80.

Now the coronavirus-free county is waiting for more shots from Colombia's central government.

Astrid Suarez reported from Bucaramanga, Colombia.

Elgin Baylor, Lakers great and aerialist pioneer, dies at 86

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Elgin Baylor changed the very direction of basketball when he joined the NBA and brought his vertical feats of athletic brilliance to a largely horizontal game.

He filled scoresheets and sparked young imaginations with his trailblazing aerial style, and every high-flying player of the past 60 years has followed his path.

Although the Lakers' first superstar in Los Angeles never won a championship ring, Baylor still looms high above the franchise and the game he loved.

The Hall of Fame forward died Monday of natural causes in Los Angeles with wife Elaine and daughter Krystal by his side, the team said. He was 86.

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An 11-time All-Star who soared through the 1960s with a high-scoring artistry that became the model for the modern basketball player, Baylor played a major role in revolutionizing basketball from a ground-bound sport into an aerial show.

"Elgin was THE superstar of his era — his many accolades speak to that," Lakers owner Jeanie Buss said in a statement.

With a silky-smooth jumper and fluid athleticism, Baylor spent parts of 14 seasons with the Lakers in Minneapolis and Los Angeles, teaming with Jerry West in one of the most potent tandems in basketball history.

Baylor's second career as a personnel executive for 22 1/2 years with the woebegone Los Angeles Clippers was far less successful, but he remained a beloved figure in Los Angeles and beyond. Baylor strengthened his ties again to the Lakers over the past decade, and the team honored him with a statue outside Staples Center in 2018.

"Elgin Baylor set the course for the modern NBA as one of the league's first superstar players," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said. "In addition to his legendary playing career, Elgin was a man of principle. He was a leading activist during the height of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s and an influential voice among his fellow players."

The 6-foot-5 Baylor played in an era before significant television coverage of basketball, and confoundingly little of his play was ever captured on film. His athletic brilliance is best remembered by those who saw it in person. No one had a better view than West, who once called him "one of the most spectacular shooters the world has ever seen."

Baylor had an uncanny ability to hang in mid-air indefinitely, inventing shots and improvising deception along his flight path. Years before Julius Erving and Michael Jordan became international heroes with their similarly acrobatic games, Baylor created the blueprint for the modern superstar.

Baylor was the first NBA player to score 70 points in a game, and he still holds the single-game NBA Finals scoring record with 61 against Boston in 1962. He averaged 27.4 points and 13.5 rebounds over his career, and he even averaged a career-best 38 points during a season in which he only played on weekend passes while on active duty as an Army reservist.

"I spent a lot of time with him over the years," Charles Barkley said during CBS' coverage of the NCAA Tournament. "To me, he's probably the most underrated great basketball player of all time. He always carried himself with great dignity and respect."

Baylor played high above most of his contemporaries, but never won a championship or led the NBA in scoring largely because he played at the same time as centers Bill Russell, who won all the rings, and Wilt Chamberlain, who claimed all the scoring titles. Knee injuries hampered the second half of Baylor's career, although he remained a regular All-Star.

West and Baylor were the first in the long tradition of dynamic pairings with the Lakers, followed by Magic Johnson and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in the 1980s before Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal won three more titles in the 2000s.

"My first few years in the league, he cared for me like a father would a son," West said Monday. "We shared the joy of winning and the heartbreaking losses in the finals. He was a prince both on and off the court."

Baylor's Lakers lost six times in the NBA Finals to the Boston Celtics and another time to the New York Knicks. Los Angeles won the 1971-72 title, but only after Baylor retired nine games into the season, dissatisfied with his standard of play due to his ailing knees.

"Before there was Michael Jordan doing amazing things in the air, there was Elgin Baylor!" Johnson tweeted. "A true class act and great man."

Elgin Gay Baylor was born in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 16, 1934. Named after his father's favorite watch, an "Elgin" timepiece, Baylor became infatuated with his sport even before he could afford a basketball, instead learning to shoot with a tennis ball.

After struggling academically in high school, Baylor played at Seattle University from 1956-58, averaging 31.3 points a game and leading the team to the 1958 NCAA championship game, where it lost to coach

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Adolph Rupp's Kentucky Wildcats.

Baylor was the No. 1 NBA draft pick in 1958 by the Minneapolis Lakers, who were near bankruptcy after a steep fall from their first championship era. Baylor immediately saved the Lakers with his scoring and style.

He won the Rookie of the Year award and led the Lakers to the NBA Finals, where they lost to the fledgling Celtics dynasty in the first of the rivals' 12 championship series meetings.

Baylor scored 64 points on Nov. 8, 1959 — then the league single-game record, and the Lakers' record for 45 years until Bryant broke it. He then became the first NBA player to surpass 70 points, scoring 71 on Dec. 11, 1960, against New York.

When the Lakers moved to Los Angeles in 1960, Baylor became the centerpiece of their Hollywood revival. West also arrived from West Virginia in 1960, and they immediately clicked, averaging 69.1 combined points per game and becoming lifelong friends.

Baylor played in only 48 games during the 1961-62 season because of his military service, yet the Lakers still won the Western Conference by 11 games. Baylor's 61 points in Game 5 of the finals put the Lakers ahead 3-2, but they lost to the Celtics in overtime in Game 7 — the pinnacle of the Lakers' suffering at Boston's hands.

Frank Selvy missed a 10-foot jumper that would have won the game in regulation. In film of that moment, Baylor appears poised to get Selvy's rebound, then disappears from the screen. Baylor contended he was pushed out of bounds by Boston's Sam Jones.

"I've always felt that was our championship," Baylor told the Riverside Press-Enterprise in 2000.

He never got closer to a ring.

Baylor's knee problems began in the 1963-64 season, but he remained a star during his slow decline. He played his last full season in 1968-69 and suited up only sporadically until retiring at 37 in the fall of 1971. He was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame in 1977.

The expansion New Orleans Jazz hired Baylor as an assistant coach for their debut season in 1974, and he eventually served as their head coach for parts of three seasons.

The Clippers hired Baylor as their vice president for basketball operations in 1986, but the franchise was the model of sports ineptitude for most of his stay — poor drafting, indifferent fans and skinflint financial dealings. Most knowledgeable basketball people realized owner Donald Sterling was to blame for the franchise's woes, while Baylor received both admiration for his tenacity and ridicule for the Clippers' struggles.

A few months after losing that job in late 2008, Baylor filed a \$2 million lawsuit against the Clippers, Sterling and the NBA, alleging he was fired because of his age and race. A Los Angeles County jury unanimously ruled in the Clippers' favor in March 2011, refusing to award any damages. Sterling lost the Clippers three years later.

The Lakers embraced Baylor in recent years, and his statue unveiling brought together several franchise greats. The statue features Baylor in his gold No. 22 Lakers uniform, a ball in his left hand as he rises toward the hoop for another moment of improvisational brilliance.

Besides his wife and daughter, Baylor is survived by a son and daughter, Alan and Alison, from a previous marriage, and sister Gladys Baylor Barrett.

"Like everyone else," Elaine Baylor said, "I was in awe of his immense courage, dignity and the time he gave to all fans."

More AP NBA: <https://apnews.com/hub/NBA> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Trump endorses challenger against Georgia elections chief

By BILL BARROW and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Former President Donald Trump on Monday endorsed a conservative Georgia congressman in his bid to unseat the Republican secretary of state who refused to help overturn the November election results.

Rep. Jody Hice, a tea party favorite and Trump acolyte, is the first major challenger to Brad Raffens-

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perger since the secretary of state certified President Joe Biden's narrow victory in Georgia and disputed Trump's false allegations of fraud.

Trump's endorsement marks his most direct attempt at retribution against those he blames for his loss and reaffirms his continued influence over the Republican Party.

"Jody has been a steadfast fighter for conservative Georgia values and is a staunch ally of the America First agenda," Trump said in a statement that repeated the unsupported allegations of fraud. "Unlike the current Georgia Secretary of State, Jody leads out front with integrity. I have 100% confidence in Jody to fight for Free, Fair, and Secure Elections in Georgia, in line with our beloved U.S. Constitution."

In a statement, Raffensperger criticized Hice for supporting Trump's false fraud claims and likened him to former GOP Sens. David Perdue and Kelly Loeffler, who lost twin Senate runoffs in January after supporting Trump's bid to subvert the election results.

"Few have done more to cynically undermine faith in our election system than Jody Hice," Raffensperger said. "We saw in January what Georgia voters will do to candidates who use that rhetoric."

Hice didn't mention Trump in his announcement but has said previously that he expected the former president's support, and he echoed Trump's rhetoric about Raffensperger.

"What Brad Raffensperger did was create cracks in the integrity of our elections, which I wholeheartedly believe individuals took advantage of in 2020," Hice said in a statement Monday, without supporting evidence that would refute Georgia's three statewide counts of nearly 5 million ballots. "Every Georgian, in fact every American, has the right to be outraged by the actions and, simultaneously, the inaction of our Secretary of State," Hice added.

Trump has long made clear his intentions to target Raffensperger and Gov. Brian Kemp, also a Republican, for their parts in ratifying Biden's victory.

"I'll be here in a year in a half campaigning against your governor and your crazy secretary of state," Trump said at a Georgia rally on Jan. 4, the eve of the two U.S. Senate runoffs that Democrats swept to win control of the chamber.

Both Kemp and Raffensperger have said they were simply following the state's election law and fulfilling their required duties.

The developments Monday drew immediate plaudits from the right.

"The establishment still doesn't get how popular Trump is with the base, but they will," said Debbie Dooley, an early tea party organizer and Trump ally who is close to Hice. "We've known Raffensperger was dead, and Jody can excite the base and raise money. This is a serious challenge."

No heavyweight primary opponent has emerged yet against Kemp.

Some Trump allies are looking to former Rep. Doug Collins as an ideal challenger. Others close to Collins, one of Trump's most high-profile House defenders during impeachment proceedings, say he is more likely to make another bid for the Senate after his unsuccessful campaign last year in a special election ultimately won by Sen. Raphael Warnock, a Democrat.

Collins was Trump's choice in 2019 for a Senate vacancy, opened by Republican Johnny Isakson's retirement. But Kemp opted for Loeffler. Collins finished third in a jungle primary behind Warnock and Loeffler last November before Warnock prevailed in the January runoff.

Hice has not cut as high a profile since his election in 2014 as Collins did in Washington, but the 60-year-old has been a loyal Trump lieutenant. He was among the many Republican officials in Georgia who relentlessly pushed Trump's false claims of voter fraud last fall. He endorsed a lawsuit filed by Texas against Georgia and other battleground states seeking to overturn Biden's victory in the U.S. Supreme Court -- a suit the high court rejected -- and he objected to the certification of Electoral College votes even after a pro-Trump mob violently stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

Trump's ire has proven vexing for Raffensperger and Kemp.

Kemp won Trump's endorsement in a heated Republican primary for governor in 2018 and has never publicly criticized the president. He even reaffirmed recently that he'd back Trump if he sought the White House again in 2024. Raffensperger has pushed back more directly, arguing forcefully in national media

interviews last fall that the election was accurate and fair. He wrote an op-ed saying he felt “thrown under the bus” by a president he’d supported. Weeks before the Capitol insurrection, a Raffensperger aide angrily predicted the president’s rhetoric would lead to violence. Since then, both Kemp and Raffensperger have tried, carefully, to appeal to the Republican base by calling for changes to the state’s election law. Most specifically, the two men support requiring voter identification for absentee voting to replace the current signature-match requirement. But some GOP lawmakers want to go considerably further, rolling back Georgia’s no-excuse absentee voting altogether, contracting weekend early voting options in some counties and ending automatic voter registration.

Raffensperger and Kemp have been more circumspect publicly about their positions on the more sweeping proposals, though the incumbent secretary of state has continued to vouch for the integrity of absentee voting and the success of automatic registration.

Hice, despite his criticism of Raffensperger, also avoided any specifics about what changes he’d like to see in Georgia’s election, saying only that he is “encouraged to see the General Assembly taking it upon themselves to address some of the glaring issues in our elections.” _____

Associated Press reporter Ben Nadler contributed to this story.

Shooting victim’s husband says police detained him for hours

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A man who survived the shooting that killed his wife at an Atlanta-area massage business last week said police detained him in handcuffs for four hours after the attack.

Mario Gonzalez said he was held in a patrol car outside the spa. The revelation, in an interview with Mundo Hispanico, a Spanish-language news website, follows other criticism of Cherokee County officials investigating the March 16 attack, which killed four people. Four others were killed about an hour later at two spas in Atlanta.

Gonzalez’s accusation would also mean that he remained detained after police released security video images of the suspected gunman and after authorities captured that suspect about 150 miles (240 kilometers) south of Atlanta. Gonzalez questioned whether his treatment by authorities was because he’s Mexican.

Cherokee County Sheriff Frank Reynolds said in an emailed statement Monday afternoon that his office would not have any further comment on the case and is focusing on the investigation and prosecution.

Robert Aaron Long, a 21-year-old white man, is accused of shooting five people, including Gonzalez’s wife Delaina Ashley Yaun, at the first crime scene near Woodstock, about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Atlanta. One man was wounded. In all, seven of the slain victims were women, six of them of Asian descent.

Cherokee sheriff’s Capt. Jay Baker was removed as spokesman for the case after telling reporters the day after the shootings that Long had “a really bad day” and “this is what he did.” A Facebook page appearing to belong to Baker promoted a T-shirt with racist language about China and the coronavirus last year.

Reynolds, the sheriff, released a statement acknowledging that some of Baker’s comments stirred “much debate and anger” and said the agency regretted any “heartache” caused by his words.

Gonzalez and Yaun, 33, had gotten a babysitter for their infant daughter and went to Youngs Asian Massage to relax. They were in separate rooms inside when the gunman opened fire.

Gonzalez heard the gunshots and worried about his wife but was too afraid to open the door, he told Mundo Hispanico in a video interview. Deputies arrived within minutes. Gonzalez said they put him in handcuffs and detained him for about four hours, according to the website.

“They had me in the patrol car the whole time they were investigating who was responsible, who exactly did this,” Gonzalez said in the video.

During the interview with Mundo Hispanico, Gonzalez showed marks on his wrists from handcuffs. “I don’t know whether it’s because of the law or because I’m Mexican. The simple truth is that they treated me badly,” he said.

“Only when they finally confirmed I was her husband, did they tell me that she was dead,” he said. “I

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wanted to know earlier.”

Left alone to raise their daughter and his wife’s teenage son, Gonzalez said the shooter took “the most important thing I have in my life.”

“He deserves to die, just like the others did,” Gonzalez said.

Authorities have said the shooting in Cherokee County happened around 5 p.m., and just after 6:30 p.m. the sheriff’s office posted on Facebook still images from a surveillance camera showing a suspect in the parking lot outside. Reynolds said Long’s family recognized him from those images and gave investigators his cellphone information, which they used to track him.

Crisp County Sheriff Billy Hancock said in a video posted on Facebook that night that his deputies and state troopers were notified around 8 p.m. that the suspect was headed their way. Deputies and troopers set up along the interstate and saw the black 2007 Hyundai Tucson around 8:30 p.m. A trooper performed a maneuver that caused the vehicle to spin out of control.

Long sat motionless in the car for about 30 seconds, then raised his hands after multiple commands to do so, the Georgia State Patrol said in its report. Long then got out of the vehicle and onto the ground, and was taken into custody, it said.

Police found a loaded handgun in one of his pockets and a knife in the other, according to the report, which was obtained by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Associated Press writer Michael Warren contributed to this report.

Overstimulated? Stocks soar 75% in historic 12-month run

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — It was one year ago that the terrifying free fall for the stock market suddenly ended, ushering in one of its greatest runs.

On March 23, 2020, the S&P 500 fell 2.9%. In all, the index dropped nearly 34% in about a month, wiping out three years’ worth of gains for the market.

That turned out to be the bottom, even though the coronavirus pandemic worsened in the ensuing months and the economy sank deeper into recession. Massive amounts of support for the economy from the Federal Reserve and Congress limited how far stocks would fall. The market recovered all its losses by August.

As time passed, the quick development of coronavirus vaccines helped stocks shoot even higher. So did growing legions of first-time investors, who suddenly had plenty of time to get into the market using free trading apps on their phones.

It all led to a 76.1% surge for the S&P 500 and a shocking return to record heights. This run looks to be one of, if not the, best 365-day stretches for the S&P 500 since before World War II. Based on month-end figures, the last time the S&P 500 rose this much in a 12-month stretch was in 1936, according to Howard Silverblatt, senior index analyst at S&P Dow Jones Indices.

All the furious movement has also raised worries that stock prices may have gone too far, too fast. Here’s a look at five trends that helped shape the market over the last year:

— TWO BULL MARKETS IN ONE

Wall Street’s big rally actually had two distinct stages. Early on, Big Tech stocks and winners of the sudden stay-at-home economy pulled the market higher. Amazon benefited as people shopped more online, Apple hoovered up sales as more people worked from home and Zoom Video Communications surged as students and adults started meeting online. Tech stocks as a group are the market’s biggest by value, so their gains helped make up for weakness across other sectors as the economy continued to struggle.

Since last autumn, though, excitement for an economic liftoff has caused a more widespread upturn. Banks, energy producers and smaller companies whose profits would be the biggest beneficiaries of a stronger economy have led the way, as coronavirus vaccines roll out and Washington delivers even more financial aid. Those gains are also picking up the slack for technology stocks, which have lost momentum as interest rates rise on worries about higher inflation.

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— FIRST-TIME INVESTORS JOIN, AND THE GAME DOESN'T STOP

Stuck at home with little to do, people looked for ways to use some dollars that might have otherwise been spent on a movie, restaurant meal or vacation. Many turned to the stock market via their phones, as trading apps made it easy to buy and sell shares with a few taps, commission free.

Clients under the age of 40 accounted for 35% of trading last month at Charles Schwab, nearly double the rate of two years earlier. Accounts less than a year old are doing more trading in total at Charles Schwab than accounts that have been around more than 10 years.

Many of those traders have been using money they got as stimulus payments from the U.S. government. The Robinhood trading app popular with many novice investors saw an increase in the percentage of deposits of exactly \$1,200 or \$2,400 after the government sent out checks for those amounts last spring, just after the stock market hit bottom, for example. A new round of government payments — \$1,400 to individuals — is underway.

Social media has only amplified the trend, as traders talk on Reddit, Twitter and elsewhere about what stocks to buy. They've been helping to push up the stock market broadly, but their influence is most evident in what have come to be known as "meme stocks." GameStop surged 1,625% in January, for example, even though the video game retailer has struggled financially. The gains for GameStop, AMC Entertainment and other meme stocks defied gravity — and, in the opinion of nearly every professional investor on Wall Street, common sense.

— A SPAC-TACULAR BOOM RAISES CONCERNS

All the mania around stocks has raised worries along Wall Street that prices may have shot too high. Much of the criticism is focused on how much faster stock prices climbed than corporate profits.

Another potential signal of too much greed and not enough fear: Investors are so hungry for the next big thing that they're pouring billions of dollars into investments, before they even know what the money could go toward. These investments are called special-purpose acquisition companies, though they're better known by their acronym, SPACs. Armed with cash raised from investors, SPACs look for privately held companies to buy so that the company can easily list its stock on an exchange.

Last year, SPACs raised \$83.4 billion, more than six times the prior year. They've already surpassed that level in less than three months this year.

— A GLOBAL RECOVERY

The coronavirus really knows no geographic boundaries. As it devastated populations and economies around the world, global financial markets sustained sharp losses.

The recovery has also been worldwide. Stocks from China, South Korea and other emerging markets as a group are up almost the exact same percentage as the S&P 500 since March 23, 2020. Japan's Nikkei 225 index is also up a similar amount.

European markets have been lagging, although their performance is much better when seen in dollar terms instead of euros. Worsening infection rates are raising worries of a "third wave" on the continent and are forcing governments to bring back some restrictions on daily life. But the hope is that the continued rollout of vaccines will get economies and trade back to normal across the world.

— WHO'S GETTING LEFT BEHIND?

Even with so many first-time investors joining the market, not everyone is benefiting from rising stocks. Only a little more than half of all U.S. households owned stocks in 2019, whether by day-trading stocks or holding an S&P 500 index fund in a 401(k) account.

Likewise, not every stock has participated in the market's run higher over the last year. A handful of stocks within the S&P 500 are actually lower, headlined by Gilead Sciences, which is down 9.8%. The stock soared early in the pandemic as its remdesivir drug became a treatment for COVID-19 but fell back in part on concerns about upcoming patent expirations.

Other early stock winners of the pandemic have also tailed off since the market took off a year ago, including Clorox, whose disinfecting wipes became like currency, and Spam-maker Hormel Foods.

US weather model upgraded to better forecast extreme events

BY SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

The National Weather Service has turbocharged its lagging forecast model to better predict extreme weather events such as hurricanes, blizzards and downpours, as well as day-to-day weather.

By including much higher layers of the atmosphere, increased factoring of ocean waves and other improvements, the weather service's update to its Global Forecast System is trying to catch up with a European weather model that many experts consider superior.

Tests for the past two years show the upgrade, which kicked in Monday, forecast heavy rains and snow-fall 15% better five days out and improved hurricane and tropical storm tracks by more than 10%, better pinpointing storm formation five to seven days in advance.

Forecasters say this new model does not predict more rain and snow than actually arrives, which its predecessor had a tendency to do. The new model was significantly better at forecasting the massive Colorado snowstorm earlier this month, getting the storm arrival time and snow amounts far more accurately than the older version, said Vijay Tallapragada, chief of modeling at the agency's Environmental Modeling Center.

Internal studies also showed the new model was generally more accurate earlier on downpours in the Southeast in February 2020, Hurricane Dorian in 2019 and Hurricane Michael in 2018.

"This is for the general day-to-day forecasting and for the extreme events, and you've got to get both right," said National Weather Service Director Louis Uccellini.

One main improvement is that the new model captures the atmosphere up to 50 miles high (80 kilometers) — far higher than the old one and has higher resolution at different levels, weather service officials said. This way it better characterizes the jet stream, which transports storms, they said.

Over the past 31 days, there was a stretch of eight straight days when this new version beat the highly-touted European forecast model, but in general over the period the European version was still better, Uccellini said.

"Extreme weather events are becoming stronger and happening more often in a changing climate," said Bernadette Woods Placky, chief meteorologist at Climate Central's Climate Matters program, who wasn't part of the upgrade. "Weather forecasting improvements that increase accuracy and warning time will give people more time to prepare and will save lives."

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears.

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Nevada announces \$45M settlement with McKinsey over opioids

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — Nevada has struck a \$45 million settlement deal with McKinsey & Company for the global consulting firm's role in advising opioid makers how to sell more prescription painkillers amid a national overdose crisis.

The western state reached the deal after sitting out a multi-state settlement with McKinsey announced in February. The hard bargaining has allowed Nevada to win a settlement that's three and a half times larger than the average settlement with other states.

"Nevada needed and deserved more than what was being made available to us in the multi-state settlement," state Attorney General Aaron Ford said Monday. Ford, a Democrat, said that had Nevada stayed in the multi-state deal, it would have received \$7 million, which he called "woefully insufficient."

The \$45 million will be paid in two installments of \$23 million in 45 days and \$22 million in 120 days.

McKinsey said the deal reached with Nevada is "consistent with the commitment we made in February to be part of the solution to the opioid epidemic," and it "believes its past work was lawful." The company

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said the settlement agreement does not contain any admission of wrongdoing or liability.

The New York-based company in February settled for \$573 million with 47 states, the District of Columbia and five U.S. territories. It also at the time announced separate settlements with Washington state for \$13.5 million and West Virginia for \$10 million.

"We deeply regret that we did not adequately acknowledge the tragic consequences of the epidemic unfolding in our communities," McKinsey Global Managing Partner Kevin Sneader said at the time.

Opioids, which include prescription drugs like OxyContin and illegal substances such as heroin and illicit fentanyl, have been tied to more than 470,000 deaths in the U.S. over the past two decades.

McKinsey's role came into the spotlight in recent months when OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma LP sought to settle claims against it in bankruptcy court. The Nevada Attorney General's Office said in legal documents that McKinsey worked with Purdue from 2004 to 2019 to boost sales even as the resulting opioid epidemic emerged.

The consulting firm helped create a plan for Purdue to "turbocharge" sales of OxyContin and other opioids, according to the office, and focused on doctors prescribing high numbers of the drug and encouraged them to prescribe patients more potent doses.

Nevada, with a population of more than 3 million, has been among the hardest-hit states by the crisis. By 2016, it had enough opioid prescriptions for 87 out of 100 residents while overdoses exceeded the national average, according to Ford's office.

Money from the settlement will be used to address the impacts of the opioid epidemic, Ford said, but the specifics would be hammered out by the governor, state lawmakers and other officials.

The state separately is pursuing a wide-ranging lawsuit against Purdue along with the company's former president, his family, other drugmakers, distributors and pharmacies.

The civil lawsuit accuses more than 40 defendants of violating state laws about deceptive trade practices, false claims, racketeering, negligence and public nuisance. Ford said a trial date has been tentatively scheduled for 2022.

Photos of migrant detention highlight Biden's border secrecy

By NOMAAN MERCHANT, JONATHAN LEMIRE and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration has tried for weeks to keep the public from seeing images like those that emerged Monday showing immigrant children in U.S. custody at the border sleeping on mats under foil blankets, separated in groups by plastic partitions.

Administration officials have steadfastly refused to call the detention of more than 15,000 children in U.S. custody, or the conditions they're living under, a crisis. But they have stymied most efforts by outsiders to decide for themselves.

Officials barred nonprofit lawyers who conduct oversight from entering a Border Patrol tent where thousands of children and teenagers are detained. And federal agencies have refused or ignored dozens of requests from the media for access to detention sites. Such access was granted several times by the administration of President Donald Trump, whose restrictive immigration approach Biden vowed to reverse.

The new president faces growing criticism for the apparent secrecy at the border, including from fellow Democrats.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, said Monday "the administration has a commitment to transparency to make sure that the news media gets the chance to report on every aspect of what's happening at the border."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki added that the White House was working with homeland security officials and the Health and Human Services Department to "finalize details" and that she hoped to have an update in the "coming days."

Axios on Monday first published a series of photos taken inside the largest Border Patrol detention center, a sprawling tent facility in the South Texas city of Donna. The photos were released by Rep. Henry Cuellar, a Texas Democrat from the border city of Laredo.

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Cuellar said he released the photos in part because the administration has refused media access to the Donna tent. He said he also wanted to draw attention to the extreme challenges that border agents face in watching so many children, sometimes for a week or longer despite the Border Patrol's three-day limit on detaining minors.

"We ought to take care of those kids like they're our own kids," Cuellar said.

Thomas Saenz, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said the U.S. should allow media access to border facilities while respecting the privacy of immigrants detained inside. He noted the risk of sharing without permission images of children who have already faced trauma.

"We ought to be aware of these conditions," Saenz said. "People have to see them so that they can assess the inhumanity and hopefully embark on more humane policies."

The White House has prided itself on its methodical rollout of policy during its first 50-plus days but West Wing aides privately acknowledge they were caught off guard by the surge of migrants at the border and the resulting media furor.

Republican lawmakers largely sat out the debate over administration's \$1.9 trillion COVID relief bill. While none of them voted for the package, their opposition was muted and they instead focused on culture war issues, like the debate over racial stereotypes in some Dr. Seuss books, rather than a bill that was broadly popular with GOP voters.

But the GOP has grabbed on to the border situation with both hands, reviving the issue that was key to propelling Trump to the top of the Republican field in 2016. In 2018, the Trump administration detained hundreds of children in many of the same facilities being used now after separating them from their parents. The following year, hundreds of families and children detained at one West Texas border station went days without adequate food, water, or soap.

Biden has kept in place a Trump-era public health order and expelled thousands of immigrant adults and families, but he declined to expel immigrant children without a parent after a federal appeals court in January cleared the way for him to do so. He also moved to speed up the reunification of hundreds of separated immigrant families.

"What Trump did was horrible," Cuellar said. "These pictures show you that even under our best intentions, and the Biden administration has the best intentions, it's still very difficult."

Cuellar said the White House needs to work more with Mexico and Central America to prevent people from leaving their home countries. The White House said Monday that key officials would go this week to Mexico and Guatemala.

Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat who visited a facility in El Paso, Texas, last week, told NPR, "We want to make sure that the press has access to hold the administration accountable."

The Associated Press has requested access to border facilities for more than a month. Reporters first asked Health and Human Services on Feb. 4 to allow entry into a surge facility re-opened at Carrizo Springs, Texas, holding hundreds of teenagers. And they have asked Homeland Security officials for access at least seven times to Border Patrol facilities, with no response. The AP has also petitioned Psaki to open border facilities.

Border agencies under Trump allowed limited media tours of both Homeland Security and Health and Human Services facilities. Several of those visits revealed troubling conditions inside, including the detention of large numbers of children as young as 5 separated from their parents.

Under Biden, the agencies also have denied full access to nonprofit lawyers who conduct oversight of facilities where children are detained. Those oversight visits occur under a federal court settlement.

When lawyers this month visited the Border Patrol facility at Donna, where thousands of children are now detained, agents refused to let them inside and the Justice Department said they were not entitled to gain access. The lawyers were forced to interview children outside. The Justice Department declined to comment.

The newly published photos released by Cuellar's office show groups of children crowded together inside the partitions. Some appear to be watching television while others are lying on floor mats, some side by

side. Children are shown wearing surgical masks but are close to each other.

The Donna facility consists of large interconnected tents. Overhead photos taken by AP show enclosed outdoor areas where children can go. But lawyers who have interviewed children detained at Donna say some can go days without being allowed outside.

The administration is rushing to open more space to get roughly 5,000 children out of Border Patrol detention and into Health and Human Services facilities that are better suited for youth. It has also tried to expedite the releases of children in HHS custody to parents and other sponsors in the U.S. But border agents continue to apprehend far more children daily than HHS is releasing, even though more than 40% of youths in the system have a parent or legal guardian who could take them.

Meanwhile, the administration is seeing its emergency facilities for immigrant children approach capacity almost as quickly as it can open them. The downtown Dallas convention center has 1,500 teenagers less than a week after opening and is expected to take in 500 more teens Monday, according to HHS. Its current capacity is 2,300 people.

— Lemire reported from New York and Merchant reported from Houston.

Transphobia, hostility about protesters in private cop group

By CLAUDIA LAUER and THALIA BEATY Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — In a private Facebook group called the Pittsburgh Area Police Breakroom, many current and retired officers spent the year criticizing chiefs who took a knee or officers who marched with Black Lives Matter protesters, whom they called “terrorists” or “thugs.” They made transphobic posts and bullied members who supported anti-police brutality protesters or Joe Biden in a forum billed as a place officers can “decompress, rant, share ideas.”

Many of the deluge of daily posts were jokes about the hardships of being officers, memorials to deceased colleagues or conversations about training and equipment. But over the group’s almost four-year existence, a few dozen members became more vocal with posts that shifted toward pro-Donald Trump memes and harsh criticism of anyone perceived to support so-called “demoncrats,” Black Lives Matter or coronavirus safety measures.

In June, Tim Huschak, a corporal at the Borough of Lincoln Police Department, posted a screenshot of an Allegheny County 911 dispatcher’s Facebook page indicating that the phrase “Blue Lives Matter” used by law enforcement supporters is not equivalent to the slogan “Black Lives Matter” because policing is a choice, not a fact of birth. He wrote: “Many negative posts on police. And we should trust her with our lives???”

Some angry members rallied quickly and organized phone calls to her supervisor demanding she be fired. “Multiple officers should call and report it. Remember NO JUSTICE NO PEACE LOL,” West Mifflin Borough Police Department officer Tommy Trieu responded under his Facebook name, Tommy Bear.

Trieu was one of two West Mifflin officers seen in a video last year restraining a 15-year-old Black girl after responding to a call about a fight on a school bus. Activists called for firing the officers, but borough officials said the recording started after a student hit an officer and that they “did nothing wrong.”

A few members of the group also were bullied or left the page, including an officer who said the Fraternal Order of Police’s Trump endorsement did not represent her and a Black officer who was accused of creating a fake Facebook account to complain about the lack of diversity in local departments.

The Associated Press was able to view posts and comments from the group, which has 2,200 members, including about a dozen current and former police chiefs -- from mainly Allegheny County and some surrounding areas stretching into Ohio -- and at least one judge and one councilman. After the AP began asking about posts last week, the group appeared to have been deleted or suspended from view.

Facebook spokesperson Andy Stone said Monday that the group was removed “for violating our policies” before the AP published its story, but could not say whether it came after a complaint or as part of routine monitoring. Last year, Facebook released an update to its community standards: “People turn to Facebook

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Groups to connect with others who share their interests, but even if they decide to make a group private, they have to play by the same rules as everyone else.”

Contacted by the AP, Lincoln Borough Police Chief Richard Bosco said departmental policy prohibited Huschak from talking to the media. He said the officer is known for his service to the community and wasn't aware that others had posted insults under his post or that things had "gotten out of hand."

"He understood the concerns and he deleted the post," Bosco said. "There is and there needs to be a higher professional standard for police, especially when it comes to social media."

Trieu defended his comment, telling the AP that he was merely advising other officers in the group that, just like community members can complain about officers, they could file a grievance with a dispatcher's supervisor if they feared for their safety.

Concerns about explicit bias on officers' social media accounts were renewed in the last year after a summer of protests demanding an end to police brutality and racial injustice in policing and pro-Trump protests in January that led to a violent siege on the Capitol.

The private Facebook page showed embattled officers hostile to criticism and doubling down on policing as it currently exists, with many posts and comments possibly violating some department social media policies that prohibit disparaging comments about race or that express bias or harass others.

Joe Hoffman, a West Mifflin Borough Police officer, posted a criticism of Webster, Massachusetts, Police Chief Michael Shaw, who lay on his stomach on the steps of his station for about eight minutes — a reference to George Floyd dying after being held on the ground by Minneapolis police.

"If you are a law enforcement officer and you kneel or lie on the ground so easily over the false narrative of police brutality, you will one day be executed on your knees or your stomach without a fight by the same criminals that you are currently pandering to," he wrote, calling the organization "Black Lies Matter."

Hoffman did not return requests for comment left with the police department or a phone number listed in his name.

In another post, a now-retired Pittsburgh police officer talked about being stuck in traffic for hours in June 2018 after protesters commandeered a highway days after a former East Pittsburgh police officer shot and killed 17-year-old Antwon Rose as he ran from a traffic stop. After the officer mentioned having his service weapon in the trunk, other officers said he shouldn't hesitate to use lethal force because he'd be protecting himself, while others said police should use dogs and water cannons to clear the demonstrators, a reference to police tactics during civil rights protests in the '60s.

During that 2018 protest, two people were injured when Bell Acres Councilman Gregory Wagner attempted to drive through a crowd near PNC Park. After his arrest, members of the Facebook group posted support for his actions, with one retired Pittsburgh police officer writing that Wagner was merely "trying to get away from a hostile, TERRORISTIC crowd."

Mount Pleasant Township Police Chief Lou McQuillan, who recently announced he is running for a vacant magisterial district judge post, was listed as one of the Facebook group's four administrators.

McQuillan posted an article in June 2017 about a civil settlement being reached in the police shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, remarking on how the amount of the award was determined: "future earnings? lol What about Ofc Wilson? What about his lost earnings? Joke." Several officers replied that Brown's earnings would have derived from crimes or welfare checks, with one posting the theme song from "The Jeffersons."

McQuillan declined an interview request from the AP, instead sending a statement saying, "Of course, I regret the loss of any life. My comments and posts from four years ago were meant to support law enforcement and police officers everywhere. And I believe in law and order."

Dozens of group members, many retired or no longer in law enforcement, fueled days of transphobic posts about former Pennsylvania Health Secretary Rachel Levine for her role in statewide social-distancing mandates to stop the spread of COVID-19. Levine, who is transgender, has since been tapped by Biden to be assistant health secretary.

The posts referred to Levine as "he" or "it" and called her a "freak" and other names. "Someone needs

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to shoot this thing!!" one retired officer wrote.

The group's rules do not explicitly prohibit racist, sexist or otherwise disparaging content, but do threaten expulsion if members don't agree to privacy.

According to the group's introduction, "What goes on in here, STAYS IN HERE. We can have discussions, opinions, thoughts, and even rants, but there is to be NO SHARING outside of this page of anything posted here!"

The Pittsburgh-area officers weren't alone in posting sometimes hostile and disparaging content to social media. In 2019, the Plain View Project released a database of similar posts from officers in eight departments around the country.

The project, founded by a group of Philadelphia attorneys, examined the Facebook accounts of 2,900 active and 600 retired officers, finding thousands of posts that were racist, sexist, advocated for police brutality or were similarly problematic. The group made the database public, saying the posts eroded the public's trust.

"In our view, people who are subject to decisions made by law enforcement may fairly question whether these online statements about race, religion, ethnicity and the acceptability of violent policing -- among other topics -- inform officers' on-the-job behaviors and choices," the project's founders wrote.

Pittsburgh was not part of the project, but city officials have received a handful of complaints about social media posts by officers, at least two of which were perceived as racist.

Amid the 2018 protests over the shooting of Antwon Rose, Officer Brian M. Martin appeared to express glee at the death of Black Pittsburgh rapper Jimmy Wopo, writing: "I'm still celebrating." He later pleaded no contest to a DUI after hitting a bicyclist and leaving the scene of the accident while off-duty, and was placed on leave. He withdrew that plea late last week and was found guilty of a lesser charge of careless driving, according to court records.

Last August, a resident lodged a complaint against Sgt. George Kristoff, whose public Facebook page contained disparaging memes about Black people and police brutality protesters.

Pittsburgh's Office of Municipal Investigations, which investigates complaints against the police and other city employees, reviewed both cases after complaints from the public, but city public safety spokesperson Chris Togneri said he could not discuss the outcome or comment on whether the men were still employed. A spokesperson Monday said Martin no longer works at the department.

Following the complaint against Kristoff, the department revised its social media policy to emphasize that officers may face discipline for online comments, especially those undermining public trust in the force. Some of the smaller police departments around Allegheny County contacted by the AP either did not have social media policies or had policies that were less specific about offenses. Others, like Lincoln Borough, were working on implementing new policies.

Pittsburgh's new policy explicitly states officers may face disciplinary action for sharing "any content involving discourteous or disrespectful remarks ... pertaining to issues of ethnicity, race, religion, gender, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, and/or disability." It also says officers are forbidden from "advocating harassment or violence."

"I think that's really important that the police department has revised its policies to reflect the type of policing they want in their community," said Elizabeth Pittenger, executive director of Pittsburgh's Citizen Police Review Board.

Kyna James, a community organizer at the Alliance for Police Accountability in Pittsburgh, said activists calling for police reforms just want officers to be held to the same accountability that citizens are, adding that the existence of the Facebook group and the posts were not surprising.

"You know, that doesn't make it less upsetting," James said. "It's 2021, and it's a shame that we are still here and we are still dealing with this."

Beaty reported from New York.

This story has been corrected to remove a reference to a Pittsburgh officer who was reassigned after a

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bar brawl. He is not the same officer as Brian M. Martin, who no longer works for the department.

Hugs, at last: Nursing homes easing rules on visitors

By PHILIP MARCELO, PATTY NIEBERG, and KIMBERLEE KRUESI Associated Press/Report for America
An 88-year-old woman in Ohio broke down in tears as her son hugged her for the first time in a year. Nursing home residents and staff in California sang "Over the Rainbow" as they resumed group activities and allowed visitors back in. A 5-year-old dove into the lap of her 94-year-old great-great-aunt for a long embrace in Rhode Island.

Nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other kinds of elderly residences battered by COVID-19 are easing restrictions and opening their doors for the first time since the start of the pandemic, leading to joyous reunions around the country after a painful year of isolation, Zoom calls and greetings through windows.

The vaccination drive, improved conditions inside nursing homes, and relaxed federal guidelines have paved the way for the reunions.

There have been welcome-back parties, birthday celebrations, coffee hours on the patio and more in recent days, giving older Americans and their families a glimpse into what life may look like in a post-vaccine world.

"This is the beginning of the very best to come, hopefully, for all of us," said Gloria Winston, a 94-year-old retirement community resident in Providence, Rhode Island. "The world is going in the right direction. We need the nourishment of each other."

Long-suffering families say the reopenings are well overdue. Most elderly care residents and many staffers have been fully inoculated for weeks, since they were among the first vaccinated in the nationwide rollout.

Roughly 1.4 million residents and 1 million staffers at long-term care facilities are fully vaccinated, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in the facilities have also plummeted, from a peak of more than 30,000 cases and 7,000 deaths among residents in one week in December to fewer than 1,300 cases and 500 deaths in all of last week, according to the CDC.

(Overall in the U.S., the death toll has topped 540,000. Deaths per day have plummeted to an average of 1,000, down from an all-time high of over 3,400 in mid-January and the lowest level since early November. New cases are running at a still-troubling average of about 54,000 per day, plunging from a quarter-million per day in early January.)

Federal regulators, in recognition of the improving situation, recommended earlier this month that long-term care facilities allow indoor visits at all times.

COVID-19 took a frightening toll in nursing homes and other such institutions. Long-term care residents accounted for more than 130,000 deaths and more than 640,000 cases during the pandemic, according to government data. Staff members accounted for an additional 1,600 deaths and more than 550,000 cases.

In Rhode Island, the first visitors Winston welcomed into the Laurelmead Cooperative since the outbreak started were her great-niece and her 5-year-old great-great-niece.

The three shared a flurry of hugs last week before Cordelia Cappelano, Winston's great-great-niece, retreated, shyly burying her head in her mother's body.

"I think I've had better hugs in my day," Winston teased. "It's as if we're not family anymore."

But after nearly two hours playing and catching up, Cordelia warmed up. She dove into Winston's lap for one last hug before it was time to go.

"To be able to be this close and have Cordelia melt around her has just been wonderful," said Wensday Greenbaum, Winston's great-niece. "It's just a release of all that anxiety and sadness that comes with being isolated. It's been a difficult year, and this is one step closer to normalcy."

In California last week, Celia Olson sat on the patio with her 92-year-old mother, Connie, at the Chaparral House in Berkeley. It was their second time meeting since visits recently resumed at the nursing home.

"This is really nice," Connie Olson said as her daughter placed a blanket over her.

Over the past year, Celia Olson, a 65-year-old veterinarian, was able to see her mother only through a

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window or via Skype. Now both are vaccinated.

"It's been a year of everybody just being traumatized and trying to understand how to navigate through the coronavirus situation," Celia Olson said.

In Cincinnati last week, Bernie Brungs donned goggles and an N-95 mask to hug his 88-year-old mother, Rose, during a special "compassionate care" visit.

Brungs recalled how his mother — who is paralyzed from the waist down and spends most of her time alone — cried and told him how much she missed him during their 15 minutes together.

He promised her he would stay longer and play her favorite game — Yahtzee — when indoor visits at Ohio nursing homes officially begin on Tuesday.

"It was wonderful," Brungs said. "The hug I got from her, it was just unimaginable how much it made me feel."

In Tennessee, Brandon Johnson was able to wrap his arms around his great-grandmother, Phyllis, on her 89th birthday earlier this month. Johnson said it was a joyful moment he had been praying for after a year of waving to his great-grandmother through windows.

"COVID robbed a year from us — a year where we couldn't hug her, kiss on her and love her. That was tough, but now we're making the most of it," said the 27-year-old from LaFollette, Tennessee. "COVID is a nasty thing, but the one good thing about it is that it was a wake-up call to be really grateful for what you have."

Other states are still reviewing and updating their policies to reflect the new federal guidance.

Many elderly residences say they will be taking a measured approach to reopening their doors, meaning stricter restrictions will probably persist in the short term in many places, to the frustration of families.

In Massachusetts last week, visits at the Hellenic Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Canton, some 20 miles (32 kilometers) south of Boston, were still limited to sit-downs in the dining room, with guests and residents separated by a clear plastic barrier.

A staffer was on hand to limit encounters to 30 minutes and make sure hugs and other physical contact happened only at the beginning and end of the session.

Anne Darling, who was visiting her 86-year-old mother, Mary Claire Lane, on Thursday, said she hoped the home would loosen its restrictions soon to allow her to bring the family's beloved dog and younger family members.

"We miss her and she misses us," Darling said. "If we could just bring in the little ones, it would just bring a joy to her heart. I know she's well cared for, but it just gets lonely."

In Bristol, Rhode Island, Charlie Galligan said visits have been gradually improving at his mother's nursing home, but not fast enough. Most visits at Saint Elizabeth Manor are still limited to 30 minutes in the common dining room with social distancing and other precautions, he said.

Galligan's 88-year-old father, Jack, who has Alzheimer's, and his 84-year-old mother, Audrey, who has a traumatic brain injury, were recently granted a compassionate care visit.

The couple, who can barely communicate with each other but spent nearly every day together before the outbreak, were allowed to hug twice and spend up to an hour together.

"It's heart-wrenching," Galligan said. "My dad has declined so much more in the past year. He's lost without her."

Lawyers battle over 'race-norming' in NFL dementia tests

By MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The court-appointed lead lawyer for thousands of retired players suing the NFL pledged Monday to try to remove race as a factor in dementia testing, but lawyers for Black players demanded he release the data on payouts by race in the \$1 billion concussion settlement.

They argue that Black men are being denied awards that average more than \$500,000 because of testing methods that assume Black people have lower cognitive function than white people.

That makes it harder to show they've suffered neurological damage linked to NFL concussions.

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Lawyers challenging the “race-norming” practice insist they need to be part of the latest round of mediation with the NFL to ensure fairness for Black players, who make up the majority of the 20,000-member class of retired players.

“The devil is always in the details,” said lawyer Cy Smith, whose civil rights challenge to the race-norming practice was thrown out this month by the judge overseeing the NFL case, Senior U.S. District Judge Anita B. Brody. He has appealed her decision to a federal circuit court.

“It’s just very hard after the fact to make sure that Black players are carefully represented if you don’t have a seat at the table,” Smith said.

Christopher Seeger, whom Brody appointed to serve as class counsel for the players, clawed back at Smith’s firm in a caustic memo filed Monday. He insisted he could resolve the race-norming issue — which Smith and others say developed on his watch — without their help.

Seeger, in the filing, agreed to seek “purely race-neutral demographic norms” and “investigate whether any class member has been disadvantaged by race norming.”

“The process is not simple, and it will take time. Demographic norms that adjust for race, when clinically appropriate, have been used for decades and are generally accepted by experts in the field of neuropsychology,” he wrote.

He stopped short of pledging a wholesale review of the tests scored to date. About 570 of the 2,000 retirees filing dementia claims so far, or 28%, have gotten awards. And thousands more were tested but never filed claims because their scores did not appear to qualify them for payments.

NFL spokesperson Brian McCarthy did not immediately return a message seeking comment on whether the NFL would agree to eliminate race-norming in the testing and review prior claims and test scores.

Smith and others believe the claims administrator could fairly quickly sort the data and payouts by race.

There has long been acrimony in the case between Seeger and dozens of other lawyers involved over terms of the settlement and the fact the judge awarded him more than \$51 million of the \$112 million in legal fees.

He joined the case after the first concussion lawsuits were filed against the NFL in 2011. Two years later, he helped steer a surprise \$765 million settlement that kept the NFL from disclosing in court what it knew about concussions and head injuries. The cap was later lifted, and the payments, now nearing \$800 million, are expected to reach more than \$1 billion.

Follow Maryclaire Dale on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Maryclairedale>

Putin to get coronavirus vaccine shot in Russia on Tuesday

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin said he will get a coronavirus vaccine shot on Tuesday, several months after widespread vaccination started in Russia.

Kremlin opponents have criticized Putin for not getting vaccinated amid a comparatively slow rollout of the shot in Russia, arguing that his reluctance is contributing to the already extensive hesitance about the vaccine. Russia, where only 4.3% of the 146-million population have received at least one dose, lags behind a number of countries in terms of the vaccination rate.

Surveys by Russia’s top independent pollster Levada Center have shown that a number of Russians reluctant to get vaccinated with Sputnik V has grown in recent months — to 62% in February from 58% in December. The Kremlin has said it doesn’t see a connection between Putin not getting vaccinated and public trust in the Russian COVID-19 vaccine.

Putin, 68, told a meeting with government officials and vaccine developers on Monday that he will get his shot “tomorrow,” without specifying which coronavirus vaccine out of the three authorized for use in Russia he will take.

Russian authorities have given regulatory approval to three domestically developed shots. Sputnik V has been approved last August with much fanfare at home and criticism abroad, because at the time it had only been tested on a few dozen people.

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But a recent study published in British medical journal The Lancet showed the Sputnik V is 91% effective and appears to prevent inoculated individuals from becoming severely ill with COVID-19, although it's still unclear if the vaccine can prevent the spread of the disease.

Two other Russian vaccines, EpiVacCorona and CoviVac, have also received regulatory approval before completing late-stage trials experts say are necessary to ensure their safety and effectiveness in line with established scientific protocol. EpiVacCorona is still undergoing these trials, while CoviVac was to begin them in March. No data on efficacy of these two vaccines have been released.

Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov also wouldn't say which one of the three Putin will take on Tuesday, saying only that "all of them are good and reliable."

According to the Russian president, 6.3 million people in Russia have already received at least one shot, and more than 4.3 million have had two doses.

Putin said that 60% of Russian adults need to be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity, which requires a total of 69.8 million vaccines. As of March 17, around 8.9 million two-dose sets of Sputnik V have been released into circulation in Russia, as well as over 115,000 two-dose sets of EpiVacCorona, the Russian leader said.

"Today we can confidently say ... that the Russian vaccines are absolutely reliable and safe," Putin said. "It is an absolute success of our scientists and specialists."

Putin and his spokesman have been repeatedly asked why the president hasn't been vaccinated so far. In December, the Russian leader said Sputnik V wasn't being recommended to people of a certain age, adding that "vaccines have not yet reached people like me."

At the time, the shot was only being offered to people ages 18 to 60, but in less than two weeks after Putin's remarks Russian health authorities cleared the vaccine for those older than 60.

Last month, Russia's Kommersant newspaper reported that Putin said he might get vaccinated at the end of the summer or beginning of the fall. The newspaper quoted Putin telling Russian media managers at a closed-door meeting that he didn't want to do it for publicity's sake in front of cameras and that he had other vaccinations scheduled already.

Peskov said Monday he didn't "expect" Putin's vaccination on Tuesday "to be a public event."

Russia has been actively marketing Sputnik V abroad, despite the slow rollout at home, in what some analysts see as an effort to score geopolitical points. Dozens of countries have approved the use of Sputnik V and signed deals with Russia to get shipments of the shot. Exporting the vaccines, however, has not been without delays, and questions remained whether Moscow had the capacity to deliver on its promises.

In order to boost production, the Russian Direct Investment Fund that bankrolled the vaccine signed agreements with pharmaceutical companies in several countries, including India, South Korea, Brazil, Turkey and most recently Italy. Putin said on Monday such agreements amounted to a total of 700 million vaccines a year.

"The geography of using the Russian Sputnik V is actively growing. Even despite deliberate discrediting of our vaccine, various hoaxes and sometimes outright nonsense, more states all around the world express interest in our vaccine," Putin said.

The Russian president took aim at officials in the European Union, some of whom have expressed reluctance about using Sputnik V even though the bloc has been criticized for a slow vaccine rollout.

On Sunday, Internal Market Commissioner Thierry Breton, who heads the European Commission's vaccine task force, told French television that the EU "has absolutely no need" for Sputnik V.

Putin called the statement "bizarre" and insisted that Russia was "not imposing anything on anyone," questioning whether European officials protect the interests "some pharmaceutical companies or the interests of citizens of European countries."

Sputnik V hasn't yet been approved for use in the EU, but the body's regulator, the European Medicines Agency, or EMA, started a rolling review of the vaccine earlier this month.

Some EU nations have decided not to wait for the EMA's approval, and Hungary became the first EU country to authorize Sputnik V for use last month while Slovakia announced a deal last week to acquire 2 million Sputnik V doses in a move that prompted a political crisis in the country.

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AstraZeneca: US data shows vaccine effective for all adults

By MARIA CHENG and LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — AstraZeneca reported Monday that its COVID-19 vaccine provided strong protection among adults of all ages in a long-anticipated U.S. study, a finding that could help rebuild public confidence in the shot around the world and move it a step closer to clearance in the U.S.

In the study of 30,000 people, the vaccine was 79% effective at preventing symptomatic cases of COVID-19 — including in older adults. There were no severe illnesses or hospitalizations among vaccinated volunteers, compared with five such cases in participants who received dummy shots — a small number, but consistent with findings from Britain and other countries that the vaccine protects against the worst of the disease.

AstraZeneca also said the study's independent safety monitors found no serious side effects, including no increased risk of rare blood clots like those identified in Europe, a scare that led numerous countries to briefly suspend vaccinations last week.

"I do hope it puts to bed any doubts about the vaccine efficacy," Mene Pangalos, AstraZeneca's biopharmaceuticals research chief, told The Associated Press. "Overall where the vaccine is being used, it's been shown to be highly effective. So I hope that the U.S. study now will continue to give the vaccine some momentum and get it used even further around the world."

The company aims to file an application with the Food and Drug Administration in the coming weeks, and the government's outside advisers will publicly debate the evidence before the agency makes a decision. Pangalos said the vaccine could win emergency authorization toward the second half of April. If so, the company would deliver 30 million doses immediately and an additional 20 million within the first month.

What that will mean for America's vaccination plans is unclear. The Biden administration already projects there will be enough doses for all adults by the end of May thanks to increasing supplies from the makers of the three vaccines already in use in the U.S. — Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson.

Federal officials said they didn't want to prejudge the FDA's review but cast the AstraZeneca findings as a victory both for the U.S. supply and the global fight against the virus.

"There are very many countries in Europe and throughout the world who have already authorized this, so the fact that a United States-run study has confirmed the efficacy and the safety of this vaccine I think is an important contribution to global health in general," said Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert.

The AstraZeneca shot, which has been authorized in more than 70 countries, is a pillar of a U.N.-backed project known as COVAX that aims to get COVID-19 vaccines to poorer countries. It has also become a key tool in European countries' efforts to boost their sluggish vaccine rollouts. That made doubts about the shots especially worrying.

Even before the blood clot scare, scientists hoped the U.S. study would clear up some confusion about how well the vaccine really works. While previous research suggested it was effective in younger populations, there were questions about how well it protects those over 65, often those most vulnerable to COVID-19.

Also, Britain authorized the vaccine based on partial results from testing in the United Kingdom, Brazil and South Africa that suggested the shots were about 70% effective. But those results were clouded by a manufacturing mistake that led some participants to get just a half dose in their first shot.

Stephen Evans, of the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, said the new data could help allay concerns.

"The benefits of these results will mainly be for the rest of the world where confidence in the AZ vaccine

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has been eroded, largely by political and media comment," he said.

Two-thirds of the volunteers in the U.S. study received the vaccine and the rest dummy shots, and Monday's report is based on the first 141 COVID-19 cases reported after the second vaccine dose kicked in. AstraZeneca declined to provide a breakdown of those cases, as it continues to prepare its FDA submission.

But Fauci said the study was careful to include different ages, racial and ethnic minorities, and people with underlying health conditions, and found "comparable efficacy across ethnicity and age."

Dr. Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia, said the results were reassuring but that more details are needed to back up AstraZeneca's claims.

"But this should add confidence that the vaccine is doing what it is most needed for," said Hunter, who was not connected to the study.

On the safety front, France, Germany, Italy and other countries have resumed their use of the AstraZeneca vaccine after the suspension last week to investigate clots. On Thursday, the European Medicines Agency concluded the vaccine did not raise the overall risk of clots, but could not rule out that it was connected to two very rare types.

In the U.S., as in Britain and Europe, major efforts already are underway to watch for any unexpected problems as the first vaccines are rolling out. And as the U.S. considers AstraZeneca's vaccine, Fauci said, "You can rest assured that the FDA will put a great deal of scrutiny in every aspect of these data."

The AstraZeneca shot is what scientists call a "viral vector" vaccine. The shots are made with a harmless cold virus that normally infects chimpanzees. It acts like a Trojan horse to carry genetic material from the coronavirus's spike protein into the body. That primes the immune system to fight back if the real virus comes along.

Two other companies, Johnson & Johnson and China's CanSino Biologics, make COVID-19 vaccines using the same technology but using different cold viruses.

Neergaard reported from Washington.

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Israeli election seen as referendum on divisive Netanyahu

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israelis vote Tuesday in their fourth parliamentary election in just two years. Once again, the race boils down to a referendum on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Netanyahu, who has served as prime minister for the past 12 years, hopes voters will reward him for leading the country's successful coronavirus vaccine rollout and his diplomatic outreach to the Arab world. His challengers have highlighted his earlier missteps in combatting the virus, his ongoing corruption trial, and his reliance on divisive religious and ultra-nationalist allies.

Over the years, Netanyahu has developed a reputation as a political magician and master manipulator capable of surviving any crisis. With witnesses set to take the stand against him next month, Netanyahu is hoping for another miracle that could deliver a friendlier parliament willing to grant him immunity or freeze his trial. Opponents portray him as a serial liar who has caused two years of political paralysis by putting his political survival and legal troubles ahead of the country's interests.

Opinion polls forecast an extremely tight race, raising the possibility of continued deadlock and even an unprecedented fifth consecutive election. Netanyahu appears to hold a slight advantage because of the intricacies of Israel's political system.

In Israel, people vote for parties, not individual candidates. Netanyahu's Likud is again poised to emerge as the largest individual party. But since no party has ever won a 61-seat parliamentary majority on its own, political alliances must be formed to create a governing coalition. If the opinion polls prove accurate, Netanyahu would have a clearer path to building a government than the array of rivals that have little in

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common beyond their animosity toward him.

Here is a look at the key factors that could determine whether Netanyahu or any of his challengers can clinch that elusive 61-seat majority.

VACCINE NATION:

Netanyahu has staked his re-election hopes on the success of Israel's successful vaccination campaign. Netanyahu last December moved quickly and aggressively, personally lobbying the CEOs of Pfizer and Moderna to secure enough vaccines for Israel's 9.3 million people. In under three months, Israel has vaccinated some 80% of its adult population. With infection rates plunging, that has allowed the country to reopen schools, restaurants, museums and the main airport just in time for election day. Netanyahu is fond of saying that Israel, which long billed itself as the "Start-up Nation" because of its hi-tech sector, has become the "Vaccine Nation."

Opponents have accused Netanyahu of bungling the management of the pandemic over the past year. A series of lockdowns hit the economy hard, thousands of businesses failed and unemployment remains in double digits. Many also have bitter memories of Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox allies flouting lockdown rules and point to the country's more than 6,000 COVID-19 deaths.

With the economy coming back to life, Netanyahu is hoping the growing sense of normalcy will make voters forget the difficulties of the past year. This may explain that while polls show a majority of Israelis want Netanyahu replaced, he also is seen as best-suited to be prime minister.

"In people's minds, first and foremost when you go into an election, is the identity of the prime minister," said Yohanan Plesner, president of the Israel Democracy Institute. "In many ways, this works in Netanyahu's favor because it's unclear who the opponent is."

SHOULD I STAY OR SHOULD I GO?

Opinion polls have indicated that some 15% of voters remain undecided. Tuesday's election will hinge not only on who these voters support, but whether they choose to vote at all.

Analysts expect turnout to be lower than the 71% level of the most recent election a year ago, in part because of continued concerns about the coronavirus along with general voter fatigue. Israel is providing special accommodations, including separate booths and mobile ballot stations, to allow people who are sick or in quarantine to vote.

But more important than overall turnout will be voter participation in key sectors. Netanyahu's religious and nationalist allies tend to have highly motivated voters. Arab voters, disappointed with the disintegration of the Arab "Joint List" bloc, are expected to stay home in larger numbers this time around. Voters in the more liberal and secular areas around Tel Aviv also tend to have lower rates of participation. Netanyahu could benefit if these trends materialize.

ON THE EDGES

This election could well hinge on the showing of a few small parties. In order to enter the Knesset, or parliament, a party must receive at least 3.25% of the vote, giving them a minimum of four seats in the 120-seat body.

Pollster Camil Fuchs said four small parties are hovering near the threshold. Of these, the dovish Meretz party and the centrist Blue and White are "much more in danger" of not getting enough support, according to recent polls, he said. Both are opposed to Netanyahu.

The Religious Zionist party, a small pro-Netanyahu faction that includes openly racist and homophobic candidates, appears to be gaining strength. If one of the anti-Netanyahu parties fails to get in, a strong showing by the Religious Zionists put Netanyahu over the top.

THE KINGMAKERS

Despite the tight race, neither Netanyahu and his religious and hardline allies, nor the anti-Netanyahu

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bloc, led by Yair Lapid's centrist Yesh Atid party, are expected to capture a majority of seats on their own. That sets the stage for former Netanyahu aide Naftali Bennett to emerge as the decisive voice in coalition building. Bennett's Yamina party supports the same hard-line ideology as the Likud. But the two men have a notoriously strained relationship, and Bennett has refused to commit to either side.

Given their similar world views, Bennett, who has served as Netanyahu's education and defense minister, appears to be better suited to join Netanyahu than the anti-Netanyahu bloc, which ranges from dovish Arab parties to former Netanyahu allies who have had bitter personal breakups with him. Still, if offered the chance to be prime minister, Bennett could side with Netanyahu's opponents.

Some polls have forecast both sides falling short of a coalition even with Bennett's support. That could create the unlikely scenario of a small Islamic party led by Arab lawmaker Mansour Abbas as kingmaker -- or simply forcing a fifth election.

MISSING IN ACTION

In the previous three elections, Netanyahu boasted of his close alliance with then-President Donald Trump, posting massive billboards on highways and high-rises showing the men together. With Joe Biden now occupying the White House, Netanyahu has barely mentioned the new president, whose administration has given him a cool reception.

Likewise, there has been almost no mention of the Palestinians, reflecting the years-long freeze in substantive peace efforts. Biden has indicated he will soon re-engage with the Palestinians. That could make it difficult for the next Israeli leader to ignore the issue — or Biden.

Mysterious new system at border keeps migrants guessing

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

BROWNSVILLE, Texas (AP) — After hearing rumors that Central American families with younger children were being allowed into the U.S., Irma Paz left Honduras with her husband and two kids on a nearly two-month journey to the banks of the Rio Grande.

They waded through the cold waters, turned themselves in to immigration authorities and were allowed in the country to request asylum.

"I thought, 'Thank you, my Lord.' We made the cut," she said while waiting at a Brownsville bus station with her son and daughter, ages 3 and 5. They planned to travel to Oklahoma to join her father-in-law, carrying documents to present at a future immigration court hearing.

Meanwhile, in the border town of Reynosa, Mexico, a mother from El Salvador sobbed after U.S. border authorities expelled her and her 8-year-old daughter. Their circumstances were almost the same as Paz's family, but they suffered a completely different fate — the result of a mysterious new system under President Joe Biden's administration that governs the fate of thousands of migrants with children who have arrived at the border in recent weeks.

The criteria to be allowed into the U.S. are a closely held secret. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas has referred only to "acute vulnerabilities" that qualify families for release in the United States to pursue asylum instead of immediate expulsion.

The mystery leaves migrants guessing as they arrive at the border.

For Paz, the system meant a ticket to Tulsa and a chance to reconnect with relatives. For the Salvadoran woman, Roxana Cardosa, it meant being banished to a violent Mexican border city with no food or money and sleeping on the concrete of a plaza.

The expulsions are among many challenges confronting the new administration at the border as it tries to maintain some elements of former President Donald Trump's deterrent policies while taking a softer stance toward the most vulnerable migrants. The issue also looms over Biden's efforts to pass landmark legislation that would grant a path to citizenship to all of the estimated 11 million people who are in the U.S. illegally.

The asylum system arose from an emergency measure enacted during the coronavirus pandemic by the

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Trump administration that is being applied unevenly by Biden.

More than seven of 10 encounters at the border in February resulted in expulsions under pandemic-related powers known as "Title 42," named for a section of an obscure public health law the Trump administration invoked a year ago.

Biden has kept Title 42 in place as he designs what he promises will be "a humane asylum system." Citizens of Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador are usually back in Mexico within two hours, while other nationalities are held in the U.S. to be flown home without a chance at asylum.

In a break from Trump, the Biden administration releases most children traveling alone to relatives in the U.S. and gives them notices to appear in immigration court. Nearly 9,500 such children arrived in February, up 60% from a month earlier.

Nine of every 10 encounters with single adults in February resulted in expulsions under Title 42. Mayorkas said last week that the U.S. makes exceptions only for adults with "certain acute vulnerabilities," without elaborating.

Families fall in the middle, with six of 10 encounters ending in expulsion during February. Another factor, Mayorkas said, is that Mexico sometimes restricts the return of families, including in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. The number of family arrivals in February topped 19,200, more than double the level from month earlier.

Limited detention space for nationalities that cannot be expelled to Mexico may also influence who gets released in the U.S., said Theresa Cardinal Brown, managing director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

The administration has strong incentive to keep its reasoning secret.

"We know that once the criteria is made known, migrant decisions follow," said Brown, a former Homeland Security Department official.

That has not stopped migrants from guessing.

About 2,000 migrants were encountered in the Rio Grande area Thursday, compared to an average daily peak of about 1,600 under Trump in May 2019, said Brian Hastings, chief of that sector for the Border Patrol.

Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley received 150 to 200 family members a day from U.S. authorities last week, but the number fluctuates, said the group's executive director, Sister Norma Pimentel. The Border Patrol appeared to be releasing families with children under 6.

One of those families was released Sunday as the sun set in McAllen, Texas. Joel Lobo, 30, held his 4-year-old daughter's hand to cross a busy road. His wife and older daughter stayed in Honduras. He had heard from his sister and father in Virginia that only families with younger children were being processed for asylum.

Lobo left two weeks earlier to reach Reynosa, saying he was fleeing poverty. They crossed the river and walked dirt roads before turning themselves over to the Border Patrol. They slept in the dirt under a bridge for a night while in U.S. custody.

"She is still upset with me," said Lobo, looking at his daughter Fernanda, who smirks back at him as he explains she was scared and cold on the journey. "It was all quite risky and overall a long trip. But we are relieved."

The future is bleaker for families bounced back to Mexico.

Cardosa, 25, the Salvadoran woman who was expelled with her daughter, waited at a plaza outside a Mexican government building in Reynosa. Mexican officials on Saturday forced them to leave the premises for a nearby park.

"I don't know what's next for us," she said, shifting her gaze between dozens of other migrants. "This is going to be hard. It's not easy to go back home."

Edrei Rodriguez, a Baptist pastor who frequents the area where migrants are dropped off by U.S. officials, said some families arrive with false hopes.

"With the change of government, they heard there were a lot of opportunities, and they decided to come," he said. "They took a chance, but they had no plan B."

Associated Press Writer Elliot Spagat in San Diego contributed to this report.

Saudi Arabia offers cease-fire plan to Yemen rebels

By JON GAMBRELL and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia on Monday offered a cease-fire proposal to Yemen's Houthi rebels that includes reopening their country's main airport, the kingdom's latest attempt to halt years of fighting in a war that has sparked the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

The move comes after the rebels stepped up a campaign of drone and missile attacks on the kingdom's oil sites, briefly shaking global energy prices amid the coronavirus pandemic. It also comes as Riyadh tries to rehabilitate its image with the U.S. under President Joe Biden. Saudi Arabia has drawn international criticism for airstrikes killing civilians and embargoes exacerbating hunger in a nation on the brink of famine.

Whether the plan will take hold remains another question. A unilaterally declared Saudi cease-fire collapsed last year. Fighting rages around the crucial city of Marib and the Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes as recently as Sunday targeting Yemen's capital of Sanaa. A U.N. mission said another suspected airstrike hit a food-production company in the port city of Hodeida.

"We want the guns to fall completely silent," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan told journalists at a televised news conference in Riyadh. "It is up to the Houthis now. We are ready to go today. We hope we can have a cease-fire immediately, but the onus is on the Houthis."

A senior Houthi official, who spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity in line with regulations, said the rebels had been aware of the proposal and in direct communication with the Saudis, as well as interlocutors from Oman. However, he said the Saudis needed to do more to see a cease-fire implemented, something reiterated by others in the Iranian-backed rebel group.

Saudi Arabia said the plan would be presented both to the Houthis and Yemen's internationally recognized government later Monday. Both would need to accept the plan for it to move forward, with any timeline likely to be set by U.N. Special Envoy to Yemen Martin Griffiths.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the announcement, said U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq.

"There is no doubt that every effort must be made to end the conflict and the suffering of the Yemeni people, and the United Nations looks forward to continuing its work with the parties to achieve this goal," Haq said.

He said Griffiths "has been working extensively with the parties to see what can be done to bring them together on the sort of proposals that he made in the Security Council. ... So he will be in touch with the Houthis, as with all parties, to see whether we can go further on this."

Saudi Arabia made two concessions to the Houthis in the plan, while not offering everything the rebels previously wanted. The first involves reopening Sanaa International Airport, a vital link for Yemen to the outside world that hasn't seen regular commercial flights since 2015. Officials did not immediately identify what commercial routes they wanted to see resume.

The second would see taxes, customs and other fees generated by the Hodeida port while importing oil put into a joint account of Yemen's Central Bank. That account would be accessible to the Houthis and Yemen's recognized government to pay civil servants and fund other programs, officials said.

The Saudi government and the Yemeni government it backs have accused the Houthis of stealing those funds in the past. A report this year by a U.N. panel of experts said the Houthis "diverted" about \$200 million from that fund.

"Only a small portion of the funds were used to pay salaries," the report said.

Whether the Houthis accept the Saudi proposal remains in question. On Friday, Houthi leader Mohammed Ali al-Houthi proposed a nationwide cease-fire contingent upon Saudi Arabia reopening Sanaa's airport to commercial flights and lifting restrictions on cargo shipments to Hodeida. The port handles most of the country's vital imports. Both are long-standing demands of the Houthis, who swept into Sanaa from their

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northwestern strongholds in September 2014.

"There is nothing new about the Saudi initiative," another senior Houthi official told the AP on condition of anonymity in line with regulations. "First, the airport and the port must both be opened."

Prince Faisal criticized the Houthis for making "only more and more demands."

"The Houthis must decide whether to put their interests first or ... Iran's interests first," the prince said.

The Saudi-led coalition entered Yemen's war in March 2015 as the Houthis threatened to take Yemen's port city of Aden and completely overrun the country's internationally recognized government. The Saudis promised that the offensive — the brainchild of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — would be over in short order.

Six years later, the fighting rages on. The war has killed some 130,000 people, including over 13,000 civilians slain in targeted attacks, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Project. Tens of thousands of children have died of starvation and disease. The conflict also has turned into a regional conflict, with the Saudis using U.S.-made weaponry, and Iran linked to weapons used by the Houthis to target the kingdom.

Last week, Griffiths warned that "the war is back in full force." Hundreds of fighters have been killed in the offensive on Marib, while other once-dormant front lines have seen renewed fighting. Saudi television channels repeatedly show black-and-white drone footage set to dramatic music of bombs dropping on suspected Houthi targets.

Yemen's internationally recognized government praised the Saudi initiative as an effort to "ease the suffering of the Yemeni people." But in a statement, its Foreign Affairs Ministry also warned that the Houthis had "met all previous initiatives with obstinacy and procrastination" and had "worked to deepen the humanitarian crisis."

Since Biden took office, his administration reversed a decision by former President Donald Trump naming the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organization, allowing U.S. aid to flow into rebel-held territory. He also ended U.S. support for the Saudis in the war.

Biden sent the U.S. envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking, to the region to negotiate a political settlement. Lenderking said earlier this month that the Houthis had an unspecified cease-fire proposal before them for a "number of days," without elaborating. He reportedly met with Houthi officials while on a February trip to Oman, something the State Department has declined to acknowledge.

In a statement, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said he had spoken to the Saudi foreign minister about the war.

Blinken supports efforts "to end the conflict in Yemen, starting with the need for all parties to commit to a cease-fire and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid," the statement said.

Associated Press writers Ahmed al-Haj in Sanaa, Yemen, Edith M. Lederer at the United Nations and Matthew Lee in Washington contributed.

Court could reimpose Boston Marathon bomber's death sentence

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court said Monday it will consider reinstating the death sentence for Boston Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, presenting President Joe Biden with an early test of his opposition to capital punishment.

The justices agreed to hear an appeal filed by the Trump administration, which carried out executions of 13 federal inmates in its final six months in office, including three in the last week of President Donald Trump's term.

The case won't be heard until the fall, and it's unclear how the new administration will approach Tsarnaev's case. The initial prosecution and decision to seek a death sentence was made by the Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president.

Biden has pledged to seek an end to the federal death penalty, but he has said nothing about how he

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plans to do so.

In just over two months in office, the new administration has reversed its predecessor's position in several high court cases. But the Justice Department has not notified the court of any change in its position in Tsarnaev's case.

Even if the court were to reinstate the death sentence, nothing would force Biden to schedule an execution date.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki did not say how Biden or his administration would approach the case at the Supreme Court. "He has grave concerns about whether capital punishment as currently implemented is consistent with the values that are fundamental to our sense of justice and fairness. He has also expressed his horror at the events of that day and Tsarnaev's actions," Psaki told reporters.

In late July, the federal appeals court in Boston threw out Tsarnaev's sentence because, it said, the judge at his trial did not do enough to ensure the jury would not be biased against him.

The Justice Department had moved quickly to appeal, asking the justices to hear and decide the case by the end of the court's current term, in early summer. Then-Attorney General William Barr said last year, "We will do whatever's necessary."

Tsarnaev's lawyers acknowledged at the beginning of his trial that he and his older brother, Tamerlan Tsarnaev, set off the two bombs at the marathon finish line on April 15, 2013. But they argued that Dzhokhar Tsarnaev is less culpable than his brother, who they said was the mastermind behind the attack.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev, 26, died following a gunfight with police and being run over by his brother as he fled. Police captured a bloodied and wounded Dzhokhar Tsarnaev hours later in the Boston suburb of Watertown, where he was hiding in a boat parked in a backyard.

Tsarnaev, now 27, was convicted of all 30 charges against him, including conspiracy and use of a weapon of mass destruction and the killing of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology police officer during the Tsarnaev brothers' getaway attempt. The appeals court upheld all but a few of his convictions.

This story has been corrected to show the federal appeals court threw out the sentence in late July, not in August.

Elton John opens his Oscar night party to all this year

By The Associated Press undefined

Attending Elton John's long-running Oscar-night party has always been one of the hardest tickets to get. Now you can go — if you have \$20.

The Elton John AIDS Foundation is inviting everyone to an hourlong, virtual pre-show Oscar party special hosted by Neil Patrick Harris and with a performance by Dua Lipa.

Tickets for the April 25 event are \$19.99 and are available via Ticketmaster. Proceeds will go to young people at risk and living with HIV all over the world.

The foundation is one of the leading independent AIDS organizations in the world. One of its fundraising highlights is the star-studded Oscar viewing show, with a dinner and an auction. This time, a pre-show will be available to ticket buyers.

The special will be hosted four times in four different time zones and each will accommodate 100,000 viewers, meaning a total of 400,000 ticket buyers are allowed access.

"Now more than ever, we need to ensure that one pandemic does not override another, and we cannot forget the 38 million people living with HIV globally who need our care, love and support so we hope everyone joins us for this special one of a kind Oscar Pre-Party," John said in a statement.

Bill to aid US publishers vs. Google, Facebook rises again

By TALI ARBEL AP Technology Writer

A congressional effort to bolster U.S. news organizations in negotiations with Big Tech has supporters

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hoping that third time's the charm.

The bill, the Journalism Competition and Preservation Act, was introduced in March for the third time since 2018. Its odds of passage may have improved in a Democrat-run Congress that's working on overhauling antitrust laws.

Australia and other countries have started pushing mechanisms to support news publishers against Facebook and Google, which dominate online advertising. Publishers argue that Big Tech squeezes news organizations out of digital ad revenue and exerts undue control over who can see their journalism.

The bill would offer a four-year antitrust exemption to publishers so they can negotiate as a group with "dominant online platforms." Facebook and Google get the majority of online ad dollars in the U.S. The measure aims to give publishers better leverage with the tech companies, while only allowing coordination that benefits the news industry as a whole, amid a long-running decline in local news.

Rep. David Cicilline, a Rhode Island Democrat and one of the bill's sponsors, said in prepared remarks for a hearing earlier this month that the legislation would provide news publishers an "even playing field" to negotiate deals with major tech platforms. The news industry is struggling with falling revenues, shrinking newsrooms and failing publications — which Cicilline and others call a threat to democracy — while Google and Facebook rack up billions in profits.

"This bill is a life support measure, not the answer for ensuring the long-term health of the news industry," the congressman said.

While the bill has Republican cosponsors in both the House and Senate, some Republicans in the same hearing expressed reservations. Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican, said he worried about giving more power to large media companies that would suppress conservatives' opinions. Republicans often assert without evidence that tech companies censor conservatives and right-wing media.

The News Guild, a union that represents journalists, says the bill would work best with additional provisions to support jobs. It has long objected to media consolidation and criticizes many publishers for impeding unionization and slashing newsroom jobs, particularly at chains owned by hedge funds and private equity firms.

News Guild president Jon Schleuss would like the legislation to require publishers to spend 60% of the revenue won from bargaining to hire more journalists and also support small papers and fund start-ups in "news deserts," areas where papers have folded, worried that instead it might be spent on things like dividends, stock buybacks and squeezing out higher profit margins.

Microsoft, whose president testified during the hearing, supports the bill. Google and Facebook on Friday declined to comment on the legislation.

In February, however, Facebook took the extraordinary step of banning Australian news from its platform to protest a law that would have required it to negotiate with publishers to compensate them for its use of news content. Facebook lifted the ban once the government agreed to modify the law. Microsoft, meanwhile, has teamed up with European publishers to support measures similar to the Australian law in Europe.

Over the past few years, Facebook, Google, Amazon and Apple have all come under increasing scrutiny from Congress and regulators. The Justice Department, Federal Trade Commission and state attorneys general are suing the internet giants for a variety of antitrust violations, some of which are related to the woes of publishers.

Miami Beach curfew aims to shut down Spring Break partying

By KELLI KENNEDY Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — A party-ending curfew imposed after fights, gunfire, property destruction and dangerous stampedes broke out among huge crowds of people in Miami Beach could extend through the end of spring break.

Miami Beach commissioners voted unanimously Sunday to empower the city manager to extend the curfew in the South Beach entertainment district until at least April 12, effectively shutting down a spring

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break hot spot in one of the few states fully open during the pandemic.

SWAT teams and law enforcement officers from at least four other agencies sought to contain the raucous crowds, but confrontations continued for days before Miami Beach officials enacted the curfew, which forces Ocean Drive restaurants to stop outdoor seating entirely.

City Manager Raul Aguila said many people from other states were coming in "to engage in lawlessness and an 'anything goes' party attitude." He said most weren't patronizing the businesses that badly need tourism dollars, and instead merely congregating by the thousands in the street.

Miami Beach Police said more than 1,000 people have been arrested this spring break season, with about 80 guns seized. Police Chief Richard Clements said the trouble intensified on Monday, when an unusually large crowd blocked Ocean Drive "and basically had an impromptu street party." By Thursday, fights were breaking out, setting off dangerous stampedes of people fleeing for safety.

The partying was out of control by Friday night, he said — one restaurant was "turned upside down" in a melee, its "chairs were used as weapons," and broken glass covered the floor. The iconic Clevelander South Beach bar next door had to suspend all food and beverage operations. Gunshots were fired, and a young woman was hospitalized with a badly cut leg, police said.

"How many more things are we going to allow to occur before we step in?" Clements said during Sunday's meeting. He defended the city's curfew, which also closes three causeways leading to South Beach in an effort to keep all but residents and employees from driving onto the island from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. Thursday through Sunday. "I think this was the right decision," the chief said.

The crowd was defiant but mostly nonviolent on Saturday night, refusing to submit to the curfew that had only been enacted four hours earlier, when officers in bulletproof vests released pepper spray balls to break up the party. A crowd showed up again Sunday night, defying the curfew yet again.

The situation ignited racial tensions. Some white residents referred to the crowd of predominantly Black tourists as "animals" or "thugs" on social media.

"We have to realize that we are definitely fighting an undertone of racism," DeAnne Connolly Graham, a member of Miami Beach's Black Affairs Advisory Committee, told the Miami Herald.

But Miami Beach Mayor Dan Gelber rejected the claim that anyone has been targeted for their race.

"When hundreds of people are running through the streets panicked, you realize that's not something that a police force can control," he said during the commission meeting Sunday.

Very few people in the crowds were covering their faces with masks, as is required by a Miami Beach ordinance imposed in hopes of containing the spread of the coronavirus, which has killed more than 33,000 people in Florida so far.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has insisted that Florida have no statewide mask rules, limits on capacity or other public health restrictions, which he credits for keeping the tourism economy going. "If you look at South Florida right now, this place is booming," DeSantis said last month. "Los Angeles isn't booming. New York City isn't booming."

Miami's tourism arm just spent \$5 million on its biggest national advertising campaign in 20 years, seeking a rebound after billions of dollars were lost to the pandemic, canceling last year's spring break and forcing beach closures across the Sunshine State.

Miami Beach, meanwhile, banned alcohol from the beach, along with all alcohol sales after 10 p.m., and even sent text messages to tourists warning, "Vacation Responsibly or Be Arrested."

Several commissioners said South Beach needs a new marketing campaign to rebrand its party-city image. They pointed to the handful of arrests in Fort Lauderdale, which has raised its hotel rates and promoted a "family friendly" spring break.

None of it sits well with people who were hoping to finally let loose in the pandemic.

"I just feel like it's really not fair," tourist Heather Price told NBC 6. "People paid a lot of money to come all the way out here, just to not be able to do the activities they wanted to."

Today in History

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By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Tuesday, March 23, the 82nd day of 2021. There are 283 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On March 23, 1775, Patrick Henry delivered an address to the Virginia Provincial Convention in which he is said to have declared, "Give me liberty, or give me death!"

On this date:

In 1792, Joseph Haydn's Symphony No. 94 in G Major (the "Surprise" symphony) had its first public performance in London.

In 1806, explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, having reached the Pacific coast, began their journey back east.

In 1919, Benito Mussolini founded his Fascist political movement in Milan, Italy.

In 1933, the German Reichstag adopted the Enabling Act, which effectively granted Adolf Hitler dictatorial powers.

In 1942, the first Japanese-Americans evacuated by the U.S. Army during World War II arrived at the internment camp in Manzanar, California.

In 1965, America's first two-person space mission took place as Gemini 3 blasted off with astronauts Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom and John W. Young aboard for a nearly 5-hour flight.

In 1973, before sentencing a group of Watergate break-in defendants, Chief U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica read aloud a letter he'd received from James W. McCord Jr. which said there was "political pressure" to "plead guilty and remain silent."

In 1993, scientists announced they'd found the renegade gene that causes Huntington's disease.

In 2001, Russia's orbiting Mir space station ended its 15-year odyssey with a planned fiery plunge into the South Pacific.

In 2003, during the Iraq War, a U.S. Army maintenance convoy was ambushed in Nasiriyah (nah-sih-REE'-uh); 11 soldiers were killed, including Pfc. Lori Ann Piestewa (py-ES'-tuh-wah); six were captured, including Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who was rescued on April 1, 2003.

In 2004, a federal commission concluded that Clinton and Bush administration officials had engaged in lengthy, ultimately fruitless diplomatic efforts instead of military action to try to get Osama bin Laden before the 9/11 attacks; top Bush officials countered that the terror attacks would have occurred even if the United States had killed the al-Qaida leader.

In 2010, claiming a historic triumph, President Barack Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, a \$938 billion health care overhaul.

Ten years ago: Academy Award-winning actor Elizabeth Taylor died in Los Angeles at age 79. NATO ships began patrolling off Libya's coast as airstrikes, missiles and energized rebels forced Moammar Gadhafi's tanks to roll back from two key western cities. A blast blamed on Palestinian militants ripped through a bus stop in Jerusalem, killing Mary Jean Gardner, a 59-year-old British tourist, and wounding two dozen other people, including five Americans. Army Spc. Jeremy Morlock pleaded guilty at his court-martial at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state to the murders of three unarmed Afghan civilians (he was sentenced to 24 years in prison).

Five years ago: President Barack Obama, on a fence-mending state visit to Buenos Aires, held up Argentina as an emerging world leader worthy of U.S. support, as he and President Mauricio Macri broke with years of tensions between their countries. Death claimed former baseball player-turned-broadcaster Joe Garagiola at age 90 and actor Ken Howard at age 71.

One year ago: President Donald Trump said he wanted to reopen the country for business in weeks, not months; he asserted that continued closures could result in more deaths than the coronavirus itself. Britain became the latest European country to go into effective lockdown, as Prime Minister Boris Johnson ordered the closure of most retail stores and banned public gatherings. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced plans to convert a New York City convention center into a hospital with 1,000 beds. The Federal Reserve unleashed its boldest effort yet to protect the U.S. economy from the coronavirus; the Fed would buy both

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government-backed and corporate debt. An Arizona health system said a Phoenix-area man had died, and his wife was in critical condition, after the couple took chloroquine phosphate, an additive used to clean fish tanks; President Donald Trump had falsely stated days earlier that the Food and Drug Administration had approved the use of the anti-malaria medication chloroquine to treat coronavirus.

Today's Birthdays: Movie director Mark Rydell is 92. International Motorsports Hall of Famer Craig Breedlove is 84. Former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is 69. Singer Chaka Khan is 68. Actor Amanda Plummer is 64. Actor Catherine Keener is 62. Actor Hope Davis is 57. Actor Richard Grieco is 56. Actor Marin Hinkle is 55. Rock singer-musician Damon Albarn (Blur) is 53. Actor Kelly Perine is 52. Actor-singer Melissa Errico is 51. Rock musician John Humphrey (The Nixons) is 51. Bandleader Reggie Watts (TV: "The Late Late Show With James Corden") is 49. Actor Randall Park is 47. Actor Michelle Monaghan is 45. Actor Keri Russell is 45. Actor Anastasia Griffith is 43. Gossip columnist-blogger Perez Hilton is 43. Actor Nicholle Tom is 43. Actor Brandon Dirden is 43. Country singer Brett Young is 40. Actor Nicolas Wright is 39. Actor Ben Rappaport is 35. NBA point guard Kyrie Irving is 29.