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Groton Area School District  
Active COVID-19 Cases  
Updated March 31, 2021; 12:12 PM

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## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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



## Living Stations presented at Groton SEAS Church

The youth of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Church of Groton and St. Joseph Catholic Church of Turton put on the Living Stations performance Wednesday at the Groton church. The event was livestreamed on [GDILIVE.COM](http://GDILIVE.COM) and is now archived at the [397news.com](http://397news.com) web site where GDI subscribers will have access to the video.



**Left to right are Jacob Traunfeld, VP of Business Development - Dan Harber, Director of Business Development- Lydia Nelson, Regional Director of Operations- Shana Bedford, Avantara Groton Administrator- Chamber Members Lori Westby, Becky Kotzer, Hope Block, Kelli Locke, April Abeln and Stacy Oliver; and Courtney Erickson, Remedy Rehab Director.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

## **Outpatient Therapy Launching at Groton and Milbank Avantara Facilities**

Two community facilities, Avantara Milbank and Avantara Groton, will begin offering outpatient therapy services in collaboration with Remedy Therapy on April 1, 2021. Using a personalized approach to care, licensed professionals will design regimens to achieve individuals' rehabilitation goals. A range of services aimed at optimizing patient recovery, including physical, occupational, and speech therapy, will be offered.

Avantara takes pride in offering guests quality, state-of-the-art medical care with a definitively personal touch. Building on its reputation of providing exceptional care and personalized services to guests in quality, state-of-the-art facilities; Avantara is excited to partner with Remedy Therapy to offer outpatient therapy services at its Milbank and Groton facilities. Remedy Therapy is an accomplished provider of rehab therapy services and a recognized leader in the care community. Following this initial launch, Avantara and Remedy Therapy will expand the program statewide in the coming weeks.

"We are honored to be a part of the community," said Shana Bedford, Healthcare Administrator for Avantara. "We look forward to continuing to provide high-quality care and exploring new ways to ensure guests meet and exceed their rehabilitation goals."

"Our team is thrilled to work together with the Avantara staff," said Danielle Box, Chief Executive Officer of Remedy Therapy. "Their patient-focused approach completely aligns with our philosophy, and we look forward to providing impactful therapy programs that ensure patients meet their health goals."

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**#402 in a series**

## **Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller**

There were 66,500 new cases reported today. Our total for the pandemic is now up to 30,481,800, which is 0.2% over yesterday. The seven-day new-case average is up to 66,064, which is 20 percent above a week ago. Those are not great numbers; look for Florida to blow up next. Hospitalizations are also up to 40,709 today. And we have now reported 551,525 deaths, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 1039 deaths reported today.

On March 31, 2020, one year ago today, we had 187,186 cases and 4047 deaths; we had reported over 800 deaths in the past 24 hours. More hospitals in the Northeast had refrigerated trucks parked outside for use as temporary morgues. Wyoming was the only state that had not yet reported a death. There were signs the new cases might be leveling off; we were around a week from the first peak—the one that should have been the last peak. Hospitals were running out of sedation drugs needed to intubate patients, that is, to put them on mechanical ventilation. They were also getting short of staff; large numbers were either infected or in quarantine due to exposures while patient loads were off the charts. These workers had begun to join the dying. States were desperate for supplies and on their own finding what they needed. Eighty percent of the population was under stay-at-home orders, and already there was pushback, a good deal of it from churches, something I find incomprehensible to this day. There was still a serious shortage of testing. Breweries and distilleries were diverting production capacity from beverages to hand sanitizer in an effort to meet the burgeoning demand; despite jokes circulating at the time, none of it was bourbon or beer-flavored.

We were starting to nail down more information about transmission, specifically the role of asymptomatic people in transmission, and along with that to realize that wearing face masks might interrupt transmission. The problem was, of course, that there weren't any medical-grade masks available for general use; hospitals couldn't keep them in stock for their own staff to wear, and those folks were far more heavily exposed to the virus than those of us walking around our regular lives—or staying home if we were paying attention to public health recommendations (which many of us were not). The idea was just being floated that maybe nonmedical cloth masks had some benefit, but no guidance had been issued yet because we weren't sure about that benefit as yet. Masking had become a matter for discussion among the physicians advising the administration on the public health response to the pandemic. In an interview with Dr. Sanjay Gupta for CNN, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said "Particularly now that we're getting some inklings that there's transmission of infection from an asymptomatic person who is not coughing, who is not sneezing, who just appears well. Well, then how do you think that's happening? It very well could be aerosol." He indicated the task force would be discussing masks, including cloth ones, saying, "Something doesn't have to be 100% effective to be beneficial." We were moving closer to a change in guidance.

There were over 857,000 cases worldwide with more than 37,600 deaths. Italy had lost 11,591 people. Spain had 94,417 cases and 8189 deaths. Iran had 44,606 cases and 2898 deaths. For weeks now, virtually all cases in China were imported; there was little domestic transmission occurring according to government reports. Much of the world was seeing increasing caseloads and deaths.

On this day, I posted my first information about vaccines. I was wrong about the timeline, projecting it would be at least a year before we had anything on the market—and I've seldom enjoyed being wrong so very much. If you're interested in the vaccine discussion, most of which (except for the bad prediction) is still apropos, check out my Update #37 posted March 31, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3474297942586587>.

And speaking of vaccines, there's large news about vaccines today: Pfizer and BioNTech announced today that their pediatric trials are showing their vaccine to be highly effective in children ages 12 to 15. (This vaccine is currently authorized for ages 16 and up.) Their words were "100% efficacy and robust" antibody responses. Their data are not yet released and have not yet been reviewed by independent experts, but if they hold up, we have a winner here. Among the 2260 children in the trial, the vaccine arm of which

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received the same vaccine dosage on the same schedule as adults and the control arm of which received placebo, no symptomatic infections were found in vaccinated children against 18 symptomatic cases in the placebo group. What's more, these kids produced much higher levels of antibodies than 16 to 25 year-olds did in the earlier phase 3 trial. The vaccine appears to be tolerated well in this group as well with the same minor side effects as seen in adults. There's a way to go yet on this one, but the companies say they are preparing to submit their results to the FDA and the European Medicines Agency with application for an expansion of the original emergency use authorization (EUA) here to the younger age group. We may be on track to vaccinating this age group by the time school starts in the fall. That would be excellent. The companies also have a trial underway in ages 5 to 11; we talked about that when it got underway last week. There are plans to run a trial for ages 2 to 5 starting next week, followed by ages 6 months to 2 years. We likely still won't see an EUA extension in these age groups until the end of the year or after.

For the record, Moderna, which is currently authorized for 18 and older, also has a 3000-participant trial in ages 12 to 17. Results should be ready in the next couple of months, so if these go well, we should see an extension in this EUA in time for school on this one too. They're at about the same point in the process as Pfizer and BioNTech with the younger children. AstraZeneca has started testing in 6 months and older, and Janssen/Johnson & Johnson are waiting for safety data in 12 and older before branching out to younger groups. Janssen/Johnson & Johnson has a study planned in 12 to 17 year-olds and another in infants up to 11 year-olds. As with vaccines for adults, monitoring of long-term safety and efficacy will continue for at least two years after EUA is granted or extended; at some point, these folks are going to want to apply for full licensure, and these data will be necessary for that application. It has been suggested that this is not too soon to get a plan together for vaccinating tens of millions of children so that, when the moment arrives, we have something ready to go. I would support that, and if I had a child in the house, I'd once again be willing to fight my way to the head of the line, only this time with the little one in tow. (I do not wish to discuss the example I would be setting for the little one either.)

Manufacturing snafu for the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine: A US plant that was supposed to be producing future US-bound doses of their vaccine had a quality control issue that has regulators delaying authorization of the plant's production while they investigate. Apparently, workers mixed up some ingredients, likely ruining 15 million already-produced doses and raising questions of how quickly the plant will receive authorization. So far, all the doses used in the US have been produced by a plant in the Netherlands, but this Baltimore plant is supposed to take over production for the US market as soon as its production lines are authorized by the FDA. The good news is that the quality control process works; this mistake didn't get shipped; it got addressed even before it was bottled, so to speak, as it should be. So it could set things back a bit, but will not have an effect on the company's ability to deliver the 20 million doses it is supposed to deliver this month. It is also not expected to prevent the US meeting the overall goal of producing enough vaccine for all adults by the end of May because Pfizer is currently shipping ahead of schedule and Moderna is about to receive authorization to put 15 doses in each vial. So we're probably still good, but this is disappointing. We'll see how serious the problem is—whether those 15 million doses have to be discarded, which seems likely—as the investigation wears on.

Let's talk about vaccine-induced immunity: How long does it last? The short answer is nobody knows; but the longer answer is there are many considerations here. I recently had a person saying, "What's the point in being vaccinated if it lasts only three months?" He asked the question because the current guidance says the immunity derived from the vaccine lasts at least three months, but he missed an important part of the statement: "at least." The reason the guidance is written this way is that we have data on large numbers of people in clinical trials only for three months, so all we can say for certain is that, after three months, you're still good. That does not mean your immunity's gone after three months; in fact, no one really thinks that at all. We're pretty darned sure it lasts much longer than that; we just don't know how much longer.

We have some models on which to base projections about the duration of immunity. We know that response to a vaccine is more robust than response to natural infection, but we don't know how this plays into duration. What we know about common coronaviruses that cause colds is that immunity to them

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lasts at least six to eight months and likely up to a year or two. We know that solid immunity following natural infection with SARS-CoV-2 lasts at least eight months, and so we figure that's sort of a starting point for the vaccine. People with more severe cases have stronger and longer-lasting immunity; so it is reasonable to conclude that vaccine-induced immunity will be at the top end of this range because we know this is a stronger response.

So then we come to the role of memory B cells (and T cells if we're right about the sorts of responses folks are having to vaccines). Memory cells can adapt to new variants, usually within a few days, which should be protective at least against severe infection. The current thinking is that we're likely going to be protected for a couple of years. David Topham, professor of microbiology and immunology and founding director of the Translational Immunology and Infectious Disease Institute at the University of Rochester, told the Washington Post, "I think this coronavirus is going to become like other seasonal coronaviruses in that you will either be vaccinated or infected as a child, have a mild illness and then when you see it as an adult, you're going to have some immunity. While it's not going to protect you from getting infected, the worst you'll get is a bad cold." I'd be cool with that.

Folks are still trying to get a handle on how long it takes for immunity to wane, and that's going to be important in scheduling boosters. So far, it appears the vaccines we have are effective against most or all current variants. The key will be what happens in the world of mutation in the future. We have talked and talked about the risks unchecked—or even just rampant—transmission poses to us all. If you missed those earlier conversations, check out the full discussion in my Update #377 posted March 6, 2021 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4500262516656786> for an explanation of why and how transmission is such a risk. There's work being done now in additional clinical trials to figure out how well and how long boosters will work and to sort out how to modify the current vaccines to pick up any new variants. Additionally, Janssen/Johnson & Johnson is testing a two-dose version of its product. The work didn't end when these vaccines were authorized; there is much yet to be done.

The new monthly Kaiser Family Foundation Vaccine Monitor poll, taken between March 15 and March 22, is out. It finds "The share of U.S. adults who report being vaccinated for COVID-19 or intending to do so as soon as possible continues to rise (currently 61%) and the share taking a "wait and see" approach continues to shrink (now 17%), while the share who say they will "definitely not" get the vaccine (13%) has remained about the same since December." Differences among racial/ethnic groups are shrinking. According to the polling, there is still a shortfall in available information about where and when folks can get vaccinated with three in ten unsure whether they're currently eligible in their state. About a third are having trouble making an appointment, but the share of those 65 and over who tried but were unable to get an appointment has declined from 16% to 7% since last month.

People who are skeptical about or opposed to vaccination have a variety of reasons for that. Some mistrust the government in general and are suspicious of the speed of development of the vaccines. The tracker-microchip fairy tale still plays a role for some. Some rural residents say it's not worth the logistics and travel time to be vaccinated. Messages tested that seem to be persuasive for some of the "wait and see" group included (1) vaccines are "nearly 100 percent effective at preventing hospitalization and death from Covid-19," (2) the new vaccines are based on a 20-year-old technology, (3) the trials included diverse volunteers, and (4) they're free. There is an indication financial incentives might help and that employers arranging for workplace vaccination would help. The greatest influence on those who are changing their minds appears to be seeing friends and neighbors being vaccinated. So keep talking about it as you get vaccinated.

Because of what one expert (whose name escapes me at the moment) has called population level experimentation, we will soon have data on an interesting possibility. The experimentation to which I refer is the decisions made in some countries to administer vaccines outside the dosing schedules tested in clinical trials. Maybe it's OK to do that, but since it hasn't been tested, we're taking some chances when we do that. Because variations are being practiced, some folks are following up—getting the data after trying the new thing in an entire population instead of before—to see how these things work. We talked

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a bit a few days ago about delaying the second dose of a two-dose vaccine; tonight, let's talk about the mix-and-match approach to vaccination where the first dose is one vaccine and the second is a different one. In the UK, that approach was implemented for circumstances where a second dose of the appropriate vaccine was unavailable when the second dose was due; the vaccines in question are the Oxford/AstraZeneca and the Pfizer/BioNTech. In upcoming weeks, researchers will take a look at blood specimens drawn from the people dosed in this manner to see what we have. It appears there are some clinical trials for some other combinations and animal testing underway for still others.

If we can get these big drug companies to play nicely together in clinical trials, we might gain a real benefit from these studies because there's a possibility two different vaccines that target slightly different parts of the virus would actually, when used in combination like this, yield a more broadly protective response than two doses of the same one—maybe not too, but there's just one way to find out. The method is not unheard of; it's called a heterologous prime-boost. (Heterologous means having different origins, prime refers to the first dose, and boost refers to the second.) There's been some preliminary work like this done with vaccines against other diseases, but nothing definitive. There are theoretical reasons to think this approach might produce a better response, but a lot of what we need to know now is simply whether it works as well—because with supply problems probably ongoing for the next year or two, it could get pretty important to understand just what does and does not work in this regard. There are 13 vaccines currently in use worldwide and another 67 in clinical trials, so this sort of research could get pretty relevant quite soon. It would be helpful if we can convince these big companies to collaborate in determining just which combinations—if any—would provide a protective response; that could inform decisions about vaccination across the globe and make it easier to get everyone protected. As I've said (many times), no one's really safe until everyone's safe.

Russia's state veterinary service announced today that they've approved a Covid-19 vaccine for animals, Karniak-Kov. They're marketing it for pets, although there is no evidence at all that pet cats or dogs can transmit the virus to humans, and the rare cases of infection in pets have not been serious. They are also targeting mink farmers. You may recall we've talked several times about fatal outbreaks on mink farms in several countries including the US; Denmark destroyed its entire mink industry in response to a transmission there from farmed mink to a human. Equally concerning, there was a case in Utah of transmission from a farmed animal to a wild mink; this sets up the possibility of establishing a wild animal reservoir in which the virus could mutate into something we really do not wish to encounter. Preventing infection in mink has worldwide benefit even for those who don't really approve of mink farming. The Russian agency has apparently had inquiries from fur farmers in various countries including the US. I should note there is an experimental animal vaccine in testing in the US; it was used in the San Diego Zoo's ape colony and is also being tested in mink. We talked about this earlier this month. Soon we may have our own version of an animal vaccine approved; I have to admit I have zero clue of the approval process for veterinary medicines in this country—can't say it's come up in my life before today. My brief note on this vaccine appears in my Update #375 posted on March 4 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4494831047199933>.

I had an aunt who was a teacher back in the '40s, '50s, and '60s. Because when I was a kid the typical mom in our rural area didn't work outside the home and wore a "housedress" every day, I remember being sort of awestruck when we met her for the first time, all dressed up in her professional clothes. She seemed sort of exotic to us with her collection of high-heeled shoes and fancy bags. I remember too, after she married my uncle and settled on the farm, giving up teaching after a few years, those fancy shoes and bags made their way to the toybox at her house, and my sisters and I gloried in playing dress-up when we visited her. We never discussed it, so I have no idea if she realized how we little girls saw her. I'd never thought about it until today, but I guess if I had, I'd have realized my aunt couldn't have been the only schoolteacher like that in her time. At any rate, with that history I was delighted by this next story.

La Verne Ford Wimberly, 83, is a widow and a faithful member of the congregation at Metropolitan Baptist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma. A retired educator who spent years as a school principal and superintendent,

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she remembers the concept of one's Sunday best, and so for 20 years, she has dressed in carefully selected outfits—"good" clothes with coordinating jewelry and hat—sitting in the same pew every Sunday and greeting her fellow parishioners. They call her "doctor" because of her doctorate in education and her years supervising schools. She's always enjoyed making an entrance, ever since she was a young teacher. As a kid, Wimberly spent her time climbing trees with the neighborhood boys; it wasn't until she noticed a junior high teacher who wore a beautiful outfit to school each day that she became interested in fashion. And in her first job out of college teaching first grade, she decided to follow that example and dress up for the students.

She's been dressing well ever since, and she has a huge collection of items filling three closets at her house from which she painstakingly composes each Sunday's attire. Wimberly explained to Fox23 News, "For years, everyone had known to look for me in the last row, section two, dressed to the nines." She dresses up for church, she told them, to make her friends and church family feel good. Her pastor says it works: "Her flair for fashion really ignites and sustains our faith."

Of course, like so much during the pandemic, on-site church stopped at Metropolitan Baptist last March, and for more than a year now, the parishioners have been attending virtual services. No more "doctor" sitting in the last row, section 2. But while it is entirely possible—I'd say probable—that many of Wimberly's fellow congregants are tuning in wearing their pajamas, that would not be the case for her. Nope, she still lays out her outfit every Saturday night the way her mother taught her so she's ready to get dressed—dressed up—for church on Sunday morning, looking "prepared and presentable." Oh, yes; she's that; I've seen photos.

She told the Washington Post, "I thought, 'Oh, my goodness, I can't sit here looking slouchy in my robe. I didn't want to sit around alone and feel sorry for myself, so I decided, 'You know what? I'm going to dress up anyway.'" What's more, she's been taking a selfie every Sunday and posting it on Facebook along with a Bible verse, and everyone is glad she does. She explained, "People always looked forward to seeing what I was wearing. So when I posted that [first] photo, everyone told me it boosted their spirits."

Believe it or not, although she had to start a calendar with notes on what she wore each week, she hasn't repeated an outfit in the 53 Sundays since the church went virtual. I can't post the photos here, so I'm just going to encourage you to Google her name and have a look for yourself; she's been getting some press, so you'll find them. She told the Post, "I started hearing from people everywhere who said my photos made them smile. The whole point was to inspire people and make them feel good, so I'm happy that's working." You can see for yourself; I know it worked for me.

Be well. 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      | 459         | 438             | 900              | 15                   | Minimal          | 12.0%                               |
| Beadle      | 2869        | 2789            | 6134             | 40                   | Substantial      | 10.7%                               |
| Bennett     | 386         | 372             | 1206             | 9                    | Minimal          | 3.6%                                |
| Bon Homme   | 1513        | 1479            | 2156             | 26                   | Moderate         | 5.0%                                |
| Brookings   | 3837        | 3655            | 12608            | 37                   | Substantial      | 6.0%                                |
| Brown       | 5304        | 5132            | 13222            | 91                   | Substantial      | 9.4%                                |
| Brule       | 701         | 689             | 1922             | 9                    | Minimal          | 2.7%                                |
| Buffalo     | 423         | 409             | 907              | 13                   | Minimal          | 5.3%                                |
| Butte       | 1009        | 981             | 3331             | 20                   | Minimal          | 1.3%                                |
| Campbell    | 131         | 127             | 268              | 4                    | None             | 0.0%                                |
| Charles Mix | 1347        | 1274            | 4091             | 21                   | Substantial      | 3.8%                                |
| Clark       | 417         | 388             | 979              | 5                    | Substantial      | 12.5%                               |
| Clay        | 1871        | 1814            | 5644             | 15                   | Substantial      | 9.7%                                |
| Codington   | 4209        | 4032            | 10055            | 80                   | Substantial      | 15.8%                               |
| Corson      | 476         | 462             | 1027             | 12                   | Minimal          | 0.0%                                |
| Custer      | 781         | 760             | 2806             | 12                   | Moderate         | 9.6%                                |
| Davison     | 3115        | 2948            | 6850             | 66                   | Substantial      | 17.9%                               |
| Day         | 677         | 640             | 1859             | 29                   | Moderate         | 16.0%                               |
| Deuel       | 494         | 478             | 1175             | 8                    | Moderate         | 0.0%                                |
| Dewey       | 1440        | 1408            | 3947             | 26                   | Minimal          | 2.0%                                |
| Douglas     | 446         | 431             | 950              | 9                    | Minimal          | 15.4%                               |
| Edmunds     | 493         | 472             | 1098             | 13                   | Minimal          | 6.7%                                |
| Fall River  | 564         | 539             | 2736             | 15                   | Moderate         | 7.6%                                |
| Faulk       | 364         | 350             | 712              | 13                   | Minimal          | 0.0%                                |
| Grant       | 1009        | 948             | 2350             | 42                   | Moderate         | 15.3%                               |
| Gregory     | 572         | 527             | 1339             | 30                   | Moderate         | 4.9%                                |
| Haakon      | 260         | 248             | 561              | 10                   | None             | 0.0%                                |
| Hamlin      | 745         | 696             | 1858             | 38                   | Moderate         | 6.2%                                |
| Hand        | 354         | 343             | 864              | 6                    | Minimal          | 0.0%                                |
| Hanson      | 376         | 371             | 760              | 4                    | Minimal          | 14.3%                               |
| Harding     | 92          | 91              | 188              | 1                    | None             | 0.0%                                |
| Hughes      | 2368        | 2300            | 6817             | 37                   | Moderate         | 1.4%                                |
| Hutchinson  | 839         | 776             | 2472             | 26                   | Substantial      | 23.4%                               |

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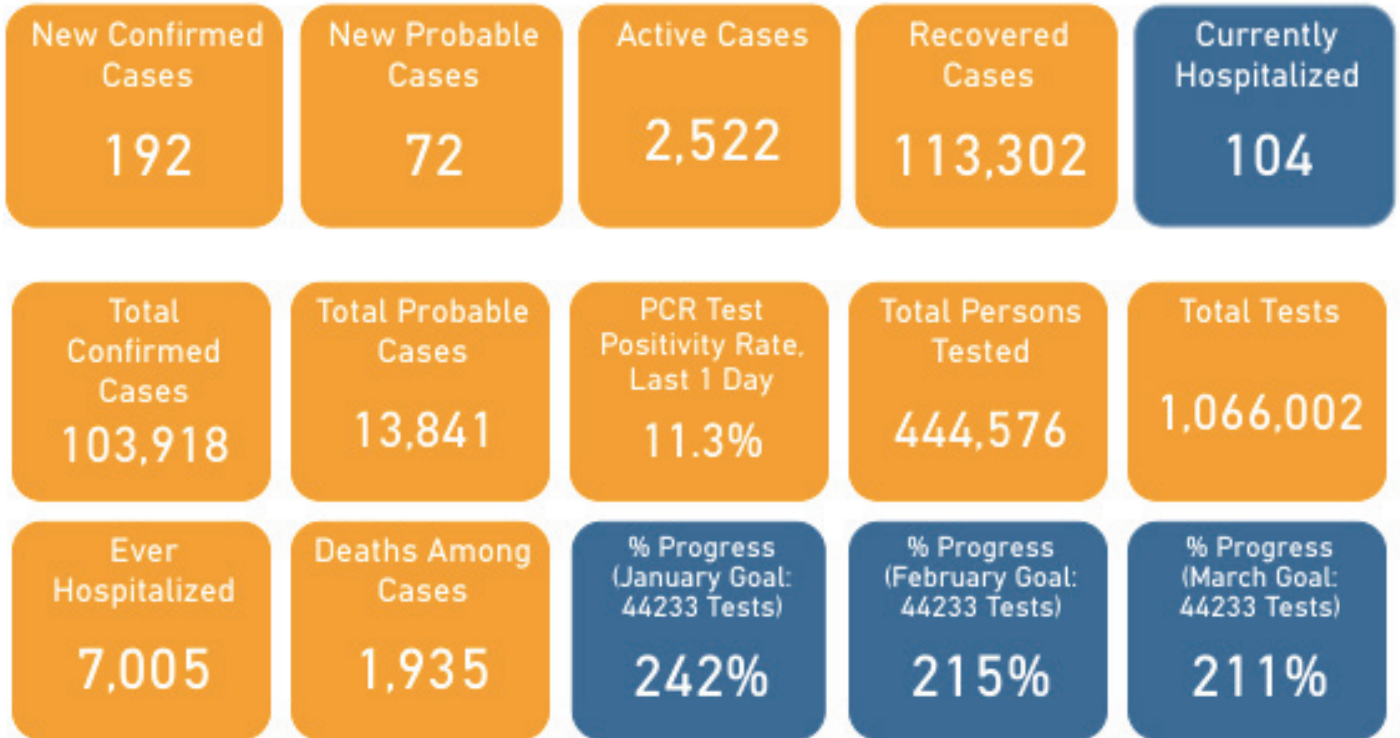
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|               |       |       |       |     |             |       |
|---------------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------------|-------|
| Hyde          | 140   | 136   | 430   | 1   | Minimal     | 0.0%  |
| Jackson       | 283   | 268   | 935   | 14  | None        | 0.0%  |
| Jerauld       | 275   | 257   | 577   | 16  | Minimal     | 9.1%  |
| Jones         | 93    | 91    | 236   | 0   | Minimal     | 11.1% |
| Kingsbury     | 734   | 652   | 1747  | 14  | Substantial | 20.4% |
| Lake          | 1298  | 1228  | 3551  | 18  | Substantial | 18.0% |
| Lawrence      | 2887  | 2824  | 8777  | 45  | Moderate    | 4.7%  |
| Lincoln       | 8228  | 7934  | 21148 | 77  | Substantial | 13.1% |
| Lyman         | 625   | 602   | 1947  | 10  | Moderate    | 10.8% |
| Marshall      | 364   | 346   | 1261  | 6   | Moderate    | 0.0%  |
| McCook        | 784   | 744   | 1726  | 24  | Moderate    | 9.7%  |
| McPherson     | 240   | 235   | 582   | 4   | None        | 0.0%  |
| Meade         | 2693  | 2632  | 7979  | 31  | Moderate    | 7.1%  |
| Mellette      | 254   | 252   | 752   | 2   | None        | 0.0%  |
| Miner         | 290   | 270   | 603   | 9   | Moderate    | 15.4% |
| Minnehaha     | 29738 | 28535 | 81704 | 343 | Substantial | 13.9% |
| Moody         | 625   | 604   | 1815  | 17  | Minimal     | 0.0%  |
| Oglala Lakota | 2085  | 2023  | 6781  | 49  | Minimal     | 1.7%  |
| Pennington    | 13246 | 12921 | 40716 | 191 | Moderate    | 6.0%  |
| Perkins       | 351   | 336   | 843   | 14  | Minimal     | 5.9%  |
| Potter        | 387   | 381   | 869   | 4   | Minimal     | 4.0%  |
| Roberts       | 1312  | 1237  | 4304  | 38  | Substantial | 12.9% |
| Sanborn       | 337   | 333   | 714   | 3   | Minimal     | 0.0%  |
| Spink         | 825   | 787   | 2202  | 26  | Moderate    | 6.2%  |
| Stanley       | 339   | 336   | 974   | 2   | Minimal     | 4.8%  |
| Sully         | 136   | 133   | 331   | 3   | None        | 0.0%  |
| Todd          | 1218  | 1187  | 4226  | 29  | Minimal     | 0.0%  |
| Tripp         | 739   | 707   | 1534  | 17  | Moderate    | 9.1%  |
| Turner        | 1133  | 1051  | 2836  | 53  | Substantial | 9.5%  |
| Union         | 2137  | 2023  | 6592  | 41  | Substantial | 12.0% |
| Walworth      | 753   | 722   | 1874  | 15  | Moderate    | 11.5% |
| Yankton       | 2929  | 2822  | 9652  | 28  | Substantial | 11.8% |
| Ziebach       | 340   | 326   | 893   | 9   | Minimal     | 9.1%  |
| Unassigned    | 0     | 0     | 1914  | 0   |             |       |

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## South Dakota



### AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

| Age Range with Years | # of Cases | # of Deaths Among Cases |
|----------------------|------------|-------------------------|
| 0-9 years            | 4908       | 0                       |
| 10-19 years          | 13564      | 0                       |
| 20-29 years          | 20783      | 7                       |
| 30-39 years          | 19411      | 19                      |
| 40-49 years          | 16876      | 37                      |
| 50-59 years          | 16557      | 116                     |
| 60-69 years          | 13443      | 258                     |
| 70-79 years          | 7060       | 442                     |
| 80+ years            | 5157       | 1056                    |

| COVID-19 Variant | # of Cases |
|------------------|------------|
| B.1.1.7          | 14         |
| B.1.429          | 5          |
| B.1.351          | 1          |
| B.1.427          | 0          |
| P.1              | 0          |

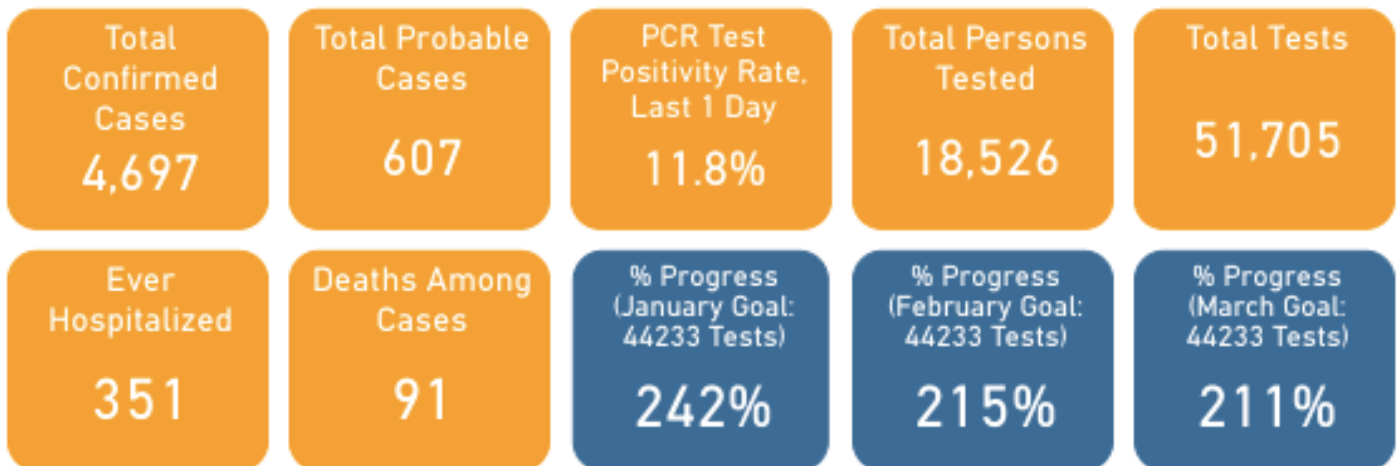
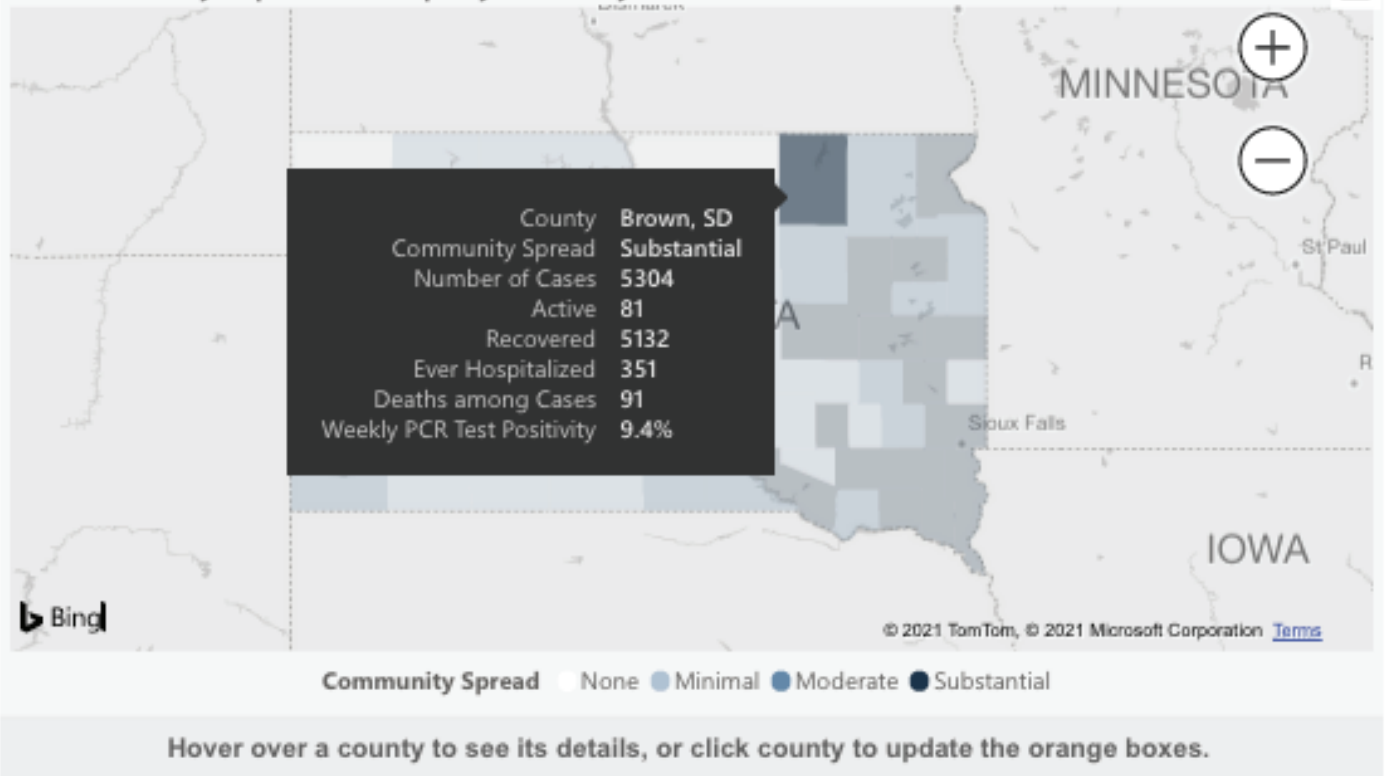
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## Brown County



### Community Spread Map by County of Residence



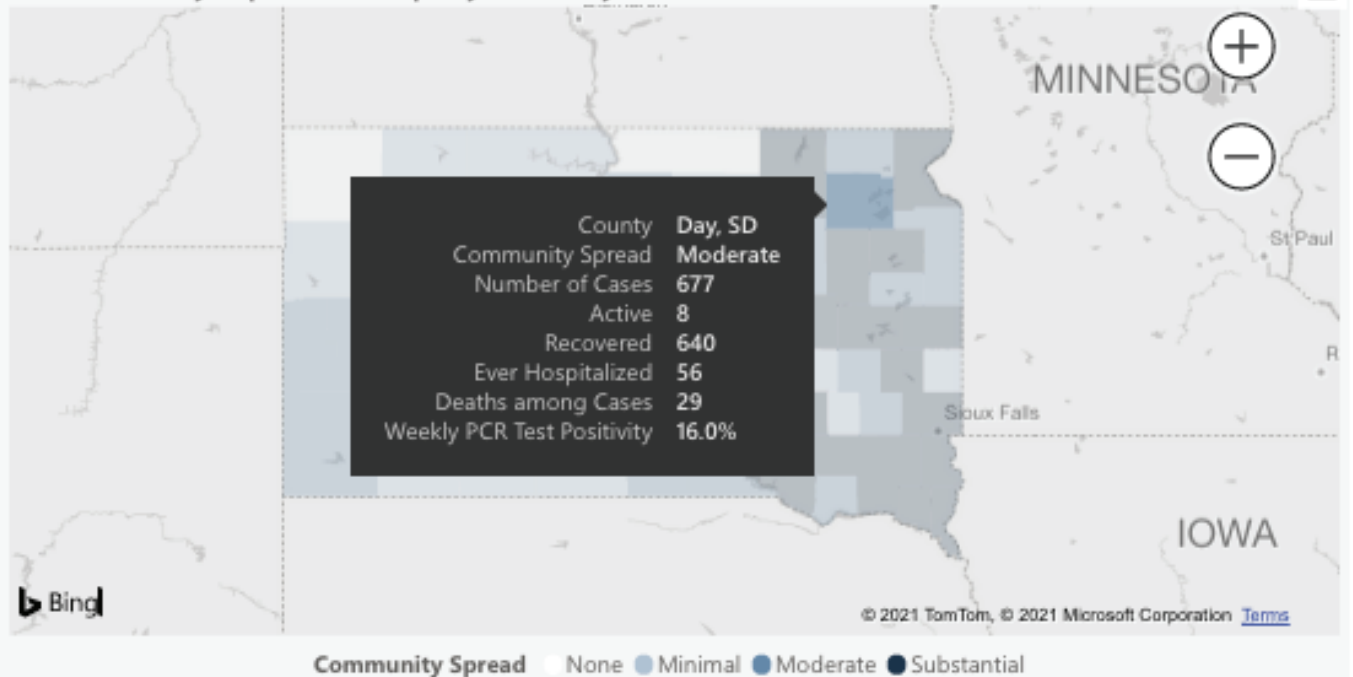
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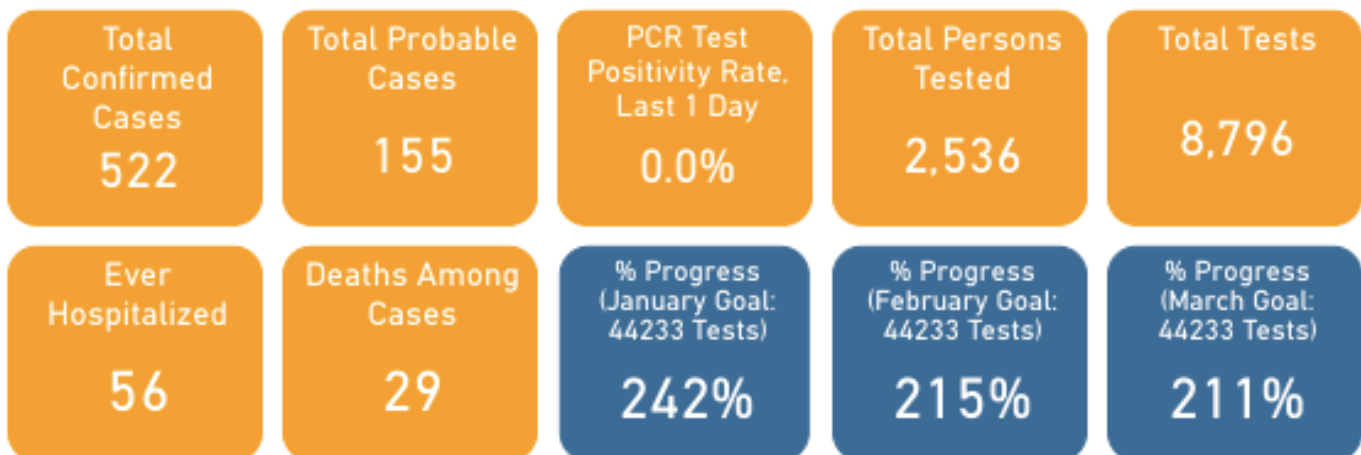
## Day County



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



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



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## Vaccinations

Total Doses Administered\*

410,502

Total Persons Administered a Vaccine\*

252,751

Percent of State Population with at least 1 Dose\*\*

43%

| Manufacturer | # of Doses |
|--------------|------------|
| Janssen      | 8,198      |
| Moderna      | 193,249    |
| Pfizer       | 209,055    |

| Doses                     | # of Recipients |
|---------------------------|-----------------|
| Janssen - Series Complete | 8,198           |
| Moderna - 1 dose          | 45,383          |
| Moderna - Series Complete | 73,933          |
| Pfizer - 1 dose           | 41,437          |
| Pfizer - Series Complete  | 83,809          |

| Doses           | % of Pop. |
|-----------------|-----------|
| 1 dose          | 42.80%    |
| Series Complete | 28.40%    |

Based on 2019 Census Estimate for those aged 16+ years. Includes aggregate data on IHS and federal

| County       | # Doses | # Persons (1 dose) | # Persons (2 doses) | Total # Persons |
|--------------|---------|--------------------|---------------------|-----------------|
| Aurora       | 1,217   | 443                | 387                 | 830             |
| Beadle       | 8,747   | 2,398              | 3,174               | 5,572           |
| Bennett*     | 607     | 117                | 245                 | 362             |
| Bon Homme*   | 4,409   | 875                | 1,767               | 2,642           |
| Brookings    | 13,232  | 3,890              | 4,671               | 8,561           |
| Brown        | 19,504  | 4,416              | 7,544               | 11,960          |
| Brule*       | 2,188   | 480                | 854                 | 1,334           |
| Buffalo*     | 150     | 80                 | 35                  | 115             |
| Butte        | 2,986   | 868                | 1,059               | 1,927           |
| Campbell     | 1,247   | 179                | 534                 | 713             |
| Charles Mix* | 3,961   | 1,137              | 1,412               | 2,549           |
| Clark        | 1,630   | 494                | 568                 | 1,062           |
| Clay         | 6,868   | 2,232              | 2,318               | 4,550           |
| Codington*   | 12,902  | 3,754              | 4,574               | 8,328           |
| Corson*      | 352     | 58                 | 147                 | 205             |
| Custer*      | 3,691   | 757                | 1,467               | 2,224           |
| Davison      | 10,181  | 3,179              | 3,501               | 6,680           |
| Day*         | 3,282   | 834                | 1,224               | 2,058           |
| Deuel        | 1,909   | 567                | 671                 | 1,238           |
| Dewey*       | 429     | 61                 | 184                 | 245             |
| Douglas*     | 1,486   | 430                | 528                 | 958             |
| Edmunds      | 1,821   | 355                | 733                 | 1,088           |
| Fall River*  | 3,189   | 647                | 1,271               | 1,918           |
| Faulk        | 1,351   | 353                | 499                 | 852             |
| Grant*       | 3,775   | 639                | 1,568               | 2,207           |
| Gregory*     | 2,174   | 546                | 814                 | 1,360           |
| Haakon*      | 647     | 119                | 264                 | 383             |

# Groton Daily Independent

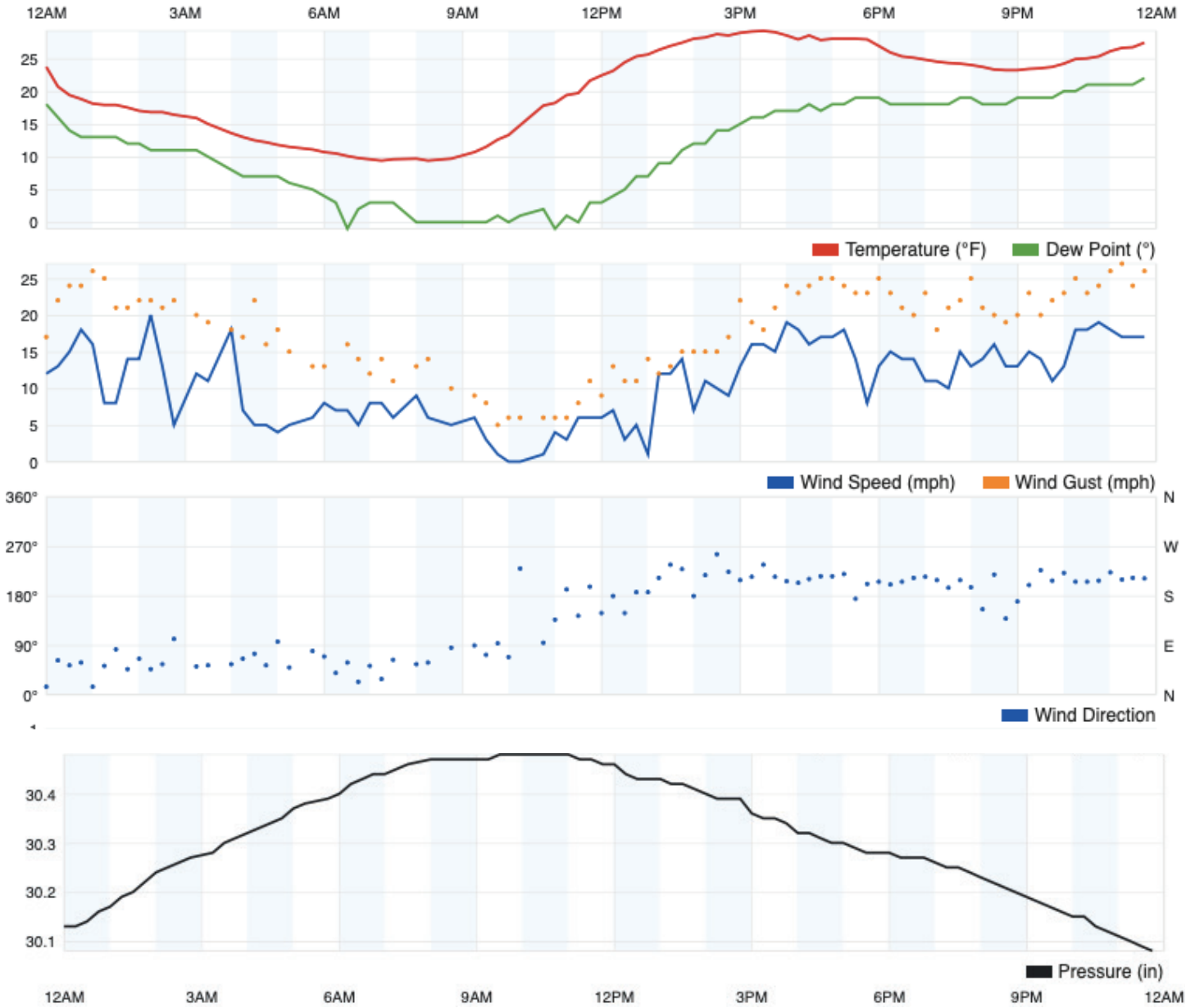
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|                |         |        |        |        |
|----------------|---------|--------|--------|--------|
| Hamlin         | 2,268   | 602    | 833    | 1,435  |
| Hand           | 1,933   | 545    | 694    | 1,239  |
| Hanson         | 711     | 253    | 229    | 482    |
| Harding        | 147     | 51     | 48     | 99     |
| Hughes*        | 10,164  | 2,466  | 3,849  | 6,315  |
| Hutchinson*    | 4,438   | 1,083  | 1,677  | 2,760  |
| Hyde*          | 680     | 140    | 270    | 410    |
| Jackson*       | 496     | 104    | 196    | 300    |
| Jerauld        | 1,124   | 316    | 404    | 720    |
| Jones*         | 767     | 135    | 316    | 451    |
| Kingsbury      | 3,216   | 868    | 1,174  | 2,042  |
| Lake           | 5,880   | 2,064  | 1,908  | 3,972  |
| Lawrence       | 11,095  | 3,319  | 3,888  | 7,207  |
| Lincoln        | 32,783  | 6,382  | 13,200 | 19,582 |
| Lyman*         | 967     | 261    | 353    | 614    |
| Marshall*      | 2,330   | 770    | 780    | 1,550  |
| McCook         | 2,920   | 658    | 1,131  | 1,789  |
| McPherson      | 327     | 59     | 134    | 193    |
| Meade*         | 8,299   | 1,747  | 3,276  | 5,023  |
| Mellette*      | 57      | 9      | 24     | 33     |
| Miner          | 1,146   | 304    | 421    | 725    |
| Minnehaha*     | 105,218 | 21,769 | 41,722 | 63,491 |
| Moody*         | 2,393   | 635    | 879    | 1,514  |
| Oglala Lakota* | 225     | 45     | 90     | 135    |
| Pennington*    | 47,989  | 8,707  | 19,641 | 28,348 |
| Perkins*       | 785     | 249    | 268    | 517    |
| Potter         | 1,205   | 353    | 426    | 779    |
| Roberts*       | 5,415   | 983    | 2,216  | 3,199  |
| Sanborn        | 1,343   | 383    | 480    | 863    |
| Spink          | 3,668   | 773    | 1,447  | 2,220  |
| Stanley*       | 1,515   | 329    | 593    | 922    |
| Sully          | 497     | 129    | 184    | 313    |
| Todd*          | 214     | 38     | 88     | 126    |
| Tripp*         | 2,446   | 404    | 1,021  | 1,425  |
| Turner         | 4,336   | 998    | 1,669  | 2,667  |
| Union          | 4,397   | 1,703  | 1,347  | 3,050  |
| Walworth*      | 2,340   | 392    | 974    | 1,366  |
| Yankton        | 12,756  | 2,704  | 5,026  | 7,730  |
| Ziebach*       | 71      | 15     | 28     | 43     |
| Other          | 8,006   | 2,356  | 2,825  | 5,181  |

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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**Red Flag Warning**

**Today**

**Tonight**

**Friday**

**Friday Night**

**Saturday**



Sunny then  
Sunny and  
Breezy

Mostly Clear  
and Breezy

Sunny and  
Breezy then  
Sunny

Mostly Clear

Sunny

**High: 58 °F**

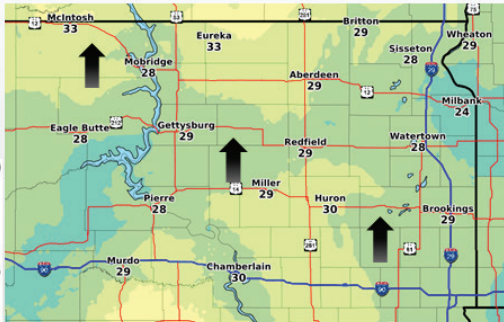
**Low: 35 °F**

**High: 70 °F**

**Low: 36 °F**

**High: 77 °F**

**Today: Maximum Wind Gusts 25 to near 35 mph**

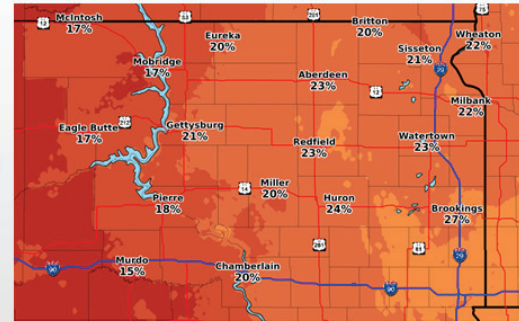


**Today**

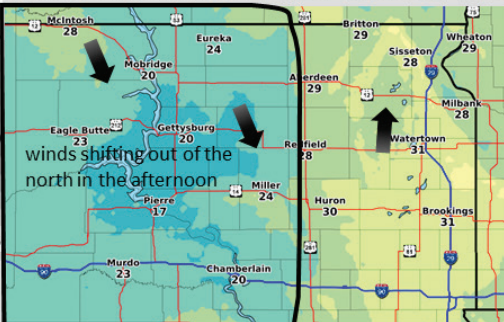
Very dry conditions and gusty winds will lead to very high to extreme grassland fire danger late this morning into the evening hours.



**Today: Minimum Relative Humidity 15 to 25%**



**Friday: Maximum Wind Gusts 15 to near 30 mph**

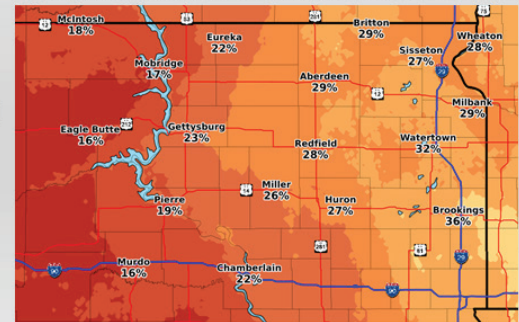


**Friday**

Still dry, although winds will be lighter over central SD and relative humidity will be a little higher.



**Friday: Minimum Relative Humidity 15 to 35%**



Very dry conditions and gusty winds will lead to very high to extreme grassland fire danger late this morning into the evening hours.

## Warm Start to April

TODAY  
Apr 1, 2021



50s&60s

FRI  
Apr 2, 2021



60s&70s

SAT  
Apr 3, 2021



70s&80s

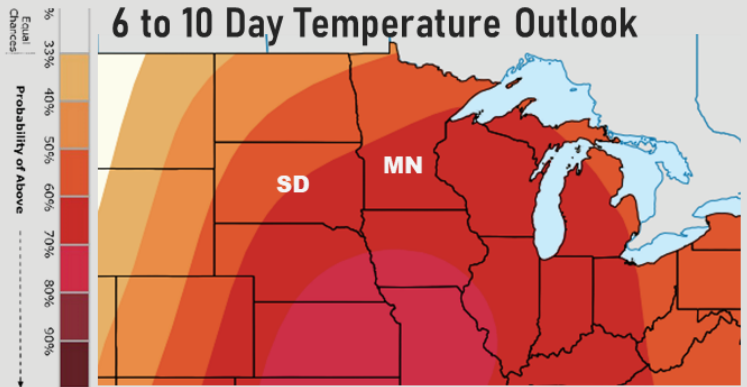
SUN  
Apr 4, 2021



80s

Average high temps in early April range from the upper 40s to low 50s - we'll be well above that by this weekend. Abnormally mild air is favored to hang on beyond the weekend as well.

Precipitation chances remain low meanwhile. The next best chance arrives mid-next week.



**April is expected to begin above, to much above average temperature-wise.**

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## Today in Weather History

April 1, 1960: Heavy snow of 4 to 10 inches fell in the eastern half of South Dakota. Some highways were closed mainly due to the difficulty of plowing the heavy, wet snow. Power and phone failures of short duration were caused by the snowfall in the Aberdeen area, which received 7.5 inches, setting the record for April 1st. Snow with high water content aggravated floods that were currently in progress on the James, Vermillion and Big Sioux Rivers.

April 1, 2011: Snowmelt flooding in March continued across much of central and northeast South Dakota as the rest of the snowpack melted into early April. Many roads along with many acres of crop and pastureland remained flooded. Roads, culverts, and bridges were damaged across the region. Several roads were washed out with many closed. Many homes were threatened with some surrounded by water. Rising lake levels in northeast South Dakota also threatened and flooded many homes. Many people had to use four-wheelers to get to their homes. A Presidential Disaster was declared for all counties due to the flooding damage. The total damage estimates, including March, were from 4.5 to 5 million dollars for the area. The flooding diminished across much of the area into May. The snowmelt flooding damaged many roads and highways, including U.S. Highway 81, throughout Hamlin County. Many roads were closed throughout the county. In the late evening of April 13th on U.S Highway 81, a car with four people inside went through a flooded area at a high rate of speed and ended up in the flooded ditch. They all got out with no injuries. The snowmelt runoff caused Lake Kampeska to rise to nearly 44 inches overfull. The lake flooded several roads and also threatened many homes. Sandbagging was done to hold off the rising lake. Waves and ice chunks did eventually do some damage to homes. Also, many boat lifts were damaged. Mud Creek near Rauville also went slightly above the flood stage of 9 feet to 9.64 feet for a couple of days in early April.

1875: The London Times published the first daily newspaper weather map. The first American newspaper weather map would be issued on 5/12/1876 in the New York Herald. Weather maps would first appear on a regular basis beginning on 5/9/1879 in the New York Daily Graphic.

1960: The first weather satellite, TIROS 1 (Television and Infra-Red Observation Satellite) began sending pictures back to Earth. The TIROS series would have little benefit to operational weather forecasters because the image quality was low and inconsistent. The most critical understanding achieved from the new technology was the discovery of the high degree of organization of large-scale weather systems, a fact never apparent from ground and aircraft observations.

1973: A tornado touches down near Brentsville, Virginia, then traveled to Fairfax hitting Woodson High School. This F2 tornado injured 37 and caused \$14 million in damage.

1912 - A tornado with incredible velocity ripped into downtown Houston, TX, breaking the water table and giving the city its first natural waterspout. (The Weather Channel)

1923 - Residents in the eastern U.S. awoke on "April Fool's Day" to bitterly cold temperatures. The mercury plunged to -34 degrees at Bergland MI and to 16 degrees in Georgia. (David Ludlum)

1987 - Forty-five cities across the southeastern U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Lows of 37 degrees at Apalachicola FL, 34 degrees at Jacksonville FL, 30 degrees at Macon GA, and 22 degrees at Knoxville TN, were records for April. (The National Weather Summary)

1987 - A tornado touched down briefly during a snow squall on the south shore of White Fish Bay (six miles northwest of Bay Mills WI). A mobile home was unroofed and insulation was sucked from its walls. (The Weather Channel)

1988 - A powerful spring storm produced 34 inches of snow at Rye CO, 22 inches at Timpas OK, 19 inches at Sharon Springs KS, and up to 35 inches in New Mexico. Severe thunderstorms associated with the same storm spawned a tornado which caused 2.5 million dollars damage at East Mountain TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Up to six inches of snow blanketed the Adirondacks of eastern New York State and the Saint Lawrence Valley of Vermont. Up to a foot of snow blanketed the Colorado Rockies. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

# Groton Daily Independent

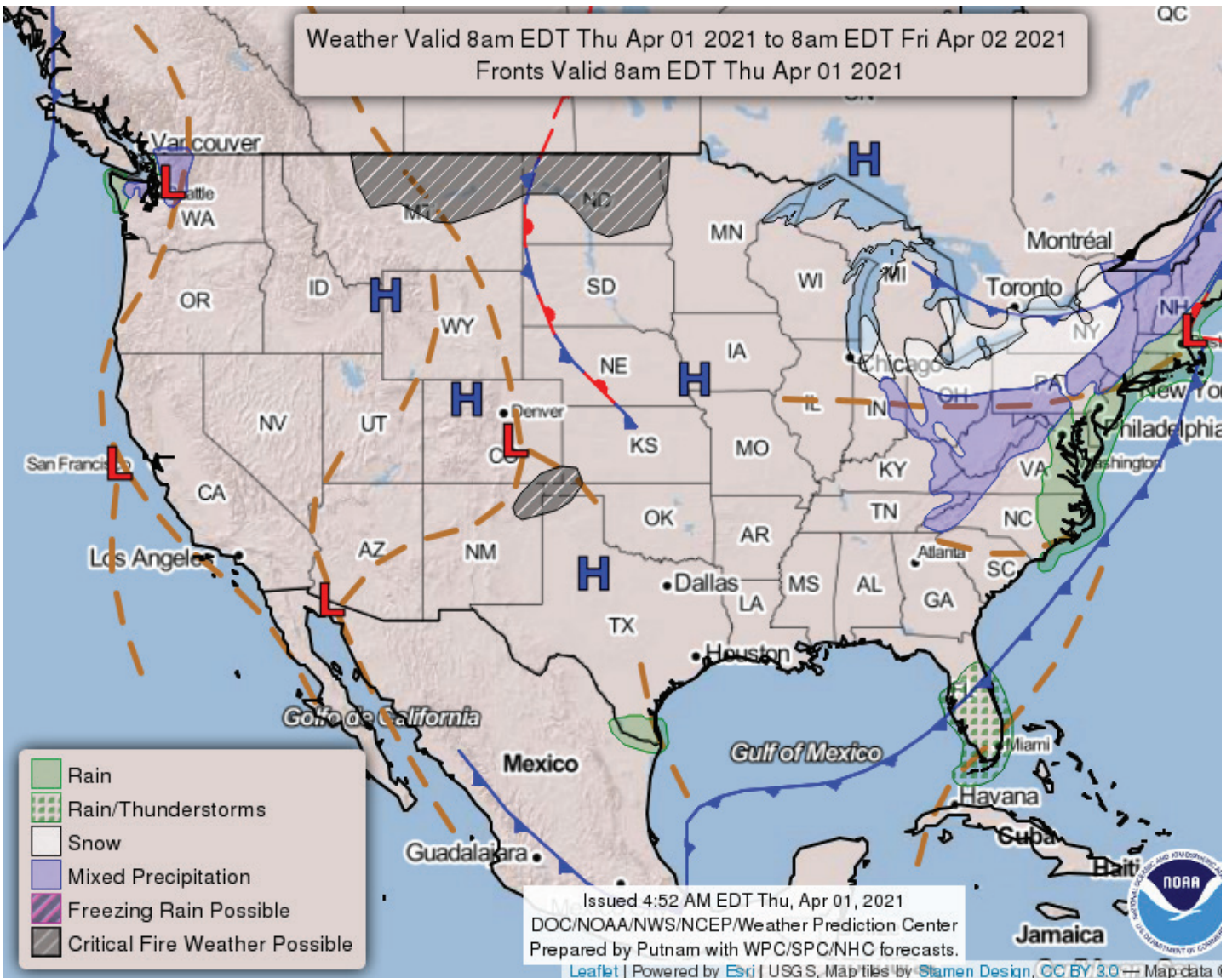
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 36 °F at 6:01 PM**  
**Low Temp: 15 °F at 7:24 AM**  
**Wind: 21 mph at 1:13 PM**  
**Precip: .00**

## Today's Info

**Record High: 80 in 1928**  
**Record Low: 0° in 1899**  
**Average High: 49°F**  
**Average Low: 26°F**  
**Average Precip in Mar.: 1.16**  
**Precip to date in Mar.: 0.36**  
**Average Precip to date: 2.18**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.54**  
**Sunset Tonight: 8:02 p.m.**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:12 a.m.**



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## DAVID'S "TASTE TEST"

"Try it for thirty days. If you are not completely satisfied with the results, return the unused portion and you will receive a complete refund!"

"We guarantee that your pain will be gone in fourteen days, and your joints will become pain free and function with no limitations or we will refund the cost of the tablets – plus the shipping and handling charges! How can you lose?"

Guarantees for anything and everything seem to be very popular. Most advertisers, manufacturers and marketing experts have combined their efforts to sell their products and give us the assurance that they will work – or else return them.

But that's nothing new. In fact a king made that claim about his God years ago. David said, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him."

He'd been through sickness and survived. He was hunted and escaped. He was emotionally drained and overwhelmed with guilt. He was so sick that his bones were wasting away. He watched as nations rose to prominence and collapsed. He saw armies that were well prepared lose battles. In fact, if we were to make a list of everything in his life that had gone wrong or if we were to compile a catalog of the disasters he faced and overcame in his life, it would be a book so large that it would be very difficult to carry from one place to another. Yet, with no hesitance he said, "God's good! Try Him. You'll see!" What a tremendous offer with guaranteed results!

Prayer: Help us Father, to recognize Your sovereignty in our lives when things seem overwhelming. May we see Your hand at work and rejoice! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in Him. Psalm 34:8

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## FREE DATE CHANGES ON 2021 TOURS\*



FROM  
\$1,449\*  
**\$1,199\***

### ALASKA NORTHERN LIGHTS

7 days, departs Feb - Mar 2022

**Anchorage • Talkeetna • Healy (Denali) • Fairbanks** — Travel deep into the rugged Alaskan wilderness in pursuit of nature's most spectacular nighttime display. Chase after the vibrant lights of the aurora borealis while you enjoy Alaska's culture, nature, and wildlife.



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\$2,599\*  
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### BEST OF HAWAII FOUR-ISLAND TOUR

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**Oahu • Hawaii Island • Kauai • Maui** — Enjoy a fully guided 4-island Hawaiian vacation with centrally located lodging in Waikiki on Oahu, and beachfront lodging on the "Big Island" of Hawaii, Kauai, and Maui. Guided throughout by our friendly Tour Directors—your local experts. Includes 3 inter-island flights.



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\*Free date changes anytime up to 45 days prior to departure for land tours, up to 95 days prior to departure for cruise tours. Deposits and final payments remain non-refundable. Prices are per person based on double occupancy plus \$299 in taxes & fees. Single supplement and seasonal surcharges may apply. Add-on airfare available. Offers apply to new bookings only, made by 6/30/21. Other terms & conditions may apply. Ask your Travel Consultant for details.

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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

### **US judge blocks Nevada grazing; sage grouse totals dwindling**

By SCOTT SONNER Associated Press

RENO, Nev. (AP) — A federal judge has blocked a Nevada project that would expand livestock grazing across 400 squares miles (1,036 square kilometers) of some of the highest priority sage-grouse habitat in the West and accused the government of deliberately misleading the public by underestimating damage the cattle could do to the land.

The ruling comes as scientists continue to document dramatic declines in greater sage-grouse populations across 11 western states — down 65% since 1986 and 37% since 2002, according to a new report by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Its numbers have shrunk to less than a quarter of what they were a half century ago, the USGS said Tuesday. If current trends continue, there's only a 50% chance most of their remaining breeding grounds known as "leks" will still be productive in 60 years, it said.

Citing concerns about grouse, U.S. administrative judge Harvey Sweitzer sided with conservationists in Nevada and suspended approval of new grazing permits for a swath of rangeland larger than Rhode Island. It stretches to Utah and includes a ranch once owned by Bing Crosby.

The senior judge at the Interior Department's Office of Hearings and Appeals in Salt Lake City ruled March 19 the Bureau of Land Management failed to adequately examine potential harm to the grouse as required by the National Environmental Policy Act.

An administrative judge since 1970, when President Nixon signed the act into law, Sweitzer's decision could have ramifications for several permits approved across the West in the final months of the Trump administration under a 2017 initiative dubbed "Outcome-Based Grazing."

Then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke said it loosened restrictions on ranchers to provide more flexibility to meet long-term rangeland health goals. Critics called it a "public land grab."

"Instead of living up to its promise to conserve, enhance and restore sage-grouse habitat, BLM embraced habitat-destroying livestock grazing actions guaranteed to drive down bird numbers," said Katie Fite, public lands director for WildLands Defense, which won the stay of the permits pending administrative appeal.

She said Sweitzer's decision is a "well-justified rebuke to BLM's industry-biased grazing program that goes to great lengths to circle the wagons around livestock interests at the expense of wildlife, biodiversity, watersheds and myriad public uses."

Interior Department press secretary Tyler Cherry declined comment on the administrative ruling in an email Wednesday to The Associated Press.

But the department said in a statement Tuesday the decline of sage grouse documented by USGS reflects the overall loss of sagebrush habitat over decades from a variety of forces ranging from wildfires to energy development.

"The Interior Department is reviewing actions the Trump administration took to undermine carefully constructed land management plans to help conserve sagebrush habitat," spokeswoman Melissa Schwartz said.

Nevada's Winecup-Gamble ranch was among 11 designated as demonstration projects in 2018 under the "Outcome-Based" initiative along with ranches in Oregon, Colorado, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming.

Sweitzer agreed with WildLands Defense's argument the grazing levels approved for Winecup-Gamble in December are substantially higher than the average number of cattle that actually grazed there the past decade. The stay he ordered is akin to a temporary injunction in U.S. district court.

He said the agency ignored rangeland health assessments its own experts conducted in June when they determined the allotments "are not currently meeting the seasonal habitat needs of sage-grouse."

USGS says the latest study is the most expansive ever on the declining status of the hen-sized bird, which is considered an indicator species for the overall health of sagebrush-related ecosystems from the Rocky Mountains to the Sierra.



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The Nevada project covers 1,460 square miles (3,781 square kilometers) of public and private land, including 860 square miles (2,227 square kilometers) of federal land with priority grouse habitat. More than one-third of those U.S. lands are considered sage-grouse strongholds with the highest densities of grouse and other criteria key to the species' survival.

Switzer said the misrepresentations in the bureau's environmental assessment stem from the baseline it used to calculate increases or decreases in cattle numbers permitted under various alternatives.

The agency's comparisons are based on maximum allowable levels established in earlier allotments, sometimes decades ago, he said. Instead, the baseline should be the average actual use the previous 10 years.

As a result, he said, the 30% reduction the agency cites in what it portrayed as a grazing-reduction alternative "is illusory."

Likewise, the bureau never addressed the effects of the real increase anticipated under the "Outcome-Based" alternative it adopted, he said. "In fact, the EA goes farther than silence on the subject and actively misleads the public."

Environmentalists said the new USGS study highlights the urgency of addressing loss of grouse habitat nationwide.

"We cannot ignore this alarm bell," said David Willms of the National Wildlife Federation in Denver. "This report shows that much more needs to be done to restore sagebrush habitat so that sage grouse populations recover and that all wildlife that lives in this ecosystem thrives."

## Schools grapple with governor's order on transgender sports

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — When South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem issued executive orders to bar transgender girls from girls' sports leagues, it appeared to be a quick fix to what had become a political mess, but opponents of the orders say they amount to little more than a suggestion.

After Noem issued the order, the Department of Education on Tuesday sent school administrators and school boards a draft of Noem's policy to consider, but the agency acknowledged in a statement that "school boards and the High School Activities Association are independent entities" and that it expected the discussion with both "to continue during the anticipated special legislative session." School boards and administrators say they are in no hurry to implement Noem's order.

"Really, in a nutshell, all we are going to tell our folks to do is stay the course of what we have right now," said Rob Monson, the director of the School Administrators of South Dakota.

The high school activities association currently evaluates applications from transgender athletes who want to join teams that align with their gender identity. The policy says it's designed to allow athletes "to compete on a level playing field in a safe, competitive and friendly environment, free of discrimination."

Even though the activities association reports there are currently no transgender girls playing in girls' sports and transgender advocates say it sends a hurtful message to transgender children, Noem said the orders "temporarily address the problem" while she worked with lawmakers to come to an agreement on a ban. She indicated there would be a special session in May or June.

While the governor's spokesman Ian Fury said that "school districts are expected to implement" Noem's policy, school boards are grappling with what to make of it. Wade Pogany, the executive director of the Associated School Boards of South Dakota, said the organization was analyzing the order, but said he "didn't have any good answers" on whether it would be adopted.

Cynthia Mickelson, the board president for the Sioux Falls School District, said she would recommend waiting to act on Noem's order until after the Legislature's special session. She felt it didn't make sense to adopt a policy that could be upended in a matter of months.

She said that after watching Monday's developments, which started with the House rejecting Noem's partial veto and culminated with the governor's orders, she sent out a single word Tweet: "Nothingburger."

The bill failed after negotiations between the Republican governor and the GOP-dominated Legislature

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broke down. After Noem faced tough lobbying from business groups concerned about the economic ramifications of a law that discriminated transgender people, she issued a "style and form veto" to exclude collegiate athletics, as well as strike sections that required annual tracking of athletes sex at birth and provided a way to sue for violations of the ban. The House rejected Noem's proposal as an unconstitutional use of the style and form veto, which is usually used to clean up technical language.

But conservative lawmakers, exasperated with the governor, say there is currently little appetite for bending to Noem's will during a special legislative session, which could potentially leave them in a stalemate similar to the one that resulted in the bill's demise. They had decried Noem's orders as little more than an effort to salvage her reputation with social conservatives nationwide who had criticized her for issuing the partial veto.

"The governor has no ability to create law. These don't have the effect of law," Republican House Speaker Spencer Gosch said of Noem's orders. "This is just her sending out a letter saying I'd like you to do this."

He added that Noem's office has communicated an evolving stance on the issue and that a "lack of preparation on her part doesn't create a sense of urgency" for lawmakers to act.

Meanwhile, transgender advocates like Susan Williams, who leads the Transformation Project, said that while Noem's orders may have little immediate practical effect, they sent a message that "trans people are not welcome in South Dakota."

In the last three weeks, as the ban became a prominent issue in the state, four families with transgender children have reached out to her, struggling with how to help their child face bullying, she said. In the previous year, she only had that happen once.

"Trans kids and their wellbeing were being used as a prop to win back (Noem's) nationwide base," Williams said.

## 13 attorneys general sue Biden admin over stimulus tax rule

By CUNEYT DIL Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — Attorneys general from 13 states sued President Joe Biden's administration on Wednesday over a rule in the federal stimulus that bars states from using relief money to offset tax cuts.

The filing in U.S. District Court in Alabama asks judges to strike down the provision in the wide-ranging relief act signed by Biden that prohibits states from using \$195 billion of federal aid "to either directly or indirectly offset a reduction" in net tax revenue. The restriction could apply through 2024.

The coalition, which includes one Democratic attorney general, is concerned the provision can construe any tax cut as taking advantage of the pandemic relief funds.

A bigger group of 21 Republican attorneys general earlier this month wrote a letter seeking clarification from Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who is named in the new lawsuit. The department at the time said the provision isn't meant as a blanket prohibition on tax cuts. States can still offset tax reductions through other means.

"Nothing in the Act prevents States from enacting a broad variety of tax cuts," Yellen wrote in a response on April 23. "It simply provides that funding received under the Act may not be used to offset a reduction in net tax revenue resulting from certain changes in state law."

But West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, who co-led the lawsuit with his colleagues from Alabama and Arkansas, argues the interpretation of the word "indirectly" in the provision could come back to haunt states that cut taxes.

"This ensures our citizens aren't stuck with an unforeseen bill from the feds years from now," he said in a statement.

Alabama Republican Attorney General Steve Marshall said the "federal tax mandate is an unprecedented and unconstitutional assault on state sovereignty."

Alaska, Florida, Iowa, Kansas, Montana, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota and Utah also signed onto the lawsuit. Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost, a Republican, earlier this month separately asked a federal judge to block the tax-cut provision.

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Several state legislatures are weighing tax reform this year, which is partly driving the lawsuit. West Virginia lawmakers are hurrying to approve a cut to the state income tax before their 60-day session ends on April 10. Montana's GOP-controlled statehouse is considering several tax cut bills. Its Republican Attorney General Austin Knudsen said "it's a slap in the face to Montana" to limit how the stimulus funds can be used.

Yellen, whose department declined new comment, had said in her letter that "it is well established that Congress may place such reasonable conditions on how States may use federal funding."

The nonprofit Tax Foundation said in a new report this week that it's more likely the Treasury Department would opt for a "narrow interpretation that does not unduly tie states' hands" in enforcing the provision. "Most states are likely at minimal risk regardless of the tax policy choices they make," it said. "For now, however, uncertainty persists, and lawmakers must operate within that uncertainty."

Associated Press writers Kimberly Chandler in Montgomery, Alabama; Josh Boak in Washington and Amy Beth Hanson in Helena, Montana, contributed to this report.

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

03-16-26-29-32

(three, sixteen, twenty-six, twenty-nine, thirty-two)

Estimated jackpot: \$100,000

Lotto America

17-18-21-35-42, Star Ball: 8, ASB: 2

(seventeen, eighteen, twenty-one, thirty-five, forty-two; Star Ball: eight; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$4.38 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$168 million

Powerball

03-10-44-55-68, Powerball: 24, Power Play: 2

(three, ten, forty-four, fifty-five, sixty-eight; Powerball: twenty-four; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

## Nebraska man found guilty in fatal 2018 kidnapping

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A Nebraska man has been found guilty of helping kidnap a South Dakota woman who was later killed on the Santee Sioux Indian Reservation in Nebraska.

Federal prosecutors said Ramon Simpson, 50, of Norfolk, Nebraska, was convicted Wednesday for his role in the Nov. 5, 2018 kidnapping of Phyllis Hunhoff. Because the kidnapping resulted in Hunhoff's death, Simpson is facing a mandatory life sentence.

Prosecutors said Simpson and Joseph James, of Norfolk, abducted Hunhoff as she left her mother's home in Utica, South Dakota, for her home in Yankton, South Dakota. Simpson and James entered Hunhoff's car before she could drive away, and they took her to Norfolk.

The U.S. Attorney's office said after he exited the car in Norfolk, Simpson tried to delete location information from James' cell phone that showed where they had been that day.

James then drove Hunhoff to the reservation where he stabbed and strangled the 59-year-old woman before setting fire to her body and her vehicle.

James pleaded guilty to murder and was sentenced last year to life in prison.

"Ramon Simpson may not have killed Phyllis Hunhoff, but his participation in her abduction and kidnapping ultimately led to her violent and senseless death," said Eugene Kowel, who is the FBI special agent

in charge of the Omaha office..

## South Dakota to open vaccines to all adults next week

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Anyone in South Dakota over 16 years of age will be eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination starting on Monday.

Gov. Kristi Noem's announcement Wednesday followed a recent uptick in cases statewide. Over the past two weeks, the rolling average number of daily new cases has increased by 34%, according to Johns Hopkins University researchers. But state health officials also reported that 43% of people have received at least one dose of a vaccine, and about 65% of those people have completed vaccination, which requires two shots in most cases.

More than 400,000 people in South Dakota will be eligible for the vaccine with the broadening of eligibility next week. Health officials said the timeline for vaccinating them depends on how many doses the state receives and how willing people are to be vaccinated. The state expects its supply of vaccines to increase significantly in the coming weeks.

Vaccines will be made available for free through health care providers and at pharmacies statewide.

"There will not be the heavy hand of government mandating that you get the vaccine," Noem said in a video announcement. "Instead, we will do what we always do. We'll trust our people to do the right thing."

No states have mandated that the general public get a vaccine.

The governor credited former President Donald Trump for initiating a vaccine development program, saying President Joe Biden is "yielding the fruits" of those efforts.

Meanwhile, Biden and top health officials have warned that despite vaccines becoming widely available, Americans are declaring victory over the pandemic too early and letting their guard down against stopping infections.

State Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon echoed those warnings, asking people to "just hang in there for a few more months so that we can avoid unnecessary cases and more death."

She said even if people are fully vaccinated they should adhere to precautions such as wearing masks, keeping their distance and washing their hands if they come into close contact with those who are not yet vaccinated.

In South Dakota, cases and deaths from the virus have declined since peaking late last year. But Josh Clayton, the state epidemiologist, warned that variants of the virus pose a renewed threat because they are believed to spread more easily and lead to more severe sickness.

The Department of Health reported 2,522 people have active infections statewide, with 104 hospitalized. The state has recorded 1,935 deaths among people with the virus.

## Firefighters make progress containing Black Hills fires

NEMO, S.D. (AP) — Firefighters continued to make progress Wednesday on containing wildfires in the Black Hills of South Dakota that earlier forced the evacuation of more than 400 homes.

Fire crews have increased containment of the largest fire near Schroeder Road in the Nemo area to 47%, the Pennington County Sheriff's Office said in a Facebook post Wednesday. The Schroeder Road fire has burned nearly 3.4 square miles (8.8 square kilometers).

Law enforcement officers opened some neighborhoods that had been evacuated, but were only admitting people who live there. Residents were asked to remain on their property and not to call 911 unless there is imminent danger from fire flare-ups.

The Schroeder Road fire has crossed into two neighborhoods near Rapid City, according to the sheriff's office. At least one home has been destroyed, as well as several other structures. No injuries have been reported.

Two smaller blazes were burning southwest of Rapid City, including one inside the grounds of Mount Rushmore National Memorial, which remained closed Wednesday.

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The fire continued to burn in steep, rough country inaccessible by roads, officials said. Heavy airtankers and helicopters supported ground firefighters as they protected homes and worked to contain the fire.

The wind remained a factor in firefighting efforts, but was not as strong as it was on Monday and Tuesday, fire officials said.

Strong winds and drought conditions also fueled a wildfire in western North Dakota, where a firefighter was injured in a fire truck crash due to low visibility from smoke. The injuries are not believed to be life-threatening.

The fire has burned about 1 square mile (2.6 square kilometers) north of Richardton in Stark County, officials said.

An abandoned building burned in the blaze, as did fences, power lines and utility poles. Montana-Dakota Utilities spokesman Mark Hanson said the fire damaged five of the company's structures, causing one to collapse.

A downed power line was believed to have started the fire.

## Another lawsuit filed over abandoned mine in Black Hawk

BLACK HAWK, S.D. (AP) — Thirty people who lost their homes when the ground collapsed in a Black Hawk neighborhood and exposed an abandoned mine have now signed on to a lawsuit seeking compensation from the state of South Dakota.

The Hideaway Hills residents say the state mined underneath the entire neighborhood up until 1993 but failed to reclaim or warn buyers about the now-collapsing mine.

The lawsuit says that failure resulted in residents purchasing and living in homes that are both worthless and dangerous. Initially, about 40 people in 15 homes were forced to evacuate when the ground collapsed in April 2020 revealing a shallow gypsum mine.

"Hideaway Hills is essentially sitting upon 'Swiss cheese' as a result of the mining activities of the state," the complaint said. "The land over the Gypsum Mine is collapsing" and "eventually all of it is going to collapse into the mine," the Rapid City Journal reported.

"You could have a kid fall in a hole, you could have a school bus fall in a hole" or a collapse could cause a gas explosion, said attorney Kathleen Barrow of Fox Rothschild, a large national law firm.

Barrow said she suspected the mine was larger than previously thought because homes and roads outside of the collapse are experiencing small collapses and shifts in the ground and walls.

The lawsuit filed in Meade County is one of at least two that have been filed over the sinkhole and abandoned mine.

## Regents increase tuition, fees 1% at SD universities

ABERDEEN, S.D. (AP) — Students in South Dakota's public universities will pay an average of about \$105 more for the upcoming academic year.

The Board of Regents this week approved a tuition and mandatory fee hike of about 1%.

"Affordability for students and their families is a major consideration for us," said Brian Maher, the board's executive director. "Setting tuition and fees must be done with a mind to balancing student affordability against the real costs of providing education. A minimal 1 percent adjustment is consistent with those goals."

On average, an in-state undergraduate student taking 30 credit hours next year will pay about \$9,360 for tuition and mandatory fees, KOTVA-TV reported.

These new rates are effective for the 2021-2022 academic year that begins this summer.

Tuition and fees cover part of the 2.4 percent salary raise for all university employees in the coming year.

Four-year public universities in South Dakota include Black Hills State University, Dakota State University, Northern State University, South Dakota School of Mines & Technology, South Dakota State University and the University of South Dakota.

## Company at heart of J&J vaccine woes has series of citations

By RICHARD LARDNER and LINDA JOHNSON Associated Press

The company at the center of quality problems that led Johnson & Johnson to discard an unknown amount of its coronavirus vaccine has a string of citations from U.S. health officials for quality control problems.

Emergent BioSolutions, a little-known company at the center of the vaccine supply chain, was a key to Johnson & Johnson's plan to deliver 100 million doses of its vaccine to the U.S. by the end of May. But the company has been cited repeatedly by the Food and Drug Administration for problems such as poorly trained employees, cracked vials and mold around one of its facilities, according to records obtained by The Associated Press through the Freedom of Information Act. The records cover inspections at Emergent facilities since 2017.

Johnson & Johnson said Wednesday that a batch of vaccine made by Emergent at its Baltimore factory, known as Bayview, can't be used because it didn't meet quality standards. It was unclear how many doses were involved or how the problem would affect future deliveries of J&J's vaccine. The company said in a statement it was still planning to deliver 100 million doses by the end of June and was "aiming to deliver those doses by the end of May."

J&J locked arms with Emergent in April 2020, enlisting the lesser-known company to manufacture the vaccine J&J was developing with federal funding. At the time, Emergent's Bayview facility wasn't scaled for making millions of doses of a potential COVID-19 vaccine, according to the FDA records that describe the plant as a contract testing laboratory that "did not manufacture products for distribution." Upgrades in technology and personnel were required before Bayview could begin making what's known as "drug substance" material for the vaccine, a two-month process during which the required biological cells are grown.

The FDA inspected Emergent's Bayview plant in April 2020, just as the agreement with J&J was being announced. The federal agency criticized the company for problems with its testing of a potential treatment for anthrax, according to the records obtained by the AP. The FDA's lead investigator cited the company for failing to train employees "in the particular operations they perform as part of their function and current good manufacturing practices."

On the same day, Johnson & Johnson, in a separate news release, heralded its partnership with Emergent as a step toward the pharmaceutical giant's goal of supplying more than 1 billion doses of the vaccine globally by the end of 2021.

Other problems cited by the FDA during the April 2020 inspection included failures by the Bayview plant "to ensure that electronically held data generated during analytical testing" of material "was protected from deletion or manipulation." The FDA's lead investigator, Marcellinus Dordunoo, wrote that Emergent hadn't investigated what he described as "data integrity concerns."

The inspection was the most recent in a series of critical reports from the FDA about Emergent, including one following a December 2017 inspection at a plant in Canton, Massachusetts, in which the FDA said the company hadn't corrected "continued low level mold and yeast isolates" found in the facility. Nearly a year later, agency investigators questioned why Emergent had "an unwritten policy of not conducting routine compliance audits" at a separate plant in Baltimore, known as Camden, where an anthrax vaccine is filled into vials.

Emergent's revenues skyrocketed during the Trump administration, jumping from around \$523 million in 2015 to more than \$1.5 billion in 2020. The company has invested heavily in lobbying the federal government, according to disclosure records, which show the company spent \$3.6 million on lobbying in 2020 alone.

Emergent is one of about 10 companies that Johnson & Johnson is using to speed up manufacturing of its recently approved vaccine, the company said. The Bayview factory where the tainted vaccine ingredient was found had not yet been approved by the FDA, so no vaccine in circulation is affected. Emergent declined to comment.

President Joe Biden has pledged to have enough vaccines for all U.S. adults by the end of May. The U.S. government has ordered enough two-dose shots from Pfizer and Moderna to vaccinate 200 million people to be delivered by late May, plus the 100 million single-dose shots from J&J.

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A federal official said Wednesday evening the administration's goal can be met without additional J&J doses.

A J&J spokesman said earlier Wednesday that the company met the end-of-March goal, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's online vaccine tracker showed J&J had provided about 6.8 million doses to the U.S. vaccine effort. J&J has been shipping finished vaccines from its factory in the Netherlands to the U.S.

J&J said it was putting more of its manufacturing and quality experts inside Emergent's factory to supervise production of the COVID-19 vaccine, a move meant to enable delivery of an additional 24 million vaccine doses through April.

J&J said it still expects to deliver more than 1 billion vaccine doses globally by the end of the year.

The J&J vaccine has been viewed as crucial for vaccination campaigns around the world, because only one shot is required and it can be shipped and stored at standard refrigeration temperatures, unlike some other vials that must be kept frozen. The company also has pledged to sell the vaccine without a profit, but only during the pandemic emergency.

The problem with the vaccine batch was first reported by The New York Times. The FDA said it was aware of the situation but declined further comment.

Johnson reported from Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, and Lardner from Washington. Associated Press writers Matt Perrone and Zeke Miller in Washington and Jason Dearen in New York contributed to this report.

Contact AP's global investigative team at [Investigative@ap.org](mailto:Investigative@ap.org). Follow Richard Lardner on Twitter at @RPLardner.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

This story has been corrected to show the name of the company is Emergent BioSolutions, not Emergent BioSolutons.

## 7 Hong Kong democracy leaders convicted as China clamps down

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Seven of Hong Kong's leading pro-democracy advocates, including a media tycoon and an 82-year-old veteran of the movement, were convicted Thursday for organizing and participating in a march during massive anti-government protests in 2019 that triggered a crackdown on dissent.

The verdict was the latest blow to the flagging democracy movement as the governments in Hong Kong and Beijing tighten the screws in their efforts to exert greater control over the semi-autonomous Chinese territory. Hong Kong had enjoyed a vibrant political culture and freedoms not seen elsewhere in China during the decades it was a British colony. Beijing had pledged to allow the city to retain those freedoms for 50 years when it took the territory back in 1997, but recently it has ushered in a series of measures that many fear are a step closer to making Hong Kong no different from cities on the mainland.

Jimmy Lai, the owner of the outspoken Apple Daily tabloid; Martin Lee, the octogenarian founder of the city's Democratic Party; and five former pro-democracy lawmakers were found guilty in a ruling handed down by a district judge. They face up to five years in prison. Two other former lawmakers charged in the same case had pleaded guilty earlier.

According to the ruling, six of the seven defendants convicted on Thursday, including Lee and Lai, carried a banner that criticized police and called for reforms as they left Victoria Park on Aug. 18, 2019, and led a procession through the center of the city. The other defendant, Margaret Yee, joined them on the way and helped carry the banner.

Police had given permission for a rally at Victoria Park but had rejected an application from the organizer,

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the Civil Human Rights Front, for the march.

Organizers estimated that 1.7 million people marched that day in opposition to a bill that would have allowed suspects to be extradited to mainland China for trial — a measure that infuriated Hong Kongers who cherish their distinct justice system and sparked months of demonstrations that sometimes led to violent clashes between protesters and police.

The legislation was eventually withdrawn, but the fuse was lit, and the protesters' demands expanded to include calls for full democracy. Instead, Beijing has responded by cracking down even harder on dissent, including a new national security law and changes last month that will significantly reduce the number of directly elected seats in Hong Kong's legislature. As a result of the clampdown, most of Hong Kong's outspoken activists are now in jail or in self-exile abroad.

Former lawmaker Lee Cheuk-yan, who was among those convicted Thursday, expressed disappointment in the verdict, saying he and his fellow residents have the constitutional right to march. Lee is known for helping to organize annual candlelight vigils in Hong Kong on the anniversary of the bloody crackdown on pro-democracy protests in Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989.

"We are firm that we have the right to assemble," he said. "It is our badge of honor to be in jail for walking together with the people of Hong Kong."

Six of the nine defendants in the case have been released on bail on the condition they do not leave Hong Kong and they hand in all their travel documents. They are due back in court on April 16, where mitigation pleas will be heard before sentencing.

Lai is among those who remains jailed on other charges, including collusion with foreign forces to intervene in the city's affairs, a new crime under the national security law imposed on the city in 2020 by the central government in Beijing.

The law has put a chill on dissent, all but quashing public protest, which was already diminished because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Authorities have used the sweeping legislation to arrest prominent pro-democracy advocates. They have also detained activists on other charges, such as participating in illegal assemblies.

Lee, a former lawmaker, has been an advocate for human rights and democracy in the city since the former British colony was returned to China in 1997, though he disagreed with the violent tactics adopted by some of the protesters in 2019.

Ahead of Thursday's court session, some of the defendants and their supporters gathered outside the court, shouting "Oppose political persecution" and "Five demands, not one less," in reference to demands by democracy supporters that include amnesty for those arrested in the protests as well as universal suffrage in the territory.

## Medics despair as France's 'third way' virus strategy flails

By ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

AMIENS, France (AP) — As France battles a new virus surge that many believe was avoidable, intensive care nurse Stephanie Sannier manages her stress and sorrow by climbing into her car after a 12-hour shift, blasting music and singing as loud as she can.

"It allows me to breathe," she says, "and to cry."

People with COVID-19 occupy all the beds in her ICU ward in President Emmanuel Macron's hometown hospital in the medieval northern city of Amiens. Three have died in the past three days. The vast medical complex is turning away critically ill patients from smaller towns nearby for lack of space.

With France now Europe's latest virus danger zone, Macron on Wednesday ordered temporary school closures nationwide and new travel restrictions. But he resisted calls for a strict lockdown, instead sticking broadly to his strategy, a "third way" between freedom and confinement meant to keep both infections and a restless populace under control until mass vaccinations take over.

The government refuses to acknowledge failure and blames delayed vaccine deliveries and a disobedient public for soaring infections and saturated hospitals. Macron's critics blame arrogance at the highest



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levels. They say France's leaders ignored warning signs and favored political and economic calculations over public health — and lives.

"We feel this wave coming very strongly," said Romain Beal, a blood oxygen specialist at the Amiens-Picardie Hospital. "We had families where we had the mother and her son die at the same time in two different ICU rooms here. It's unbearable."

The hospital's doctors watched as the variant ravaging Britain jumped the Channel and forged south across France. Just as in Britain, the variant is now driving ever-younger, ever-healthier patients into French emergency rooms and ICUs. Amiens medics did their best to prepare, bringing in reinforcements and setting up a temporary ICU in a pediatric wing.

After Britain's death toll shot higher in January, after new variants slammed European countries from the Czech Republic to Portugal, France continued vaunting its "third way."

French scientists' projections — including from the government's own virus advisory body — predicted trouble ahead. Charts from national research institute Inserm in January and again in February forecast climbing virus hospitalization rates in March or April. Worried doctors urged preventative measures beyond those that were already in place — a 6 p.m. nationwide curfew and the closure of all restaurants and many businesses.

Week after week, the government refused to impose a new lockdown, citing France's stable infection and hospitalization rates, and hoping that they would stay that way. Ministers stressed the importance of keeping the economy afloat and protecting the mental health of a populace worn down by a year of uncertainty. A relieved public granted Macron a boost in the polls.

But the virus wasn't finished. The nationwide infection rate has now doubled over the past three weeks, and Paris hospitals are bracing for what could be their worst battle yet, with ICU overcrowding forecast to surpass what happened when the pandemic first crashed over Europe.

Acknowledging the challenges, Macron on Wednesday announced a three-week nationwide school closure, a month-long domestic travel ban and the creation of thousands of temporary ICU beds. He also promised personnel reinforcements.

While other European countries imposed their third lockdowns in recent months, Macron said that by refusing to do so in France, "we gained precious days of liberty and weeks of schooling for our children, and we allowed hundreds of thousands of workers to keep their heads above water."

At the same time, France has lost another 30,000 lives to the virus this year. It has also reported more virus infections overall than any country in Europe, and it has one of the world's highest death tolls — 95,640 lives lost.

Macron's refusal to order a lockdown frustrates people like Sarah Amhah, visiting her 67-year-old mother in the Amiens ICU.

"They've managed this badly all along," she said, recalling government missteps a year ago around masks and tests and decrying logistical challenges around getting a vaccine for elderly relatives. While she's still proud of France's world-renowned health care system, she's ashamed of her government. "How can we trust them?"

Pollsters note growing public frustration in recent days with the government's hesitancy to crack down, and the potential impact of Macron's current decisions on next year's presidential campaign landscape.

Macron last week defended his decision not to confine the country Jan. 29, a moment epidemiologists say could have been a turning point in France's battle to prevent surge No. 3. "There won't be a mea culpa from me. I don't have remorse and won't acknowledge failure," he said.

Instead of emulating European neighbors whose strategies are bringing infections down — like Britain, which is now starting to open up after a firm three-month lockdown — French government officials dodge questions about the growing death toll by comparing their country to places where the situation is even worse.

At the Amiens ICU, things are already bad enough.

"We have the impression that the population is doing the opposite of what they should be doing," nurse Sannier said, before heading off on her rounds. "And we have the feeling we are working for nothing."

Intern Oussama Nanai acknowledged that the drumbeat of grim virus numbers has left many people feeling numb, and he urged everyone to visit an ICU to put a human face to the figures.

"There are ups and downs every day ... Yesterday afternoon I couldn't do it anymore. The patient in (room) 52 died, and the patient in (room) 54," he said.

But sometimes their work pays off. "Two people who were in the most serious condition for 60 days left on their own two feet, and they sent us photos," he said. "That boosts our morale and makes us realize that what we are doing is useful."

Sylvie Corbet in Paris contributed.

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## Child among 4 dead in shooting at California office building

By STEFANIE DAZIO and ROBERT JABLON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A child was among four people killed Wednesday in a shooting at a Southern California office building that left a fifth victim and the gunman critically wounded, police said.

The violence in the city of Orange southeast of Los Angeles was the nation's third mass shooting in just over two weeks.

When police arrived at the two-story structure around 5:30 p.m. shots were being fired, Orange Police Lt. Jennifer Amat said. Officers opened fire and the suspect was taken to a hospital, Amat said.

It's unclear if the suspect suffered a self-inflicted wound or was shot by police. Police provided no details on the victims other than to say one was a child and a woman was critically wounded.

In a tweet, Gov. Gavin Newsom called the killings "horrifying and heartbreaking."

"Our hearts are with the families impacted by this terrible tragedy tonight," he wrote.

U.S. Rep. Katie Porter, a California Democrat whose district includes the city of Orange, said on Twitter that she was "deeply saddened."

Amat had no information about what may have prompted the attack. She said the shooting occurred on both levels of the building. Signs outside indicated a handful of businesses were located there, including an insurance office, a financial consulting firm, a legal services business and a phone repair store.

People gathered outside the building after the shooting hoping to get word about loved ones.

Paul Tovar told KTLA-TV that his brother owns a business there, Unified Homes, a mobile home broker. "He's not answering his phone, neither's my niece," Tovar said. "I'm pretty scared and worried ... right now I'm just praying really hard."

Charlie Espinoza also was outside the building and told The Orange County Register that he couldn't reach his fiancé, who works for a medical billing company.

Cody Lev, who lives across the street from the office building, told the newspaper he heard three loud pops that were spaced out, then three more. There was silence, then he heard numerous shots, followed by sirens and then more shots.

A Facebook livestream posted by a resident who lives near the office appeared to show officers carrying a motionless person from the building and officers providing aid to another person.

The killings follow a mass shooting at a supermarket in Boulder, Colorado, last week that left 10 dead. A week before that six Asian women were among eight people killed in three Atlanta-area spas.

The city of Orange is about 30 miles (48 kilometers) from Los Angeles and home to about 140,000 people. Amat said the shooting was the worst in the city since December 1997, when a gunman armed with an assault rifle attacked a California Department of Transportation maintenance yard.

Arturo Reyes Torres, 41, an equipment operator who had been fired six weeks earlier, killed four people

and wounded others, including a police officer, before police killed him.

## **The Dutch went first in 2001; who has same-sex marriage now?**

By DAVID CRARY and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

AMSTERDAM (AP) — Twenty years ago, just after the stroke of midnight on April 1, the mayor of Amsterdam married four couples in City Hall as the Netherlands became the first country in the world with legalized same-sex marriages.

"There are two reasons to rejoice," Mayor Job Cohen told the newlyweds before pink champagne and pink cake were served. "You are celebrating your marriage, and you are also celebrating your right to be married."

Same-sex marriage is now legal in 28 countries worldwide, as well as the self-governing island of Taiwan. That includes most of Western Europe. Yet its spread has been uneven — Taiwan is the only place in Asia to take the step; South Africa is the only African country to do so.

"If you had told me 20 years ago that today same-sex marriage would be a reality in 29 countries, I would not have believed you," said Jessica Stern, executive director of the global LGBTQ-rights group OutRight Action International.

But she noted how polarized the world is regarding LGBTQ acceptance, with nearly 70 countries continuing to criminalize same-sex relations.

"The progress has been great, no doubt. But we have a long road ahead," Stern said.

In many countries, even outside of Asia and Africa, opposition to marriage equality remains vehement. In Guatemala, some lawmakers have proposed a bill that would explicitly ban same-sex marriage. In Poland, President Andrzej Duda was reelected last year after a campaign depicting the LGBTQ rights movement as more harmful than communism.

Poland is among a solid bloc of Eastern European countries that have resisted same-sex marriage, while 16 countries in Western Europe have legalized it.

Switzerland is on track to become the 17th — its parliament approved legalization of same-sex marriage in December. But the law hasn't taken effect, and opponents are trying to collect enough signatures to require a referendum on whether to overturn it.

Elsewhere, same-sex marriage is legal in the United States, Canada and Costa Rica; five South American countries; a majority of Mexico's 32 states; Australia and New Zealand.

Added together, those countries are home to about 1.2 billion people, roughly 15% of the world's population. Legalization came in various ways: through court rulings, legislation and — in the case of Ireland — a resounding endorsement by voters in a 2015 national referendum.

Several countries in Europe — including Italy, Greece and the Czech Republic — provide civil unions for same-sex couples. But even if these arrangements offer many of the protections of marriage, many LGBTQ activists consider them a demeaning second-tier status.

Just two weeks ago, the Vatican's orthodoxy office declared that the Catholic Church won't bless same-sex unions since God "cannot bless sin."

In the Netherlands, there have been more than 18,000 same-sex marriages since 2001 — about 53% of them between two women, according to the Dutch Central Bureau of Statistics. Each year about 400 same-sex marriages break up, the bureau says.

Amsterdam will be celebrating the April 1 anniversary with an online symposium and a "rainbow walk" route along 20 sites considered important in the struggle for LGBTQ rights.

"There are still causes for concern," the city said. "Because equal rights don't automatically lead to everybody being treated the same."

One of the couples married 20 years ago, Gert Kasteel and Dolf Pasker, told The Associated Press they'd been warmly accepted by their neighbors and associates, though they're aware that anti-LGBTQ sentiment persists elsewhere.

"For most people, it is no issue any more," Pasker said. "Oh happy day."

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In contrast to the Netherlands, there was an 11-year gap in the United States between the first legal same-sex marriages in Massachusetts in 2004 and the 2015 Supreme Court ruling that extended legalization nationwide. According to the Williams Institute, a think tank at the UCLA School of Law that specializes in research on LGBTQ issues, there were 513,000 married same-sex couples in the U.S. in 2020.

As in other countries legalizing same-sex marriage, popular support for the concept has risen steadily in the U.S. since 2004. Back then, 42% of Americans thought same-sex marriage should be legalized, according to the Gallup Poll. By last year, that figured had reached 67%.

In Africa, where religious and cultural traditions often frown on homosexuality, no country appears on track to soon join South Africa in legalizing same-sex marriage.

The situation is more fluid in Asia. A same-sex partnership bill has been proposed in Thailand's parliament. In Japan, where some local governments recognize same-sex unions, a court recently ruled that same-sex marriage should be allowed under the constitution. The ruling has no immediate legal effect, but activists say it could influence other court cases and boost their quest for parliamentary debate on allowing same-sex marriage.

India struck down a colonial-era law in 2018 that made gay sex punishable by up to 10 years in prison, and there are some openly gay celebrities. But same-sex marriage remains illegal; the government says gay and lesbian couples don't warrant the status of "family unit."

As the marriage equality movement took shape in Europe and the Americas over the past 20 years, opponents worldwide offered some basic counter-arguments.

One common warning related to religious freedom, with some faith leaders predicting repercussions for religions that disapprove of same-sex relationships.

For the most part, faiths in the same-sex marriage countries have been able to maintain their own rites of marriage. There have been some highly publicized legal cases, however, such as one that reached the U.S. Supreme Court involving in a conservative Christian baker who refused to make a wedding cake for a gay couple.

Another argument was that legalizing same-sex marriage would undermine the institution of marriage itself.

Lawyer Evan Wolfson, who helped orchestrate the U.S. marriage equality movement as head of the advocacy group Freedom to Marry, assessed this argument in a recent article in the European Human Rights Law Review.

"The history of marriage is a history of change and expanding inclusion. ... The sky has not fallen when marriage has embraced same-sex couples," he wrote. "There is enough marriage to share."

Crary reported from New York. Associated Press reporters Vanessa Gera in Warsaw and Krutika Pathi in New Delhi contributed to this report.

## Gaza man: After lengthy torture, Hamas forced me to divorce

By FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — After months of torture and interrogations in a Hamas prison, Palestinian activist Rami Aman says he was offered an unconventional proposition: Divorce your wife and you are free to go.

Aman had recently signed a marriage contract with the daughter of a Hamas official, and the ruling Islamic militant group apparently wanted to dispel any insinuation that it supported Aman's outreach to Israeli peace activists. He says he eventually caved into the pressure. Now he says the love of his life has been whisked out of Gaza against her will, and he may never see her again.

"I realized I was sent there to do time until I break up my relationship," Aman said in an interview on the roof of his Gaza City home.

It was the final humiliation in a saga that began with what he believed to be an innocent online meeting with Israeli peace activists. Instead, the episode landed him in a notorious prison cell known as "the bus,"

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and ultimately destroyed his marriage. His experience shows the tough constraints on free expression in the Hamas-ruled territory, and the militant group's hostility to any talk of coexistence with Israel.

"The deplorable treatment of Rami Aman by Hamas authorities reflects their systematic practice of punishing those whose speech threatens their orthodoxy," said Omar Shakir, Israel-Palestine director at Human Rights Watch.

Aman did not think he was doing anything subversive when he joined that fateful Zoom call last April. Amid the widespread closures at the start of the coronavirus pandemic, Aman wanted to discuss the "double lockdown" in Gaza, which has endured 14 years of a tight Israeli-Egyptian blockade against Hamas.

"I wanted to let people know more how it is when you live under Israeli occupation and siege, deprived of the rights the rest of the world enjoys," said Aman, a 39-year-old freelance writer.

For over two hours, Aman and his group of peace activists, the Gaza Youth Committee, talked about coexistence with dozens of Israelis.

As word of the meeting leaked out, social media filled with angry comments branding him a traitor. Some urged Hamas, which has ruled Gaza since 2007, to act.

Aman said that on April 9, he and seven members of his group were summoned to Internal Security, the agency that deals with dissidents and people accused of spying for Israel.

He said he was blindfolded and quickly sent to "the bus," a room lined with rows of kindergarten chairs and a pair of toilets at the end. There, he said, detainees are forced to sit in the tiny chairs for days or weeks at a time, with few breaks.

"They did not present any evidence against me," Aman said. He said he would sit in the chair from 6 a.m. until 1 a.m., except when he was taken away for questioning or to pray. He was only allowed to remove his blindfold when he went to the bathroom. His captors called him by his prison number, 6299.

The questions focused on the Zoom meeting and who might have been behind it. Aman was accused of collaborating with Israel -- a crime punishable by death.

The Gaza Youth Committee has held dozens of talks with Israelis, Americans and Europeans under an initiative called Skype with Your Enemy. In 2019, it organized an event with cyclists in Gaza and Israel riding in parallel on opposite sides of the barbed-wire perimeter fence.

He said at 1 a.m., the "bus riders" were allowed to sleep blindfolded next to the chairs. They would curl up in their jackets and lie on the cold floor before they were woken up a few hours later for the Muslim dawn prayer. In a 2018 report, Human Rights Watch documented similar accounts.

The interrogation was over after one week, but Aman said he spent 18 agonizing days on the bus before being moved to a tiny cell.

Then the questioning took a strange new turn.

Just two months earlier, Aman had signed a marriage contract with the daughter of an exiled Hamas official based in Egypt. The couple did not have time to celebrate their wedding with a formal ceremony due to a coronavirus lockdown, but they were considered married under Islamic law.

Aman said he met her in 2018 after she separated from her first husband. He said she believed in the message of peace and joined his team in several discussions with Israelis. He asked not to publish her name, fearing it could bring her harm.

Any insinuation that a member of Hamas was friendly toward Israel is deeply embarrassing to the group. In an unrelated and far more serious case, Mosab Yousef, a son of one of Hamas' co-founders, spied for Israel from 1997 to 2007. Now living in the U.S., he is a staunch critic of Hamas and the subject of a 2014 documentary.

Aman said his new wife was arrested with him but they were quickly separated.

"She doesn't want you," an officer told him. "It's better you both divorce."

For two months, he said, he resisted the pressure to break up. On June 28, she finally visited, telling him she had been released on bail.

"This was not the woman I knew," he said. "She was full of weakness and fear." Officers sat in the room.

He asked her if she wanted to end the relationship, and she said yes. "I know she did not say so from her heart and it was clear she was under heavy pressure," Aman said. He refused to grant her a divorce.

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In July he was transferred to Hamas' central prison, though he still had not been convicted of any crime. There was no more interrogation or torture.

On Aug. 12, an Islamic judge came for a visit and asked whether he felt coerced to divorce. Aman told him yes, and felt encouraged since Islamic law does not allow divorce to be forced on someone. But then the imam turned against him.

"How are you being forced? Do you see me carrying a gun?" he says he was told.

He said he finally gave in and signed the divorce papers after he was promised he would be released the next day.

Yet he remained in captivity for two more months. On Oct. 25, Egypt opened its border with Gaza to allow a Hamas delegation to travel to Cairo.

The next day, a Hamas court convicted Aman and two members of his team on the vague charge of "weakening the revolutionary spirit." They were sentenced to one year in prison, but had the remainder of their terms suspended and were released.

Only then did Aman learn his wife had been taken with the Hamas delegation to Egypt and turned over to relatives living there.

The Associated Press contacted the woman, who confirmed she was forced into the divorce and wanted her husband back.

The landlord of the Gaza apartment where the woman lived confirmed that she had collected her belongings, accompanied by a Hamas official, after her release on bail. She was then taken to a women's shelter until her move to Egypt. The Hamas official, a well-known public figure, did not answer calls seeking comment.

Aman spends his days speaking to his lawyer, human rights groups, and texting Hamas officials. Internal Security are still holding his laptop, desktop computer, and his phone along with several other devices belonging to family members.

He also has learned that he is now barred from leaving Gaza. In December, after receiving an invitation to speak at New York University, he said Hamas officers blocked him from entering Israel to apply for a visa at the U.S. consulate.

Eyad Bozum, an Interior Ministry spokesman, confirmed the travel ban but said the issue is "on its way to being resolved," without elaborating.

For now, Aman has put aside his political activism. "Now I have my personal battle: return to my wife."

## In Dubai, an art show's return reflects city's new normal

By MALAK HARB Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — It was a scene reminiscent of pre-pandemic Dubai: Art lovers dressed in designer clothes or alternative fashion, walking around in one of the city's many swanky locations. Bloggers, VIPs and influencers filming on their mobile phones. People mingling and laughing.

The only difference? They all wore masks.

After being canceled in March last year due to the coronavirus pandemic, Art Dubai returned this week to the sunbaked desert metropolis it calls home, becoming one of the first in-person international art fairs of 2021. The show is part of the city-state's efforts to reopen to international trade and tourism that power its economy.

"Art Dubai was the first art fair to be canceled, just when the pandemic started" and now it's the first to be back live, said Pablo del Val, the show's artistic director.

"I think it's been an emotional, fantastic moment," he added. "I think everyone was looking forward to stop looking to screens and having a physical relationship with a work of art."

This year's installment is different, however. Typically held at the vast conference space of Madinat Jumeirah in the shadow of Dubai's iconic, sail-shaped Burj al-Arab hotel, the 2021 event instead came to Dubai International Financial Center. Temporary galleries sprung up around the center's Gate House, the landmark structure at the business hub.

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Signs of the pandemic are still everywhere: Social-distancing signs and hand sanitizer dispensers stand visible in the tents housing the galleries. People attending the fair can book a specific time slot in advance to guarantee their entry. Those worried about being around a crowd can take a virtual tour of the fair from home.

Even some of the art is teleconferencing into the event. Art Dubai introduced a program allowing galleries unable to travel to Dubai to connect to visitors via video.

The fair features 50 contemporary and modern galleries from 31 countries, specializing in regions that are not main players on the international art scene. It also focuses on artists from the Middle East.

One of them is Rashed al-Shashai, a prominent figure of the contemporary Saudi art scene. He recently designed a piece entitled *Concise Passage, 2020* in the kingdom's al-Ula historical district — a feature made of shipping crates divided by a pink-lighted walkway symbolizing a region that was once a key stop on an incense trade route linking Arabia to Asia.

"Taking part in this fair shows the determination of art to be part of bringing life back to normal, for people and humanity," al-Shashai said. "It helps people live in a better way, even when there are disasters and tragedies happening in the world."

As Dubai went into a lockdown in early 2020, the city's big events shut down, along with its long-haul carrier Emirates. The autocratically ruled emirate moved aggressively to reopen in July to tourists. Coronavirus numbers however spiked to levels unseen following New Year's Eve. Other countries also blamed Dubai for outbreaks of coronavirus variants.

Since then, reported daily new infection numbers have dropped to over 2,000, from highs of nearly 4,000 at the worst of the winter. The United Arab Emirates is vaccinating at one of the quickest rates in the world, hoping to be ready for Dubai hosting its Expo 2020 world's fair in October, after the pandemic forced a delay of the event last year.

With airlines flying again, big events back on the calendar, and bars and restaurants open to residents and tourists — albeit masked when not eating or drinking — the UAE hopes to power through the rest of the pandemic.

"Corona changed life as a whole," al-Shashai said. "I found that people are just waiting for a chance to come back, and they will, and they will rebuild, and they will forget everything that happened, and it will all become tales to be told."

The pandemic also featured in the art exhibited in the show. One piece, a giant outdoor display reading "NEWS: IT WON'T BE LIKE THIS FOREVER" drew many a selfie.

"I think that culture is something that should never be canceled and I think it doesn't matter the times that you're going through," del Val said. "I think it's a way that we can really interrelate with each other and where our senses and our positiveness come back to life."

"I think that one of the magics that Art Dubai is managing this week is precisely that ... bringing people (into) a completely different state of mind," he added.

"We are becoming humans again."

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Follow Malak Harb on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/malakhARB](https://www.twitter.com/malakhARB).

## Imprisoned Palestinian leader's entry shakes up planned vote

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

RAMALLAH, West Bank (AP) — A popular Palestinian leader imprisoned by Israel has registered his own parliamentary list in May elections, his supporters said Wednesday, in a last-minute shakeup that could severely weaken President Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah party and help its militant Hamas rivals.

Marwan Barghouti's wife, Fadwa, registered the list hours before the deadline set by the election commission. Polls indicate it would split the vote for Fatah, potentially paving the way for another major victory by Hamas. That increases the likelihood that Abbas will find a way to call off the first Palestinian elections in 15 years.

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Barghouti, 61, a former Fatah militant commander, is serving five life sentences in Israel following a 2004 terrorism conviction. But he remains a popular and charismatic leader, and by breaking with Abbas he could reshape Palestinian politics and potentially replace him as president.

His entry reflects growing frustration with Abbas, who has presided over an increasingly authoritarian and unpopular Palestinian Authority that has failed to achieve national unity or advance Palestinian hopes for an independent state.

It's unclear how Barghouti's rise would affect relations with Israel. Both he and Abbas want a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, but there have been no substantive peace talks in over a decade. Israel is unlikely to release Barghouti regardless of his political fortunes, and may refuse to engage with a leader it views as a terrorist.

Abbas has decreed parliamentary and presidential elections for May and July this year, the first since 2006, when the Islamic militant Hamas won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections. That precipitated a crisis that led to Hamas' seizure of Gaza from Abbas's forces the following year, leaving the West Bank and Gaza divided between rival governments.

Abbas decreed the election in January in a step meant to help heal the division. It now remains to be seen whether the elections will actually be held, given the long-running feud between Fatah and Hamas — and the widening divisions within Fatah.

An opinion poll carried out by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research earlier this month found that a separate list endorsed by Barghouti would split the Fatah vote and potentially garner more support than the official list.

"Barghouti running would dramatically change the outcome," the center's director Khalil Shikaki said last week when the results of the poll were published.

If Barghouti runs for president in elections planned for this summer, he would easily defeat both Abbas and Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, according to the poll, which surveyed 1,200 Palestinians with a margin of error of 3 percentage points.

Barghouti, 61 has flirted with a run in the past but eventually ended up endorsing Abbas, who was elected to a four-year term in 2005 but has remained in power since then.

This time Barghouti will partner with Nasser al-Kidwa, the 67-year-old nephew of the late Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for a list called "Freedom." Al-Kidwa was kicked out of Fatah in early March after announcing he would run on his own list.

"We hope that this list will lead to democracy," Fadwa Barghouti said. "We registered this list and we hope it will succeed."

Earlier, senior Fatah official Jibril Rajoub submitted the party's official list.

He said the elections would be held in "all the Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem," which Israel annexed and considers part of its capital. He also predicted the elections would lead to a national unity government that would end the rift.

"We seek to win the elections in the spirit of democracy, and we will respect the results," he added.

Another list, known as "Future," has been registered by supporters of Mohammed Dahlan, a former senior Fatah official who had a falling-out with Abbas and is now based in the United Arab Emirates. He is also expected to drain support from Fatah.

The fracturing of Fatah severely weakens Abbas and could pave the way for the far more disciplined and unified Hamas — which is running on one list — to emerge as the largest Palestinian party. Abbas could postpone or cancel the elections, but that would risk censure from the United States and European nations, which provide vital aid to the Palestinian Authority and have long called for free and fair elections.

East Jerusalem could provide a pretext for cancelling or postponing the elections. Israel bars the PA from operating there and has not said whether it will allow voting in the city.

Tensions are already rising in the occupied West Bank. In the Qalandia refugee camp near Jerusalem, dozens of Fatah gunmen fired automatic weapons into the air Wednesday night to protest the expected makeup of the official party list, which they said did not represent them.

Barghouti led Fatah's militant wing during the intifada, or uprising, that erupted in 2000 amid the break-



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down of the peace process. He condemned attacks targeting civilians inside Israel, though Israel says he is responsible for civilian deaths.

The uprising saw Palestinians carry out suicide bombings and other attacks against Israeli civilians as the Israeli military launched deadly raids in the West Bank and Gaza. More than 6,000 Palestinians and over 1,000 Israelis were killed, with the unrest tapering off after 2005.

Israeli troops arrested Barghouti in 2002, at the height of the uprising, and two years later a military court convicted him of orchestrating attacks that killed five people, giving him an equivalent number of life sentences. Barghouti refused to recognize the Israeli military court or offer any defense.

Many Palestinians view Barghouti as a revolutionary leader in the mold of Nelson Mandela or Fidel Castro, unsullied by the corruption of the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority or the long-running feud between Fatah and Hamas. As a long-jailed militant, he is seen as having sacrificed his freedom for the cause of Palestinian independence.

From behind bars, he has continued to call for a Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem, lands Israel seized in the 1967 war. Polls consistently show him to be the most popular Palestinian leader, with support from across the political spectrum.

In 2017, Barghouti led more than 1,500 prisoners in a 40-day hunger strike to demand better conditions inside Israeli jails. Most Palestinians view prisoners held by Israel as heroes to their cause, and the strike bolstered Barghouti's image.

Israel considers Barghouti and other Palestinians jailed for security offenses to be terrorists and has given no indication it would free him. He was not included in a group of more than 1,000 high-profile prisoners who were released in 2011 in a deal with Hamas in exchange for an Israeli soldier captured by militants and held in Gaza for more than five years.

## Ancient coins may solve mystery of murderous 1600s pirate

By WILLIAM J. KOLE Associated Press

WARWICK, R.I. (AP) — A handful of coins unearthed from a pick-your-own-fruit orchard in rural Rhode Island and other random corners of New England may help solve one of the planet's oldest cold cases.

The villain in this tale: a murderous English pirate who became the world's most-wanted criminal after plundering a ship carrying Muslim pilgrims home to India from Mecca, then eluded capture by posing as a slave trader.

"It's a new history of a nearly perfect crime," said Jim Bailey, an amateur historian and metal detectorist who found the first intact 17th-century Arabian coin in a meadow in Middletown.

That ancient pocket change — the oldest ever found in North America — could explain how pirate Capt. Henry Every vanished into the wind.

On Sept. 7, 1695, the pirate ship *Fancy*, commanded by Every, ambushed and captured the *Ganj-i-Sawai*, a royal vessel owned by Indian emperor Aurangzeb, then one of the world's most powerful men. Aboard were not only the worshipers returning from their pilgrimage, but tens of millions of dollars' worth of gold and silver.

What followed was one of the most lucrative and heinous robberies of all time.

Historical accounts say his band tortured and killed the men aboard the Indian ship and raped the women before escaping to the Bahamas, a haven for pirates. But word quickly spread of their crimes, and English King William III — under enormous pressure from a scandalized India and the East India Company trading giant — put a large bounty on their heads.

"If you Google 'first worldwide manhunt,' it comes up as Every," Bailey said. "Everybody was looking for these guys."

Until now, historians only knew that Every eventually sailed to Ireland in 1696, where the trail went cold. But Bailey says the coins he and others have found are evidence the notorious pirate first made his way to the American colonies, where he and his crew used the plunder for day-to-day expenses while on the run.

The first complete coin surfaced in 2014 at Sweet Berry Farm in Middletown, a spot that had piqued

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Bailey's curiosity two years earlier after he found old colonial coins, an 18th-century shoe buckle and some musket balls.

Waving a metal detector over the soil, he got a signal, dug down and hit literal paydirt: a darkened, dime-sized silver coin he initially assumed was either Spanish or money minted by the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Peering closer, the Arabic text on the coin got his pulse racing. "I thought, 'Oh my God,'" he said.

Research confirmed the exotic coin was minted in 1693 in Yemen. That immediately raised questions, Bailey said, since there's no evidence that American colonists struggling to eke out a living in the New World traveled to anywhere in the Middle East to trade until decades later.

Since then, other detectorists have unearthed 15 additional Arabian coins from the same era — 10 in Massachusetts, three in Rhode Island and two in Connecticut. Another was found in North Carolina, where records show some of Every's men first came ashore.

"It seems like some of his crew were able to settle in New England and integrate," said Sarah Sportman, state archaeologist for Connecticut, where one of the coins was found in 2018 at the ongoing excavation of a 17th-century farm site.

"It was almost like a money laundering scheme," she said.

Although it sounds unthinkable now, Every was able to hide in plain sight by posing as a slave trader — an emerging profession in 1690s New England. On his way to the Bahamas, he even stopped at the French island of Reunion to get some Black captives so he'd look the part, Bailey said.

Obscure records show a ship called the Sea Flower, used by the pirates after they ditched the Fancy, sailed along the Eastern seaboard. It arrived with nearly four dozen slaves in 1696 in Newport, Rhode Island, which became a major hub of the North American slave trade in the 18th century.

"There's extensive primary source documentation to show the American colonies were bases of operation for pirates," said Bailey, 53, who holds a degree in anthropology from the University of Rhode Island and worked as an archaeological assistant on explorations of the Wydah Gally pirate ship wreck off Cape Cod in the late 1980s.

Bailey, whose day job is analyzing security at the state's prison complex, has published his findings in a research journal of the American Numismatic Society, an organization devoted to the study of coins and medals.

Archaeologists and historians familiar with but not involved in Bailey's work say they're intrigued, and believe it's shedding new light on one of the world's most enduring criminal mysteries.

"Jim's research is impeccable," said Kevin McBride, a professor of archaeology at the University of Connecticut. "It's cool stuff. It's really a pretty interesting story."

Mark Hanna, an associate professor of history at the University of California-San Diego and an expert in piracy in early America, said that when he first saw photos of Bailey's coin, "I lost my mind."

"Finding those coins, for me, was a huge thing," said Hanna, author of the 2015 book, "Pirate Nests and the Rise of the British Empire." "The story of Capt. Every is one of global significance. This material object — this little thing — can help me explain that."

Every's exploits have inspired a 2020 book by Steven Johnson, "Enemy of All Mankind;" PlayStation's popular "Uncharted" series of video games; and a Sony Pictures movie version of "Uncharted" starring Tom Holland, Mark Wahlberg and Antonio Banderas that's slated for release early in 2022.

Bailey, who keeps his most valuable finds not at his home but in a safe deposit box, says he'll keep digging.

"For me, it's always been about the thrill of the hunt, not about the money," he said. "The only thing better than finding these objects is the long-lost stories behind them."

## Migrant families freed without court notice or any paperwork

By ELLIOT SPAGAT Associated Press

MISSION, Texas (AP) — Overwhelmed and underprepared, U.S. authorities are releasing migrant families on the Mexican border without notices to appear in immigration court or sometimes without any paperwork at all — a time-saving move that has left migrants confused.

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The rapid releases ease pressure on the Border Patrol and its badly overcrowded holding facilities but shifts work to Immigration and Customs and Enforcement, the agency that enforces immigration laws within the United States. Families are released with booking records — when they get paperwork at all — though only parents are photographed and fingerprinted.

The Border Patrol began the unusual practice last week in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, which has seen the biggest increase in the number of migrant families and unaccompanied minors crossing the border. Last week, the agency added instructions to report to an ICE office within 60 days to adults' booking documents.

But some got no documents at all, including dozens at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in the Texas border city of Mission, where about 100 migrants released by U.S. authorities had been arriving each night to sleep on mats in classrooms in a shuttered elementary school.

Carlos Enrique Linga, 27, waited at the shelter for a week without documents along with his 5-year-old daughter, hoping to join a friend in Tennessee. His wife is still in Guatemala with their 2-year-old twin daughters and a 3-month-old.

Linga was unwilling to leave the shelter until he got documents and was asking Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley for help.

"We hope they can help with our papers so that we can move on, work and send (money) to my family," said Linga, whose home in Guatemala was destroyed by storms in November. "The church has told us that there are mistakes sometimes. Because there are so many people, they forget."

Customs and Border Protection, which oversees the Border Patrol, said it stopped issuing court notices in some cases because preparing even one of the documents often takes hours. Migrants undergo background checks and are tested for COVID-19.

The agency didn't answer questions about how many migrants have been released without court notices or without documents at all.

Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley, knows of 10 to 15 families released without any paperwork since last week, an issue that has cropped up before when there are large increases in new arrivals.

"It's a problem, it's a situation we need to resolve, to make sure we follow up," she said.

Migrants will be issued notices to appear in court at their 60-day check-ins with ICE, according to a U.S. official with direct knowledge of the plans who spoke on condition of anonymity because the plans have not been made public. It is unclear how widespread the practice has been, but it is very common in Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings.

Preparing a court appearance notice can take an hour to 90 minutes, said Chris Cabrera, spokesman for the National Border Patrol Council, a union that represents agents. He welcomed the change.

"Honestly, from my end, I think it's good because it's less paperwork for our guys," said Cabrera, who works in the Rio Grande Valley.

An uptick in the number of people crossing the border, especially children traveling alone and families, has filled up federal holding facilities. The U.S. has been releasing families with children 6 and under and expelling families with older children under pandemic-related powers that deny an opportunity to seek asylum.

Immigration attorneys had mixed reactions to people being released without court notices or paperwork, particularly the requirement to check in with ICE. They advise migrants to apply for a different route to asylum — one that's only for people already in the country. In that option, they meet a Citizenship and Immigration Services asylum officer in a less adversarial environment and if denied, can appeal to an immigration judge, advocates say.

"It's a whole different tone," said Charlene D'Cruz, director of Lawyers for Good Government's Project Corazon legal aid program. And if they fail, they get "a second bite at the apple" before a judge.

Initially, U.S. authorities didn't even require the ICE check-in when it began releasing families without court notices over the past two weeks. But they shifted course. D'Cruz said ICE could potentially issue a notice to appear in court, expel people from the country or do nothing.

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"There are so many different options, and I don't know what's going to happen," D'Cruz said.

The immigration courts, with a backlog of 1.3 million cases, is ill-prepared for a large increase in new asylum claims.

At the shelter in Mission, a city of about 85,000 people bordering Mexico with a large park known for birdlife, migrants who have booking records closely guarded them. Along with their proof of a COVID-19 test, the documents are kept in large yellow envelopes that say, "Please help me. I do not speak English."

Information on the booking form is sparse: name, nationality, gender, date of birth. Some forms say they are eligible for "prosecutorial discretion," a designation that signals they are not a priority for deportation.

Jose Sansario waited at the shelter for a week after coming from Guatemala with his wife, Kimberly, and their 3-year-old daughter, Genesee. They had difficulty finding flights to Richmond, Virginia, their final destination.

They left their homeland in early March because a gang threatened to kill him if he didn't hand over money from his auto repair business. He said he heard the Biden administration was friendly to immigrants, despite repeated statements from the president and top aides that the border is not open.

"We didn't know what was true, but we had faith — faith that God would help us and that faith would allow us in," Sansario said.

Alba Urquia of El Salvador waited for a week at the shelter because she was released without any documents after crossing the Rio Grande with a large group of migrants, including her 4-year-old daughter. She plans to help her father with his car repair shop in Los Angeles.

"I can't leave," she said, sitting on a bench in the shuttered school's playground. The shelter has since closed. "Our fear is that they return us to Mexico or to our country."

"That would be a nightmare," said Alexi Sarmiento of Honduras, who came to the U.S. with her 6- and 9-year-old daughters and was released without documents.

## Brutal NYC attack renews Asian American volunteers' efforts

By TERRY TANG and DEEPTI HAJELA Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Fed up with the incessant attacks on Asian Americans, Stan Lee recently started voluntarily patrolling San Francisco's Chinatown. So when the 53-year-old fire lieutenant saw a video of a New York City woman getting brutally beaten, he didn't have to guess how his fellow volunteers — other Asian American firefighters — were taking it.

"I'm pretty sure they're all steamed, like I am," said Lee, who is Chinese American. "It's personal. It could have been our aunt or our mom or our grandma."

The vicious assault of a 65-year-old woman while walking to church in the daytime this week near New York City's Times Square has heightened already palpable levels of outrage over anti-Asian attacks that escalated with the pandemic.

New York police say the assailant yelled racial slurs at the Filipina American woman and told her, "You don't belong here!" The video quickly drew millions of views along with widespread condemnation, not just for its heinous nature but the seemingly indifferent bystanders. The assailant was arrested and charged Wednesday with hate crimes.

Asian American groups from coast to coast, already doing more than digital activism — patrolling, escorting, chaperoning, — are trying not to let this latest hate crime discourage those efforts.

"I think that gives us more motive to take care of our own," Lee said. "We see everyone in our community as our own. It doesn't have to be just Asians."

In New York City, Teresa Ting, a 29-year-old Chinese American, started what has become the Main Street Patrol following an attack on another older Asian American woman in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens in February.

"It literally could have been my mother had it been the wrong place, wrong time," Ting said of that attack.

She wanted to do something more than posting messages on social media and was happily surprised when people showed up to volunteer. The group has since organized volunteers to go out in parts of

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Flushing, a heavily Asian neighborhood, on weekend afternoons.

Volunteers travel in groups of three, and have an app they use to communicate with each other. Ting, who wants to expand to offer a chaperone service, said she wanted people to know how to get involved and tactics they could use.

"I think it's very necessary, especially in the Asian community right now, just because a lot of the elders have a language barrier. They can't speak or understand English," she said. "That's why I feel a lot of hate crimes have been unreported."

Bystander training has also been on the rise and the need was only reinforced by the video of this week's attack. Emily May, co-founder of Hollaback!, which offers training on how to respond when witnessing harassment, said it was disturbing that the video showed several witnesses to the attack who didn't seem to render aid to the woman.

Two have been identified as lobby workers, and the attack took place on the street right outside of their building. Neither intervened or called 911, the police said. One of them was even seen closing the building door during the assault.

May said there were things they could have done, even if they were worried about harm coming to themselves, like shouting or otherwise creating a distraction.

"I still think there are ways that they could have intervened without compromising their own safety," she said.

Marita Etcubanez, senior director of strategic initiatives for Asian Americans Advancing Justice, said the organization partnered with Hollaback! last year to offer free online bystander training that focused on Asian Americans.

"It's clear that the training was responding to a need and a lot of concerns within the community because we had over 1,000 people register for the first two trainings that we offered," she said.

The interest in the training has cycled up and down since, and demand has increased as anti-Asian attacks have gotten more coverage.

Asian Americans are still reeling just weeks after a white gunman opened fire inside three Asian-owned massage businesses in metro Atlanta. Eight people, including six women of Asian descent, died. The shooter has not been charged with any hate crimes, and authorities received intense backlash when they cited the suspect blaming a "sex addiction." Critics say the victims' race is inextricably tied to the motive.

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland on Tuesday ordered a review of how the Justice Department can best deploy its resources to combat hate crimes during a surge in incidents targeting Asian Americans.

Garland issued a department-wide memo announcing the 30-day review, citing the "recent rise in hate crimes and hate incidents, particularly the disturbing trend in reports of violence against members of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community since the start of the pandemic."

Asian American activists say former President Donald Trump is partly to blame because of his rhetoric around COVID-19, which he frequently referred to as the "Chinese virus." They say he gave license for people to show racism that was already present and rooted in decades of anti-Asian sentiment in the U.S.

According to a report from Stop AAPI Hate, more than 3,800 anti-Asian incidents were reported to the organization between March 2020 through February. The group, which tracks incidents of discrimination, hate and xenophobia against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders in the U.S., said that number is "only a fraction of the number of hate incidents that actually occur."

According to the Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, hate crimes targeting Asians ballooned by 150% last year, while hate crimes overall during the pandemic went down 7%.

Lee, the San Francisco firefighter, said he is willing to keep volunteering for however long it feels necessary, adding that he often bumps into volunteers from other citizen patrols, a sign of how much attention the issue is getting. Asian American seniors he's met still want to maintain their routines.

"If they are scared they're not showing it, because they still have to go about their daily lives," he said.

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Tang reported from Phoenix. Hajela and Tang are members of The Associated Press' Race and Ethnicity

team. Follow Tang on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/ttangAP>. Follow Hajela on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/dhajela>.

## Under pressure, some Ga. corporate leaders slam voting bill

By BILL BARROW and DAVID KOENIG Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Some of Georgia's most prominent corporate leaders on Wednesday began to more forcefully criticize the state's sweeping new election law, acknowledging concerns of civil rights activists and Black business executives who say the measure targets non-white voters and threatens the democratic process.

The chief executives of Delta Air Lines and Coca-Cola pivoted from earlier, more equivocal statements and called the law "unacceptable," opening an unusual rift with Republican leaders who championed the legislation and typically enjoy a cozy relationship with the state's business community.

The business lobby in Georgia, home to 18 Fortune 500 companies, wields significant clout in state politics. Civil rights activists blamed influential executives for not helping spike the new law that's become a focal point in the nationwide, partisan fight over voting rights, and there is rising pressure nationally on corporate titans to defend voting rights more explicitly and oppose Republican efforts in states that could follow Georgia's lead. Delta's and Coca-Cola's latest declarations could push Georgia's other marquee brands, including UPS and Home Depot, to take a stronger stand.

"Delta's statement finally tells the truth — even if it's late," said Nsé Ufot of the New Georgia Project, which has launched an ad campaign targeting major corporations.

After Republican Gov. Brian Kemp signed the new law last week, Delta issued a statement promoting parts of the law such as expanded weekend voting, but said "we understand concerns remain over other provisions ... and there continues to be work ahead in this important effort."

Chief executive Ed Bastian was more blunt in a memo sent Wednesday to employees.

"The entire rationale for this bill was based on a lie: that there was widespread voter fraud in Georgia in the 2020 elections. This is simply not true," Bastian wrote, alluding to former President Donald Trump's false claims that he lost because of fraud. "Unfortunately, that excuse is being used in states across the nation that are attempting to pass similar legislation to restrict voting rights."

Bastian said Delta "joined other major Atlanta corporations to work closely with elected officials from both parties, to try and remove some of the most egregious measures from the bill. We had some success in eliminating the most suppressive tactics that some had proposed."

But, he said, "I need to make it crystal clear that the final bill is unacceptable and does not match Delta's values."

Speaking later on CNBC, Coca-Cola chief executive James Quincey called the legislation a "step backward."

"It does not promote principles we have stood for in Georgia around broad access to voting, around voter convenience, about ensuring election integrity," he said. "This legislation is wrong and needs to be remedied."

Kemp insisted the law was being misrepresented. He accused businesses of ignoring their role in its development.

"Throughout the legislative process, we spoke directly with Delta representatives numerous times," the governor said in a statement. "Today's statement ... stands in stark contrast to our conversations with the company, ignores the content of the new law, and unfortunately continues to spread the same false attacks being repeated by partisan activists."

Republicans in the Georgia House added their disapproval later Wednesday, voting to strip Delta of a tax break worth tens of millions of dollars annually. The vote was rendered symbolic when the state Senate failed to take up the measure before adjourning its yearly session.

The reaction wasn't much friendlier from voting rights groups that fought the legislation and criticized corporate players for not trying to block it altogether.

Ufot chided Bastian for his timing and alluding to conversations "with leaders and employees in the Black

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community" late in the process. She also noted advocates' pending demands that Delta and other companies no longer use their political action committees to back lawmakers who support voting restrictions.

Bastian's memo did not address that matter. Quincey noted on CNBC that Coca-Cola, even before Georgia's action, already had paused its PAC activity and would consider politicians' position on voting rights as part of future contributions.

Also on Wednesday, dozens of Black business executives from around the country, including Merck chief executive Kenneth Frazier and former American Express chief executive Kenneth Chenault, released a joint letter in The New York Times urging corporate America to stand up forcefully on matters of racial justice.

Black activists, meanwhile, recall that many U.S. corporations took public stands last summer amid nationwide demonstrations against systemic racism and police violence.

Bishop Reginald Jackson, who presides over more than 400 African Methodist Episcopal churches in Georgia, said too many corporate leaders have been "silent" on voting laws. He has called for his 90,000 parishioners to boycott Delta, Coca-Cola and other major brands.

"This is not just a Georgia issue or problem. It is a national problem that we believe puts our democracy at risk," Jackson said.

Business analysts say the dynamics are challenging for corporations.

"Delta clearly felt a lot of heat for its previous statement. Delta's problem now is credibility," said Henry Harteveltdt, a travel industry analyst in San Francisco. "Will people believe future Delta statements or actions regarding voting rights or social justice?"

Kemp signed the measure last Thursday, hours after a negotiated version cleared the state House and Senate in whirlwind votes. It is part of a tide of GOP-sponsored election bills introduced in states across the country after Trump's false assertions about the 2020 elections. Democrat Joe Biden won the presidential race in Georgia by about 12,000 votes out of almost 5 million cast, and Democrats won two Jan. 5 Senate runoffs to give the party control of the chamber on Capitol Hill.

Georgia officials, including Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, also a Republican, vouched for election's accuracy even as they backed some changes that could make it harder for Georgians to cast absentee ballots, a method that more than one-fifth of the November electorate used.

The new law adds a photo ID requirement for voting absentee by mail, cuts the amount of time people have to request an absentee ballot and limits where drop boxes can be placed and when they can be accessed. It also bans people from handing out food or water to voters waiting in line and allows the Republican-controlled State Election Board to remove and replace county election officials while curtailing the power of the secretary of state as Georgia's chief elections officer.

Republicans insist the changes are needed to restore voters' confidence.

Civil rights groups have filed federal lawsuits seeking to overturn the Georgia law. They've otherwise turned their focus to Washington, where Democrats are pushing a comprehensive federal overhaul of election law that could effectively override many changes being enacted in Georgia and considered elsewhere. Advocates want corporate leaders like Bastian and Quincey to help.

"They've been out there trying to claim victory in Georgia, saying basically that this bill could have been worse," said Mia Arreguin of Progress Georgia. "But this was never going to be a voter-friendly bill. Now they can really do something about it" in Washington. "We aren't watching what they say. We are watching what they do."

Bastian nodded toward Capitol Hill action in his memo, declaring that federal proposals would "expand voting rights nationwide." He noted one bill is "named after the late Atlanta civil rights hero and Delta friend John Lewis," the longtime Georgia congressman who died last year.

But Bastian stopped short of an explicit position. Delta, he wrote, is "closely monitoring legislation."

## Biden plan would spend \$16B to clean up old mines, oil wells

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's \$2.3 trillion plan to transform America's infrastructure includes \$16 billion to plug old oil and gas wells and clean up abandoned mines, a longtime priority for

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Western and rural lawmakers from both parties.

Hundreds of thousands of "orphaned" oil and gas wells and abandoned coal and hardrock mines pose serious safety hazards, while causing ongoing environmental damage. The administration sees the long-standing problem as an opportunity to create jobs and remediate pollution, including greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

Biden said last week he wants to put pipefitters and miners to work capping the wells "at the same price that they would charge to dig those wells."

Many of the old wells and mines are located in rural communities that have been hard-hit by the pandemic. Biden's plan would not only create jobs, but help reduce methane and brine leaks that pollute the air and groundwater. Methane is a powerful contributor to global warming.

The Interior Department has long led efforts to cap orphaned wells — so named because no owner can be found — but does not assess user fees to cover reclamation costs. Bond requirements for well operators, when known, are often inadequate to cover full clean-up costs.

Biden's plan, which needs approval by Congress, would jump-start the well-capping effort and expand it dramatically.

Similarly, the White House plan would exponentially boost an Abandoned Mine Land program run by Interior that uses fees paid by coal mining companies to reclaim coal mines abandoned before 1977. About \$8 billion has been disbursed to states for mine-reclamation projects in the past four decades, but Biden's plan would ramp up spending sharply.

Sen. Joe Manchin, the West Virginia Democrat who chairs the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, has long pushed to expand the mine-lands program, which he calls crucial to his state.

"It cannot be forgotten that West Virginia coal miners powered our country to greatness," Manchin said. While many mine lands in coal communities have been reclaimed, "there is still much more work to be done to clean up damage to the land and water in those communities," he said.

Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso, the top Republican on the Senate energy panel, ridiculed Biden's overall plan as "an out-of-control socialist spending spree."

The proposal "starts with the punishing policies of the Green New Deal and builds back worse from there," Barrasso said in statement. The plan would hike taxes and "spend trillions of dollars on the left's radical agenda," he added.

A spokeswoman said Barrasso has "has been very active in trying to re-evaluate and improve" the Abandoned Mine Land program. Barrasso is working with Manchin and other committee members to "responsibly reauthorize AML fee collection and facilitate reclamation (of mine sites) across the country," spokeswoman Sarah Durdaller said.

Environmental groups hailed the announcement, saying unplugged wells and abandoned mines pose a significant environmental threat. Some former drilling or mining sites have sat unattended for decades.

"From launching a visionary Civilian Climate Corps and reclaiming abandoned mines and orphaned wells to restoring America's lands, waters, wetlands, grasslands and coasts, the president's plan proposes strategic investments that will make communities more resilient and healthier," said Collin O'Mara, president and CEO of the National Wildlife Federation.

An oil industry group said it shares the administration's goals of safety and environmental stewardship.

"Our industry is fully committed to complying with existing state and federal requirements for abandoned wells" and "will continue to support efforts to plug these wells and further reduce methane emissions," said Frank Macchiarola, senior vice president of the American Petroleum Institute.

The National Mining Association said it supports the renewed focus on abandoned mine lands, but wanted to see more details. "We're eager to work with Congress on legislation around the president's initiative, while bringing reform to the coal AML program and standing up durable, bipartisan solutions on hard-rock" mining sites, spokesman Conor Bernstein said.

Environmental groups and Democrats have called for stronger bonding requirements for oil and gas companies that drill on public lands, as well as changes to bankruptcy law that make it harder for companies to evade responsibility for cleaning up old sites.



"Investing in orphan well clean-up would create good-paying jobs while helping reduce pollution, restore habitat and protect our climate," said Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., who has introduced legislation to clean up federal sites and strengthen bond requirements for drilling on public lands.

## Officer video shows Floyd struggle, then takedown

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — George Floyd's struggle with three police officers trying to arrest him, seen on body-camera video, included Floyd's panicky cries of "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" and "I'm claustrophobic!" as the officers tried to push Floyd into the back of a police SUV.

At one point, Floyd bucks forward, throwing his upper body out of the car. Officers eventually give up, and Floyd thanks them — and then is taken to the ground, facedown and handcuffed. Officer Derek Chauvin's knee pins his neck, another officer's knee his back and a third officer holds his legs, with the officers talking calmly about whether he might be on drugs.

"He wouldn't get out of the car. He just wasn't following instructions," Officer Thomas Lane was recorded saying. The officer also asked twice if the officers should roll Floyd on his side, and later said he thinks Floyd is passing out. Another officer checked Floyd's wrist for a pulse and said he couldn't find one.

The officers' video was part of a mountain of footage and witness testimony Wednesday in Chauvin's trial on murder and manslaughter charges in Floyd's death, showing how his alleged attempt to pass a phony \$20 bill at a neighborhood market last May escalated into tragedy one video-documented step at a time.

A security-camera scene of people joking around inside the store soon gave way to the sight of officers pulling Floyd, who was Black, from his SUV at gunpoint. The extended body-camera footage gave jurors the fullest view yet of the roughly 20 minutes between when police first approached Floyd's vehicle to when he was loaded into an ambulance.

When Floyd was finally taken away by paramedics, Charles McMillian, a 61-year-old bystander who recognized Chauvin from the neighborhood, told the officer he didn't respect what Chauvin had done.

"That's one person's opinion," Chauvin could be heard responding. "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy... and it looks like he's probably on something."

Floyd was 6-foot-4 and 223 pounds, according to the autopsy, which also found fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system. Chauvin's lawyer said the officer is 5-foot-9 and 140 pounds.

Chauvin, 45, who is white, is charged with murder and manslaughter, accused of killing the 46-year-old Floyd by kneeling on Floyd's neck for 9 minutes, 29 seconds, as he lay face-down in handcuffs. The most serious charge against the now-fired officer carries up to 40 years in prison.

Floyd's death, along with the harrowing bystander video of him gasping for breath as onlookers yelled at Chauvin to get off him, triggered sometimes violent protests around the world and a reckoning over racism and police brutality across the U.S.

As Floyd was pinned down by Chauvin and other officers, McMillian, the bystander, could be heard on video saying to Floyd, "You can't win" and "Get up and get in the car."

Floyd replied: "I can't."

The defense has argued that Chauvin did what he was trained to do and that Floyd's death was not caused by the officer's knee, as prosecutors contend, but by Floyd's illegal drug use, heart disease, high blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body.

Events spun out of control earlier that day soon after Floyd allegedly handed a cashier at Cup Foods, 19-year-old Christopher Martin, a counterfeit bill for a pack of cigarettes.

Martin testified Wednesday that he watched Floyd's arrest outside with "disbelief -- and guilt."

"If I would've just not taken the bill, this could've been avoided," Martin lamented, joining the burgeoning list of witnesses who expressed a sense of helplessness and lingering guilt over Floyd's death.

Martin said he immediately believed the \$20 bill was fake. But he said he accepted it, despite believing the amount would be taken out of his paycheck by his employer, because he didn't think Floyd knew it was counterfeit and "I thought I'd be doing him a favor."

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Martin then second-guessed his decision and told a manager, who sent Martin outside to ask Floyd to return to the store. But Floyd and a passenger in his SUV twice refused to go back into the store to resolve the issue, and the manager had a co-worker call police, Martin testified.

Martin said that when Floyd was inside the store buying cigarettes, he spoke so slowly "it would appear that he was high." But he described Floyd as friendly and talkative.

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

## **Biden announces huge infrastructure plan to 'win the future'**

By JONATHAN LEMIRE, KEVIN FREKING and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — President Joe Biden outlined a huge \$2.3 trillion plan Wednesday to reengineer the nation's infrastructure in what he billed as "a once-in-a-generation investment in America" that would undo his predecessor's signature legislative achievement — giant tax cuts for corporations — in the process.

Speaking at a carpenters union training center in Pittsburgh, Biden drew comparisons between his hard-hatted proposed transformation of the U.S. economy and the space race — and promised results as grand in scale as the New Deal or Great Society programs that shaped the 20th century.

"It's not a plan that tinkers around the edges," Biden said. "It's a once-in-a-generation investment in America unlike anything we've seen or done since we built the interstate highway system and the space race decades ago. In fact, it's the largest American jobs investment since World War II. It will create millions of jobs, good-paying jobs."

White House officials say the spending would generate those jobs as the country shifts away from fossil fuels and combats the perils of climate change. It is also an effort to compete with the technology and public investments made by China, which has the world's second-largest economy and is fast gaining on the United States' dominant position.

"I'm convinced that if we act now, in 50 years people are going to look back and say this is the moment when America won the future," Biden said.

The Democratic president's infrastructure projects would be financed by higher corporate taxes — a trade-off that could lead to fierce resistance from the business community and thwart attempts to work with Republican lawmakers. Biden hopes to pass an infrastructure plan by summer, which could mean relying solely on the slim Democratic majorities in the House and the Senate.

The higher corporate taxes would aim to raise the necessary piles of money over 15 years and then reduce the deficit going forward. In doing so, Biden would undo the 2017 tax overhaul by President Donald Trump and congressional Republicans and lift the corporate tax rate to 28% from the 21% rate.

"Ninety-one Fortune 500 Companies, including Amazon, pay not a single solitary penny in income tax," Biden said.

Wednesday's announcement will be followed in coming weeks by Biden pushing a companion bill of roughly equal size for investments in child care, family tax credits and other domestic programs. That nearly \$2 trillion package would be paid for by tax hikes on wealthy individuals and families.

"Wall Street didn't build this country," Biden said. "You, the great middle class, built this country. And unions built the middle class."

Biden's choice of Pittsburgh for unveiling the plan carried important economic and political resonance. He not only won Pittsburgh and its surrounding county to help secure the presidency, but he launched his campaign there in 2019. The city famed for steel mills that powered America's industrial rise has steadily pivoted toward technology and health care, drawing in college graduates in a sign of how economies can change.

The White House says the largest chunk of the proposal includes \$621 billion for roads, bridges, public transit, electric vehicle charging stations and other transportation infrastructure. The spending would push the country away from internal combustion engines that the auto industry views as increasingly antiquated technology.

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An additional \$111 billion would go to replace lead water pipes and upgrade sewers. Broadband internet would blanket the country for \$100 billion. Separately, \$100 billion would upgrade the power grid to deliver clean electricity. Homes would get retrofitted, schools modernized, workers trained and hospitals renovated under the plan, which also seeks to strengthen U.S. manufacturing.

The new construction could keep the economy running hot, coming on the heels of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package. Economists already estimate it could push growth above 6% this year.

To keep companies from shifting profits overseas to avoid taxation, a 21% global minimum tax would be imposed. The tax code would also be updated so that companies could not merge with foreign businesses and avoid taxes by moving their headquarters to a tax haven. And among other provisions, it would increase IRS audits of corporations.

Biden appealed for Republicans and the business community to join him in negotiations on the bill, but the legislative prospects for Biden's twin proposals already appear to hinge on Democrats coming up with the votes on their own through the budget reconciliation process, which requires just a simple majority in the 50-50 Senate.

"I'm going to bring Republicans into the Oval Office, listen to them, what they have to say and be open to other ideas," Biden said. "We'll have a good faith negotiation. Any Republican who wants to help get this done. But we have to get it done."

Democratic leaders embraced Biden's plan Wednesday. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York said it would create millions of jobs.

"I look forward to working with President Biden to pass a big, bold plan that will drive America forward for decades to come," Schumer said at an event in Buffalo.

But Republican opposition to Biden's ambitious proposal came swiftly, and with resolve for the long brawl ahead.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell dismissed the package as nothing more than a "Trojan horse" for tax hikes.

Republicans on Capitol Hill view the fight as a defining moment for the parties, framing it as a choice between Democrats intent on relying on government to solve the nation's problems and a GOP that believes the private sector can best unleash the nation's potential.

Smarting over Biden's intent to undo the 2017 tax cuts has only solidified what could amount to a wall of GOP opposition.

The business community favors updating U.S. infrastructure but dislikes higher tax rates. U.S. Chamber of Commerce Executive Vice President and Chief Policy Officer Neil Bradley said in a statement that "we applaud the Biden administration for making infrastructure a top priority. However, we believe the proposal is dangerously misguided when it comes to how to pay for infrastructure." The Business Roundtable, a group of CEOs, would rather have infrastructure funded with user fees such as tolls.

Trump, in a statement, blasted his successor's proposal, claiming it "would be among the largest self-inflicted economic wounds in history."

Infrastructure spending usually holds the promise of juicing economic growth, but by how much remains a subject of political debate. Commutes and shipping times could be shortened, while public health would be improved and construction jobs would bolster consumer spending.

Standard & Poor's chief U.S. economist, Beth Ann Bovino, estimated last year that a \$2.1 trillion boost in infrastructure spending could add as much as \$5.7 trillion in income to the entire economy over a decade. Those kinds of analyses have led liberal Democrats in Congress such as Washington Rep. Pramila Jayapal to conclude, "The economic consensus is that infrastructure pays for itself over time."

But the Biden administration is taking a more cautious approach than some Democrats might like. After \$1.9 trillion in pandemic aid and \$4 trillion in relief last year, the administration is trying to avoid raising the national debt to levels that would trigger higher interest rates and make it harder to repay.

Biden's efforts may also be complicated by demands from a handful of Democratic lawmakers who say they cannot support the bill unless it addresses the \$10,000 cap on individuals' state and local tax deduc-

tions put in place under Trump and a Republican-led Congress.

With a narrow majority in the House, those Democrats could conceivably quash any bill that doesn't significantly lift the cap or repeal it entirely.

Miller and Freking reported from Washington. AP writers Lisa Mascaro, Josh Boak and Padmananda Rama also contributed from Washington.

## **Johnson & Johnson COVID-19 vaccine batch fails quality check**

By LINDA A. JOHNSON and RICHARD LARDNER Associated Press

A batch of Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine failed quality standards and can't be used, the drug giant said Wednesday.

The drugmaker didn't say how many doses were lost, and it wasn't clear how the problem would impact future deliveries.

A vaccine ingredient made by Emergent BioSolutions — one of about 10 companies that Johnson & Johnson is using to speed up manufacturing of its recently approved vaccine — did not meet quality standards, J&J said.

J&J said the Emergent BioSolutions factory involved had not yet been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to make part of the vaccine. Emergent declined to comment.

J&J had pledged to provide 20 million doses of its vaccine to the U.S. government by the end of March, and 80 million more doses by the end of May. Its statement on the manufacturing problem said it was still planning to deliver 100 million doses by the end of June and was "aiming to deliver those doses by the end of May."

President Joe Biden has pledged to have enough vaccines for all U.S. adults by the end of May. The U.S. government has ordered enough two-dose shots from Pfizer and Moderna to vaccinate 200 million people to be delivered by late May, plus the 100 million shots from J&J.

A federal official said Wednesday evening the administration's goal can be met without additional J&J doses.

A J&J spokesman said earlier Wednesday that the company met the end-of-March goal, but did not respond to questions about whether the Emergent plant in Baltimore, known as Bayview, had been cleared by FDA.

As of Wednesday, J&J had provided about 6.8 million doses to the U.S. vaccine effort, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's online vaccine tracker. Some additional doses may not yet have been recorded as delivered, and federal health officials said Wednesday that another 11 million doses of the vaccine would be available for shipments starting on Thursday.

It was not immediately clear where those 11 million doses originated, but J&J has been shipping finished vaccines from its factory in the Netherlands to the U.S.

Emergent, a little known pharmaceutical company granted a major role in the federal government's response to coronavirus pandemic, has been repeatedly cited by the FDA for problems ranging from poorly trained employees to cracked vials and mold around one of its facilities, according to records obtained by The Associated Press through the Freedom of Information Act.

The records cover inspections at Emergent facilities, including Bayview, since 2017. Following a December 2017 inspection at an Emergent plant in Canton, Massachusetts, the FDA said the company hadn't corrected "continued low level mold and yeast isolates" found in the facility. Nearly a year later, agency investigators questioned why Emergent had "an unwritten policy of not conducting routine compliance audits" at a separate plant in Baltimore, known as Camden, where an anthrax vaccine is filled into vials.

Emergent's revenues skyrocketed during the Trump administration, jumping from around \$523 million in 2015 to more than \$1.5 billion in 2020. The company has invested heavily in lobbying the federal government, according to disclosure records, which show the company spent \$3.6 million on lobbying in 2020 alone.

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J&J said it was putting more of its manufacturing and quality experts inside Emergent's factory to supervise production of the COVID-19 vaccine, a move meant to enable delivery of an additional 24 million vaccine doses through April.

J&J said it still expects to deliver more than 1 billion vaccine doses globally by the end of the year.

The J&J vaccine has been viewed as crucial for vaccination campaigns around the world, because only one shot is required and it can be shipped and stored at standard refrigeration temperatures, unlike some other vials that must be kept frozen. The company also has pledged to sell the vaccine without a profit, but only during the pandemic emergency.

The problem with the vaccine batch was first reported by The New York Times. The FDA said it was aware of the situation but declined further comment.

Johnson reported from Fairless Hills, Pennsylvania, and Lardner from Washington. AP reporters Matt Perrone and Zeke Miller in Washington contributed.

Follow Linda A. Johnson at [https://twitter.com/LindaJ\\_onPharma](https://twitter.com/LindaJ_onPharma)

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## Gaetz staying on Judiciary panel, despite investigation

By MICHAEL BALSAMO, ERIC TUCKER and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz, a prominent, outspoken conservative and a close ally of former President Donald Trump who has been under federal investigation for a former relationship, would lose his House seat if convicted of a felony. But there are no rules addressing lawmakers under investigation.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy said Wednesday that Gaetz would be removed from his committees if the charges were proven, but sidestepped the issue of what to do while the case is ongoing. Democrats called for him to step aside from the House Judiciary Committee, which oversees the Justice Department.

"Those are serious implications," McCarthy, R-Calif., said on Fox News. "If it comes out to be true, yes, we would remove him if that was the case. But right now Matt Gaetz says it is not true, and we don't have any information. So let's get all the information."

Gaetz, who represents parts of western Florida, has known for months that he was under federal investigation over accusations that he had a sexual relationship with a 17-year-old girl and paid her to travel with him, two people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

During that time, he has remained on both the House Armed Services Committee and on the Judiciary Committee, which has congressional oversight of the Justice Department. He has been one of Trump's most vocal defenders on the Judiciary panel, fiercely defending the former president through two impeachments and other investigations.

Gaetz is under investigation to determine if he violated federal sex trafficking laws, said the people who were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The AP on condition of anonymity.

The Justice Department has also been looking into whether Gaetz, 38, may have also been involved in relationships with other underage girls, the people said.

The case, which reached the highest levels of the Justice Department, has been going on for nearly a year and former Attorney General William Barr was briefed on the matter several times, the people said. Investigators have also interviewed several witnesses in the case and have been scrutinizing documents, including travel and financial records, the people said.

In at least one instance, a high-profile Washington defense attorney and his law firm declined the opportunity to represent Gaetz after the congressman reached out, seeking to hire him for his case.

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Some Democrats have called for his committee positions to be revoked.

Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., tweeted that Gaetz should "resign and be prosecuted" if sex trafficking allegations prove true. Lieu wrote that until then, "You can't have Gaetz sitting on the Congressional Committee that has oversight over the Department that is investigating him."

Gaetz did get backing from Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., the hard-right freshman who's had her share of run-ins since arriving in Congress this year.

"Remember all the conspiracy theories and lies like Trump/Russia collusion and propaganda that the media has spread around. Take it from me rumors and headlines don't equal truth. I stand with @mattgaetz," she tweeted.

Gaetz told Axios that his lawyers were informed that he was the subject of an investigation "regarding sexual conduct with women" but that he was not a target of the probe. He denied that he ever had a relationship with any underage girls and said the allegations against him were "as searing as they are false."

A subject is conventionally thought of as someone whose actions fall within the scope of a criminal investigation, whereas a target is someone whom prosecutors have gathered evidence linking to a crime. But during the course of an investigation, a subject can become a target.

It is a federal crime to transport a minor over state lines for sex.

Gaetz said the allegations were part of an extortion plot by a former Justice Department official, whom he identified as David McGee. The lawyer has been in private practice for more than two decades.

"Over the past several weeks my family and I have been victims of an organized criminal extortion involving a former DOJ official seeking \$25 million while threatening to smear my name," Gaetz said in a statement.

In response, McGee's Florida-based law firm released a statement saying the allegation that Gaetz made about the supposed extortion attempt was "both false and defamatory." The firm said McGee had served in top positions at the U.S. attorney's office in Florida about 25 years ago and his "reputation for integrity and ethical conduct was impeccable."

Gaetz said his family has been cooperating with the FBI and said his father was wearing a recording device, at the FBI's direction, "to catch these criminals." He demanded the Justice Department release the recordings.

"No part of the allegations against me are true, and the people pushing these lies are targets of the ongoing extortion investigation," he said.

The scrutiny of Gaetz stemmed from a separate Justice Department probe into one of his political allies and fellow Florida politician, Joel Greenberg, who was indicted last summer on sex trafficking and other charges that he stalked a political opponent, the person familiar with the matter said. A judge ordered the former tax collector back to jail earlier this month for violating the conditions of his release and federal prosecutors issued a superseding indictment in his case on Tuesday, though there is no mention of Gaetz in the court documents.

"I believe that there are people at the Department of Justice who are trying to criminalize my sexual conduct, you know, when I was a single guy," Gaetz told Axios.

"I have definitely, in my single days, provided for women I've dated," Gaetz said. "You know, I've paid for flights, for hotel rooms. I've been, you know, generous as a partner. I think someone is trying to make that look criminal when it is not."

Gaetz has not been charged with a crime. The Justice Department did not comment.

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Associated Press writer Curt Anderson in Miami contributed to this report.

## Welcome back, fans! MLB openers bring stars, hope and crowds

By BEN WALKER AP Baseball Writer

Great to see ya, Buster Posey. Been a while, Tony La Russa. Good luck, Madison Bumgarner and every other National League pitcher toting a bat.

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From Comerica Park to Coors Field to the Coliseum, Major League Baseball is set to roll out a big welcome mat Thursday.

Most of all, this opening day, it'll be for the fans.

When Gerrit Cole throws the first pitch of the season — weather permitting — nearly 11,000 people could be at Yankee Stadium. Healthcare workers will be celebrated, and everyone will sit in socially distanced seats and wear masks, inside a park that will continue to operate as a mass coronavirus vaccination site.

Far from normal. But after a year in which fans weren't permitted at any regular-season game because of COVID-19 protocols, no longer will "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" strangely echo around empty ballparks during the seventh-inning stretch.

"That's how it's supposed to be, I think," said Bumgarner, ready to start for the Arizona Diamondbacks against Fernando Tatis Jr., Manny Machado and the San Diego Padres.

"That's what we're doing. It's an entertainment business. We're all playing a game and competing and everyone's got their team they pull for or just likes watching the game in general," he said.

Missing opening day, however, will be five players on the Washington Nationals. One of them tested positive for the virus this week — remember, last year Nats star Juan Soto had the virus and missed the opener.

"Everybody across the game — we had seen so few positive cases across spring training as a whole," Nationals ace Max Scherzer said. "It just shows you how quickly that can turn. It can turn on a dime. We have to face it, and we have to overcome it."

Crowd sizes will vary around the majors.

At Fenway Park, where Xander Bogaerts and the Boston Red Sox host Baltimore, 12% of capacity will be allowed. At Globe Life Field in Texas, where the Rangers open Monday, a full 100% will be permitted.

The Rangers didn't have any fans in their \$1.2 billion palace that opened last year during the pandemic-shortened 60-game season. But 11,000 spectators were inside the Arlington, Texas, park when Clayton Kershaw, Mookie Betts, Corey Seager and the Los Angeles Dodgers beat Tampa Bay in MLB's first neutral-site World Series.

Boosted by signing NL Cy Young Award winner Trevor Bauer, the pitching-rich Dodgers start in Colorado, trying to become the first repeat champions since the New York Yankees in 1998-2000.

Kershaw gets the opener against the Rockies, while Bauer goes in the second game.

"I'm pumped up for it. Especially pumped up to get back in front of the LA fans for my first home start," Bauer said.

"This is going to be cool, putting on the Dodger uniform, playing with this group of guys. I'm really pumped up that baseball is back, especially now that we get to have fans in the stands," he said.

How many will actually be in the box seats and bleachers on April Fools' Day might depend on the weather.

Rain is forecast early in the day for Boston, New York and Philadelphia. Same in Washington, too, where a marquee matchup is waiting at Nationals Park: Two-time Cy Young winner Jacob deGrom of the Mets faces Scherzer, a three-time Cy champ.

Temperatures are supposed to be in the 30s with gusty winds at Wrigley Field when Kris Bryant and the Chicago Cubs host Pittsburgh. Also in the low 30s in Detroit, where Cleveland ace Shane Bieber faces the Tigers, and chilly in Cincinnati, where the Reds take on St. Louis newcomer Nolan Arenado.

Jack Flaherty pitches for the Cardinals. Two teammates from his Southern California high school a decade ago also start on opening day — Max Fried for the Braves in Philadelphia and Lucas Giolito for the Chicago White Sox against Mike Trout and rejuvenated two-way star Shohei Ohtani at Angel Stadium.

Arenado and Bauer are among the many stars who switched teams in the offseason. The Padres acquired Blake Snell and Yu Darvish, the Mets traded for Francisco Lindor, the White Sox added closer Liam Hendriks and the Yankees hope low-risk moves for Corey Kluber and Jameson Taillon pay off.

Some teams will benefit from getting their own players back on the field.

Posey of the Giants, Ryan Zimmerman of the Nats, David Price of the Dodgers and Marcus Stroman of the Mets were among those who opted out of playing last year because of coronavirus concerns.

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A six-time All-Star and three-time World Series champ, Posey liked what he saw in spring training. "Watching the games on TV last year and seeing just cardboard fans in the stands, it was definitely nice to see some live humans out there," he said.

A more curious sight: La Russa, at 76 years old and already in the Hall of Fame, returning to manage the fortified White Sox. His last time in the dugout was 2011, in a World Series Game 7 win for the Cardinals. Alex Cora, who guided Boston to the 2018 crown, rejoins the Red Sox while AJ Hinch takes over the Tigers. Both managers were suspended last year for their roles in the 2017 Astros' sign-stealing scandal.

Also around the bases:

## THE GROUND RULES

Some of the experiments that debuted last season are back: seven-inning doubleheaders, automatic runners at second base to start extra innings. The expanded playoff field is back to 10 teams, down from 16. And the designated hitter in the National League is gone. That means pitchers who usually flail away will try to make contact after a year layoff. The DH could become permanent in the NL next season. In the meantime, those pitchers could get help on the mound as MLB is trying out a slightly deadened baseball that supposedly doesn't fly quite so far.

## DEBUTS

Supremely qualified, Kim Ng finally got her chance and begins the season with the Miami Marlins as MLB's first female general manager. "Failure is not an option for me," the 52-year-old Ng said. ... Forced out of Canada because of the virus, the Toronto Blue Jays will play their home opener April 8 at their spring training field in Dunedin, Florida — about 1,275 fans will be allowed at 8,500-seat TD Ballpark.

## MISSING

White Sox slugger Eloy Jiménez, Toronto newcomer George Springer, Rays reliever Nick Anderson and 2020 home run champ Luke Voit all got injured during spring training. Aces Justin Verlander, Chris Sale, Noah Syndergaard and Mike Clevinger are recovering from major surgery. Robinson Canó is serving a season-long drug suspension and Masahiro Tanaka went home to pitch in Japan. Nick Markakis, Alex Gordon, Gio Gonzalez, Daniel Murphy and Dustin Pedroia retired and Ryan Braun says he's leaning that way.

More AP MLB: <https://apnews.com/hub/MLB> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Sports](https://twitter.com/AP_Sports)

## Ex-cop told onlooker Floyd was big, 'probably on something'

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — After the ambulance took George Floyd away, the Minneapolis officer who had pinned his knee on the Black man's neck defended himself to a bystander by saying Floyd was "a sizable guy" and "probably on something," according to police video played in court Wednesday.

The video was part of a mountain of footage — both official and amateur — and witness testimony at Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial that all together showed how Floyd's alleged attempt to pass a phony \$20 bill at a neighborhood market last May escalated into tragedy one video-documented step at a time.

A security-camera scene of people joking around inside the store soon gave way to the sight of officers pulling Floyd from his SUV at gunpoint, struggling to push him into a squad car as he writhed and screamed that he was claustrophobic, and then putting him on the pavement.

When Floyd was finally taken away by paramedics, Charles McMillian, a 61-year-old bystander who recognized Chauvin from the neighborhood, told the officer he didn't respect what Chauvin had done.

"That's one person's opinion," Chauvin could be heard responding. "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy ... and it looks like he's probably on something."

Floyd was 6-foot-4 and 223 pounds, according to the autopsy, which also found fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system. Chauvin's lawyer said the officer is 5-foot-9 and 140 pounds.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter, accused of killing the 46-year-old Floyd by kneeling on his neck for 9 minutes, 29 seconds, as he lay face-down in handcuffs. The most serious charge against the now-fired white officer carries up to 40 years in prison.



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Floyd's death, along with the harrowing bystander video of him gasping for breath as onlookers yelled at Chauvin to get off him, triggered sometimes violent protests around the world and a reckoning over racism and police brutality across the U.S.

Jurors were shown police body camera video of the approximately 20 minutes between when police approached Floyd's vehicle and when he was loaded into the ambulance.

When Officer Thomas Lane confronted Floyd in his SUV, drew his gun and demanded with a few expletives that he show his hands, a panicky-sounding Floyd said: "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" and "I got shot before." Seemingly crying, he begged repeatedly, "Please don't shoot me, man."

Then, when told to get into the squad car, Floyd repeatedly yelled, "I'm not that kind a guy!" and "I'm claustrophobic!" As officers shoved his upper body and then his legs into the car, he writhed and screamed, "Please! Please! ... I can't breathe!"

Officers were clearly exasperated as Floyd braced himself against the squad car and arched his body while they tried to get him inside. At one point, he threw his upper body out of the car, and officers tried to push him back in.

Officers eventually pulled him out and brought him to the ground. Floyd thanked officers as they took him out of the squad car.

Once Floyd was on the ground — with Chauvin's knee on his neck, another officer's knee on his back and a third man holding his legs — the officers talked calmly about whether he might be on drugs.

Lane was heard saying officers found a "weed pipe" on Floyd and wondered if he might be on PCP, saying Floyd's eyes were shaking back and forth fast.

"He wouldn't get out of the car. He just wasn't following instructions," Lane was recorded saying. The officer also asked twice if the officers should roll Floyd on his side, and later said calmly that he thought Floyd was passing out. Another officer checked Floyd's wrist for a pulse and said he couldn't find one.

Minutes earlier, as Floyd was pinned down by Chauvin and other officers, McMillian, the bystander, could be heard on video saying to Floyd, "You can't win" and "Get up and get in the car."

Floyd replied: "I can't."

The defense has argued that Chauvin did what he was trained to do and that Floyd's death was not caused by the officer's knee, as prosecutors contend, but by Floyd's illegal drug use, heart disease, high blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body.

Events spun out of control earlier that day soon after Floyd allegedly handed a cashier at Cup Foods, 19-year-old Christopher Martin, a counterfeit bill for a pack of cigarettes.

Martin testified Wednesday that he watched Floyd's arrest outside with "disbelief — and guilt."

"If I would've just not taken the bill, this could've been avoided," Martin lamented, joining the burgeoning list of witnesses who expressed a sense of helplessness and lingering guilt over Floyd's death.

Martin said he immediately believed the \$20 bill was fake. But he said he accepted it, despite believing the amount would be taken out of his paycheck by his employer, because he didn't think Floyd knew it was counterfeit and "I thought I'd be doing him a favor."

Martin then second-guessed his decision and told a manager, who sent Martin outside to ask Floyd to return to the store. But Floyd and a passenger in his SUV twice refused to go back into the store to resolve the issue, and the manager had a co-worker call police, Martin testified.

Martin said that when Floyd was inside the store buying cigarettes, he spoke so slowly "it would appear that he was high." But he described Floyd as friendly and talkative.

After police arrived, Martin went outside as people were gathering on the curb and yelling at officers. He said he saw Officer Tou Thao push one of his co-workers. Martin said he also held back another man who was trying to defend himself after being pushed by Thao.

Wednesday morning's testimony was briefly interrupted when a juror stood and raised her hand and gestured toward the door. She later told the judge that she had been feeling stress and having trouble sleeping, but told the judge she was OK to proceed.

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

## Hunter Biden details lifelong addiction struggle in memoir

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's son Hunter details his lifelong struggle with alcoholism and drug abuse in a new memoir, writing that "in the last five years alone, my two-decades-long marriage has dissolved, guns have been put in my face, and at one point I dropped clean off the grid, living in \$59-a-night Super 8 motels off I-95 while scaring my family even more than myself."

His "deep descent" into substance addiction followed the 2015 death of his older brother, Beau, who succumbed to brain cancer at age 46, Hunter Biden writes in "Beautiful Things." The book is set for release on Tuesday.

"After Beau died, I never felt more alone. I lost hope," he wrote.

He credits his second wife, Melissa Cohen Biden, with helping him sober up, along with the love from his father and late brother.

Before meeting his future wife in California, Hunter Biden cycled through addiction, rehab and sobriety all while managing to have a family and career as a lawyer and lobbyist. His family tried to intervene sometime in 2019 after his mother, Jill Biden, called and invited him to a family dinner in Delaware.

But Hunter Biden sensed that more than a hot meal was on table after he saw his three daughters and two counselors from a Pennsylvania rehab center where he'd been a patient when he arrived.

He swore at his father and bolted from the house, but was chased down the driveway by Joe Biden, who "grabbed me, swung me around, and hugged me. He held me tight in the dark and cried for the longest time. Everybody was outside now."

To end the scene, Hunter Biden agreed to check into a facility in Maryland. He was driven there by Beau's widow, Hallie, with whom he'd had a relationship. After she dropped him off, Hunter Biden writes, he called an Uber, told the staff he'd return in the morning and then checked into a hotel near Baltimore's airport.

"For the next two days, while everybody who'd been at my parents' house thought I was safe and sound at the center, I sat in my room and smoked the crack I'd tucked away in my traveling bag," he wrote. "I then boarded a plane for California and ran and ran and ran. Until I met Melissa."

The first drink Hunter Biden remembers having was a flute of champagne.

He was 8 and at an election-night party in Delaware celebrating his father's reelection to the Senate in 1978. He says he didn't know what he was doing because "to me, champagne was just a fizzy drink."

But he writes that he knew better when he was 14 and overnighting at his best friend's house in the summer between eighth and ninth grades. They split a six-pack of beer while the boy's parents were out. The boys pretended to be asleep when the parents returned home because they were drunk after three beers apiece.

"Getting blasted and sick as a dog didn't scare me or turn me off one bit," he wrote. "Instead, I thought it was kind of cool. While I felt a nagging guilt from disappointing my father, who didn't drink and who encouraged us to stay away from alcohol as well, I wanted to do it again."

Drinking, he wrote, "seemed to solve every unanswered question about why I felt the way I felt. It took away my inhibitions, my insecurities, and often my judgment. It made me feel complete, filling a hole I didn't even realize was there — a feeling of loss and my sense of not being understood or fitting in."

At 18, Hunter Biden was busted for cocaine possession but did pretrial intervention with six months' probation and the arrest was removed from his record. He says he disclosed the episode during a 2006 Senate committee hearing on his nomination to serve on the Amtrak board of directors.

As an adult, he once let a crack cocaine addict he first met when he was a senior at Georgetown University live with him in his Washington apartment for about five months. Hunter Biden was kicked out of the U.S. Navy Reserve after he failed a drug test.

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Hunter Biden, now 51, also writes about thinking he had developed a superpower — “the ability to find crack in any town, at any time, no matter how unfamiliar the terrain,” and about once having a gun thrust in his face when he embarked on such a hunt during five months of self-exile in Los Angeles.

It was in Los Angeles where he met Melissa Cohen, and he describes their first meeting as akin to love at first sight. He says she didn't flinch when he told her about his addiction, his alcoholism and other problems.

“She pushed away everyone in my life connected to drugs,” taking away his phone, computer, car keys and wallet, he wrote. She deleted every contact in his phone who wasn't family, and tossed his crack cocaine.

The South African filmmaker slowly eased him off of drinking and arranged for a doctor to come to their Hollywood Hills apartment to help with his withdrawal. He slept for three days.

He woke up on the fourth day and asked her to marry him. She asked to wait for the right time, but when they woke up the next morning — seven days after they'd met — she told him, “Let's do it.”

They wed in May 2019. Their son, Beau, came along in 2020.

Last week, Hunter and his family were at the White House and traveled with President Joe Biden aboard the Marine One helicopter.

## Reversing Trump, Pentagon releases new transgender policies

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Pentagon on Wednesday swept away Trump-era policies that largely banned transgender people from serving in the military, issuing new rules that offer them wider access to medical care and assistance with gender transition.

The new department regulations allow transgender people who meet military standards to enlist and serve openly in their self-identified gender, and they will be able to get medically necessary transition-related care authorized by law, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters during a briefing.

The changes come after a two-month Pentagon review aimed at developing guidelines for the new policy, which was announced by President Joe Biden just days after he took office in January.

Biden's executive order overturned the Trump policy and immediately prohibited any service member from being forced out of the military on the basis of gender identity. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin then gave the Pentagon two months to finalize the more detailed regulations that the military services will follow.

The new rules also prohibit discrimination based on gender identity. Their release Wednesday coincides with International Transgender Day of Visibility, and they will take effect in 30 days. Kirby said that will give the military services the time they need to update their policies and provide guidance to commanders.

“The United States military is the greatest fighting force on the planet because we are composed of an all-volunteer team willing to step up and defend the rights and freedoms of all Americans,” Austin said in a statement Wednesday. “We will remain the best and most capable team because we avail ourselves of the best possible talent that America has to offer, regardless of gender identity.”

Austin has also called for a reexamination of the records of service members who were discharged or denied reenlistment because of gender identity issues under the previous policy. Stephanie Miller, the director of military accession policy, told reporters there is no data yet on how many people that may be.

Until a few years ago, service members could be discharged from the military for being transgender, but that changed during the Obama administration. In 2016, the Pentagon announced that transgender people already serving in the military would be allowed to serve openly, and that by July 2017 they would be allowed to enlist.

After Donald Trump took office, however, his administration delayed the enlistment date and called for additional study. A few weeks later, Trump caught military leaders by surprise, tweeting that the government wouldn't accept or allow transgender people to serve “in any capacity” in the military.

After a lengthy and complicated legal battle and additional reviews, the Defense Department in April 2019 approved a policy that fell short of an all-out ban but barred transgender troops and recruits from transitioning to another sex and required most individuals to serve in what the administration called their

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“birth gender.”

Under that policy, currently serving transgender troops and anyone who had signed an enlistment contract before the effective date could continue with plans for hormone treatments and gender transition if they had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria.

But after that date, no one with gender dysphoria who was taking hormones or had transitioned to another gender was allowed to enlist. Troops that were already serving and were diagnosed with gender dysphoria were required to serve in the gender assigned at birth and were barred from taking hormones or getting transition surgery.

The new policies released Wednesday are similar to those developed in 2016. The announcement was praised by advocacy groups and members of Congress.

“The Pentagon absolutely did the right thing today by reestablishing a policy of inclusion for transgender service members, who once again will be able to serve openly and proudly in their self-identified gender,” said Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., who heads the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee.

Nicolas Talbott, whose plans to enlist in the Air Force National Guard were sidelined by the Trump administration, expressed relief Wednesday.

“I’m more confident than ever that when I apply to enlist, I will be judged on my skills and my accomplishments, instead of my transgender status, which has nothing to do with my ability to serve,” said Talbott, who plans to enlist.

Miller said the number of service members who self-identify as transgender could range from 1,000 to 8,000, including those who may not seek treatment. Other studies have said the total could be as high as 14,700. There are more than 1.3 million active-duty troops and close to 800,000 in the National Guard and Reserves.

Speaking during a Pentagon briefing, Miller provided updated numbers on troops who have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria, saying there are 2,200 who are currently serving. That total is more than double the 1,071 who were serving in February 2019, according to data released then.

Miller also said that medical costs associated with treatment and gender transition is very small, “a handful of million dollars per year.” She added that “we’re not anticipating with these changes in policies that there’s going to be a significant impact in terms of medical costs.”

According to the Pentagon, the department spent about \$8 million on transgender care from 2016 to 2019.

Four of the military service chiefs told Congress in 2018 that they had seen no discipline, morale or unit readiness problems with transgender troops serving openly in the military. But they also acknowledged that some commanders were spending a lot of time with transgender people who were working through medical requirements and other transition issues.

## Scientists: Grizzlies expand turf but still need protection

MATTHEW BROWN Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. (AP) — Grizzly bears are slowly expanding the turf where they roam in parts of the northern Rocky Mountains but need continued protections, according to government scientists who concluded that no other areas of the country would be suitable for reintroducing the fearsome predators.

The Fish and Wildlife Service on Wednesday released its first assessment in almost a decade about the status of grizzly bears in the contiguous U.S. The bruins are shielded from hunting as a threatened species except in Alaska.

Grizzly populations grew over the past 10 years in two areas — the Yellowstone region of Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, with more than 700 bears; and around Glacier National Park in Montana, which is home to more than 1,000 of the animals.

Grizzly numbers remain low in other parts of the Northern Rockies, and scientists said their focus is on bolstering those populations rather than reintroducing them elsewhere in the country.

The bears now occupy about 6% of their historical range in the contiguous U.S., up from 2% in 1975.

Conservationists and some university scientists have pushed to return bears to areas including Colorado’s San Juan Mountains and California’s Sierra Nevada.

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The 368-page assessment makes no recommendation on the topic, but scientists looked at the possibility of bears in more areas as part of an examination of their remaining habitat.

That analysis showed grizzlies would be unable to sustain themselves in the San Juans, the Sierra Nevada or two other areas -- Utah's Uinta Mountains and New Mexico's Mongollon Mountains.

"They were looking for areas that could sustain grizzly bears as opposed to areas that would continuously need for humans to drop bears in there," said Hilary Cooley, the Fish and Wildlife Service's grizzly bear recovery coordinator.

In each case, officials said, bears would face the same challenge — not enough remote, protected public lands, high densities of humans and little chance of connecting with other bears populations to maintain healthy populations.

An estimated 50,000 grizzlies once inhabited western North America from the Pacific Ocean to the Great Plains. Hunting, commercial trapping and habitat loss wiped out most by the early 1900s. The bears were last seen in California in the 1920s and the last known grizzly in Colorado was killed by an elk hunter in 1979.

Grizzly bears have been protected as a threatened species in the contiguous U.S. since 1975, allowing a slow recovery in a handful of areas. An estimated 1,900 live in the Northern Rockies of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho and Washington state.

The Center for Biological Diversity sued the Fish and Wildlife Service in 2019 in a bid to force officials to consider restoring grizzlies to parts of seven more western states. A U.S. District judge ruled last year that the government was not compelled to draft recovery plans for the bears in new areas.

Protections for bears in the Yellowstone region were lifted under former President Donald Trump but later restored under a court order just as Idaho and Wyoming prepared to hold public hunts for grizzlies for the first time in decades. Five Republican U.S. senators from the region this week introduced legislation to strip protection from Yellowstone-area bears and put them under state jurisdiction.

Wyoming Sen. John Barrasso said in a statement that President Joe Biden's administration had missed an opportunity Wednesday to declare restoration efforts in the region a success and lift protections.

Biologists say Yellowstone grizzlies are "biologically-recovered." But an appeals court last year said the government had not done enough to make sure hunting and other pressures don't reduce the population size in the future to where the bears' genetic health could be harmed.

Center for Biological Diversity attorney Andrea Zaccardi said state officials, hunting groups and the agriculture industry had too much influence on decisions about bears made under Trump. She urged officials under Biden to take a "less politically-motivated look at grizzly bear recovery."

Wyoming ranchers who want grizzlies under state control sided with the government in the legal dispute over where bears should be restored. They would oppose any attempt by the new administration to reverse course, said Will Trachman with Mountain States Legal Foundation, which represents the ranchers.

"We hope they won't roll over on their own victory," he said.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, who oversees Fish and Wildlife Service, co-sponsored legislation while in Congress to increase protections for bears and reintroduce them on tribal lands. Haaland declined to say how she would approach the issue when questioned during her February confirmation hearings.

"I imagine at the time I was caring about the bears," she said.

## 2 views of Floyd onlookers: Desperate to help, or angry mob

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

To the prosecution, the witnesses who watched George Floyd's body go still were regular people — a firefighter, a mixed martial arts fighter, a high school student and her 9-year-old cousin in a T-shirt emblazoned with the word "Love" — going about their daily lives when they happened upon the ghastly scene of an officer kneeling on a man's neck.

"Normal folks, the bystanders," prosecutor Jerry Blackwell called them in his opening statement. "You're going to see these bystanders, a veritable bouquet of humanity."

But some of the same people are being portrayed as unruly, angry, even threatening by Eric Nelson,

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the attorney for Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death. Nelson has told the jury about the hostility the officers faced, how they were distracted and perhaps frightened by people at the scene — repeatedly describing the bystanders as a "crowd," and calling the neighborhood a "high crime area."

"As the crowd grew in size, seemingly so too did their anger," Nelson said in his opening statement on Monday. "And remember, there's more to the scene than just what the officers see in front of them. There are people behind them, there are people across the street, there are cars stopping, people yelling. There is a growing crowd and what officers perceive to be a threat."

The carefully calibrated language by each side is no accident. As Nelson cross-examined Donald Williams, a former wrestler and a mixed martial arts fighter who has also worked security, he peppered his questions with the word "crowd": "Have you ever had to deal with a crowd of people?" "Have you ever had to deal with a crowd of people that was upset?" and "Is it easier or harder to deal with a crowd that is upset?"

Video of the scene suggests something less than a crowd — around 15 people can be seen on surveillance video on the sidewalk in front of Cup Foods, where Chauvin pinned Floyd to the street. That camera shows Darnella Frazier, who made the most widely seen bystander video, walking past with her 9-year-old cousin, then returning to begin filming, one of the first people to stop and watch. Others gather, one by one.

A still image of body-camera footage from Officer Tou Thao, who was facing the bystanders and admonishing them to stay on the sidewalk, shows 14 people. At least five are female, including Frazier, her cousin and two teenagers. One bystander is a small child. At least three people have their phones out to capture the scene. Of the 14, only one — a teenage girl two steps into the street with her phone out — is off the sidewalk at that point, although the live video shows others stepping into the street at times.

Nelson has suggested there were others off camera — across the street and on the other side of the intersection — though the broadest camera view so far does not show a crowd at the intersection. He has also highlighted passing cars that may have heightened officers' stress.

Mike Brandt, a local defense attorney closely watching the trial, said Nelson "obviously needs to come up with some explanation as to why the cops kept doing what they were doing." He said he did not think it would be persuasive.

"When you look at the 'crowd' you have visions of two or three people deep fanning out 180 degrees (if not more) around the officers," Brandt said. "That really wasn't the case."

Video shot by Frazier and others showed people upset by what they were seeing. Blackwell said bystanders first sought to "intercede with their voices," then began taking video. Before long, some were imploring Chauvin to have mercy on Floyd.

"You got him down — let him breathe," someone yelled. A woman said, "How long y'all going to hold him down?"

Concern grew when Floyd went silent. "He's not responsive right now," someone said. Onlooker Genevieve Hansen, a firefighter, urged officers to check his pulse. Another asked, "Did they (expletive) kill him?"

Hansen said she was on her way home from a walk when she saw the police vehicles.

"I was concerned to see a handcuffed man who was not moving, with officers with their whole body weight on his back, and a crowd that was stressed out," she said.

She said she identified herself as a firefighter but officers refused to let her come to Floyd's aid. She admitted raising her voice and using foul language "because I was desperate" to help Floyd. In cross-examination, Nelson asked her how she would react if she was fighting a fire and a crowd of bystanders took issue with her work. Hansen said she wouldn't have a problem.

No bystander was more vocal than Williams, and Nelson worked to draw him out.

Nelson asked if Williams grew angrier as the arrest continued, and the mixed martial arts fighter agreed that he did. Nelson also noted that Williams called Chauvin names -- "tough guy," "real man." He called him a "bum" 13 times. When Williams appeared to step off the curb and Thao touched him, Nelson said Williams threatened the officer.

Williams didn't disagree.

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"Yeah, I did," he said without hesitation. "I meant it." But he said his anger was directed at what was happening to Floyd.

"You can't paint me out to be angry," he told Nelson.

Frazier, too, was at the center of a notable exchange with Nelson. She confirmed to him that as time went on, more people gathered, voices became louder, and people got more angry.

But Blackwell followed up by asking Frazier whether anyone threatened police, became violent, acted unruly or could be fairly called a "mob." No, she responded.

Did she see any onlooker "do anything to attack or threaten Mr. Chauvin?"

"No," she replied.

"Did you see a single thing that indicated to you that Mr. Chauvin was afraid of you, your little cousin or a single one of the bystanders?" Blackwell asked.

The answer, again, "No."

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

## Asian neighbors pen letter of fear to Ohio's lieutenant gov

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Report for America/Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Dozens of Asian American residents of the suburb that Ohio's Republican lieutenant governor calls home penned a letter to him Wednesday, citing their concerns over a tweet he sent referring to the "Wuhan virus" and the fears they have for the safety of their children because of such comments.

"Lt. Governor Husted, your choice of words has only raised the anxiety and fear that Asians and Asian Americans in Upper Arlington are currently experiencing," the letter obtained by the local NBC affiliate read.

"Our children have been targeted for bullying and abuse in the district well before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, but that abuse has increased significantly in the last 14 months and has reached levels that have brought news media attention to our doorsteps," the letter continued. "Our children are the classmates, friends, and neighbors of your children."

The letter to the lieutenant governor was signed by nearly 70 members and families of the Asian community in Upper Arlington, a suburb of Columbus.

It came in response to a March 26 tweet where Husted linked to an article in which Robert Redfield, the ex-director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said, without citing evidence, that he believed the virus originated in a lab in Wuhan.

"So it appears it was the Wuhan Virus after all?" Husted tweeted Friday from his personal account.

His intention with the tweet, Husted said in an interview with The Associated Press earlier on Wednesday, was to criticize the Chinese government.

"I was just pointing out that this is an international crisis, in my opinion, that the Chinese government is responsible for and I wanted an independent investigation," he said. "So I wasn't trying to accomplish anything that the political left or political right thinks that I might have from that tweet other than to draw attention to the issue."

The claim that COVID-19 originated in a lab in Wuhan has been scrutinized in the past year by health officials, including the leading U.S. infectious disease specialist, Dr. Anthony Fauci.

The claim was further muddled when a draft obtained by The AP on Monday and formally published Tuesday from the World Health Organization's inquiry said it was "extremely unlikely" that the virus emerged accidentally from a Chinese laboratory and was likely spread from animals to humans.

Some replies on the original post supported Husted for standing up to China. More numerous were critical replies from Twitter users who said such rhetoric feeds into hate and violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.

The organization Stop AAPI Hate released a report last month that showed it received more than 3,800 reports in the U.S. of episodes ranging from shunning and verbal harassment to assault from March 2020

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to Feb. 28 of this year. Many of the confrontations were linked to misconceptions around the virus.

A gunman walked into three spas on March 16 in the Atlanta area, killing eight people, six of them Asian women, though police have yet to designate the shootings as a hate crime. The shock was still fresh when a man was caught on surveillance video Monday in New York City kicking an Asian American woman and stomping on her face while, police say, he shouted anti-Asian slurs.

For Democratic State Sen. Tina Maharath, the first Asian American woman elected to the Ohio General Assembly, Husted's tweet was the second time that week she heard an elected official call the coronavirus that first emerged in Wuhan, China, the "Wuhan virus," she said.

Maharath said Husted and others are following the lead of former President Donald Trump, who sometimes used overtly racist terms to refer to the virus.

"When you say those things, such as attach locations or ethnicities to the disease, it creates racial profiling, and then it turns into xenophobic behavior," Maharath said. "And when leaders with that kind of power repeat those terms in confidence and double down on it, it leads to more hate crimes."

Two days before Husted's tweet, Republican Ohio Sen. Terry Johnson mentioned the "Wuhan virus" on the chamber floor.

"We called it the Wuhan virus because that's where it came from," Johnson said. "We always called viruses by where they came from, but now we don't even do that because of all this political correctness."

Senate Republican spokesperson John Fortney said the overreaction to the phrase is a part of cancel culture, adding that it is important to question the origin of the deadly virus.

In the past century, international health experts have intentionally avoided naming diseases after the city or region of origin because of potential stigma. In 2015, the World Health Organization issued guidelines that discouraged the use of geographic locations, animals or groups of people in naming diseases.

But Husted remained firm in his AP interview.

"On Twitter, there were a lot of people who are from what I will call the cancel culture, who immediately assumed that there was a racial element to the tweet," Husted said, "which there wasn't any."

His neighbors, however, believe Husted's words matter, regardless of intention, and offered an invitation to "meet personally to discuss the issues of violence and hatred towards Ohio's Asian and Asian American citizens."

"As Lt. Governor, you are uniquely positioned to represent and protect the interests and safety of all Ohioans," the letter stated. "As a resident of Upper Arlington, and our Lt. Governor, you are uniquely situated and have the power to take action to protect the families of our community. To protect all of our families."

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This story has been corrected to show that the former CDC director's name is Robert Redfield, not Robert Redford.

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Farnoush Amiri 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.

## France to close schools, ban domestic travel as virus surges

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday announced a three-week nationwide school closure and a month-long domestic travel ban, as the rapid spread of the virus ramped up pressure on hospitals.

In a televised address to the nation, Macron said new efforts are needed as "the epidemic is accelerating."

It's a departure from the government's policy in recent months, which has focused on regionalized restrictions. School closures in particular had been seen as a very last resort.

"We're going to close nursery, elementary and high schools for three weeks," Macron said, adding that a nationwide 7 p.m.- 6 a.m. curfew will be kept in place.



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Macron said restrictions already applying in the Paris region and elsewhere will be extended next week to the whole country, for at least one month. Under these restrictions, people are allowed to go outside for leisure, but within a 10-kilometer (6 miles) radius from their homes — and without socializing. Also, most non-essential shops are closed down.

In addition, Macron promised to speed up the vaccination campaign by giving access to all people aged 60 and over in mid-April, those aged 50 and over in mid-May and the rest of the population a month later. So far, France has prioritized people living in nursing homes and those aged 70 and over, as well as health care workers and people with serious health conditions.

“If we stay united in the coming weeks ... then we will see light at the end of the tunnel,” Macron said.

He said the school closures aimed at avoiding major disruption by bringing forward the date of scheduled Easter holidays. All children will get online teaching next week, Macron said. Then they will go on vacation for two weeks.

Macron reaffirmed his views against a prolonged closure of schools as “increasing social inequalities.” According to figures reported by the U.N. education agency UNESCO, to this date, France has closed schools for 10 weeks in total since the start of the pandemic — compared to 27 weeks in the U.K., 28 weeks in Germany and 47 in the United States.

A debate is scheduled in parliament Thursday that will address the virus situation and the new measures.

Previous nationwide lockdowns in March and October 2020 were also announced by Macron in televised speeches.

The total number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in France surged past 5,000 on Tuesday, the first time in 11 months that the figure has been that high. Macron on Wednesday said numbers of hospital ICU beds will be increased “in the coming days” from the current 7,000 to 10,000. He said 44% of patients now in intensive care are aged under 65.

After an overnight shift at an ICU in the northern French city of Amiens, Dr. Pauline Caillard described growing numbers of patients and mounting strain on medical staff.

“It is moving very fast,” she said. “I hope we do not have to make choices” between patients.

The renewed surge of infections has led to growing questions about Macron’s virus strategies. With presidential elections scheduled for 2022, Macron is having to weigh both political and health considerations.

An overnight nationwide curfew has been in place since January, and all France’s restaurants, bars, gyms, cinemas and museums have been closed since October.

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

## **New York is latest state to legalize recreational marijuana**

By MARINA VILLENEUVE and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

New York adults over the age of 21 can now possess and use marijuana — even in public — under a legalization bill signed Wednesday by Gov. Andrew Cuomo, though legal sales of recreational-use cannabis won’t start for an estimated 18 months until regulations are set.

Passed after several years of stalled efforts, the measure makes New York the 16th state to legalize adult use of the drug, though South Dakota’s measure is in legal limbo.

New York becomes the second-most populous state, after California, to legalize recreational marijuana. Legalization backers hope the Empire State will add momentum and set an example with its efforts to redress the inequities of a system that has locked up people of color for marijuana offenses at disproportionate rates.

“By placing community reinvestment, social equity, and justice front and center, this law is the new gold standard for reform efforts nationwide,” said Melissa Moore, New York state director of the Drug Policy Alliance.

The legislation provides protections for cannabis users in the workplace, housing, family court, schools,

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colleges and universities, and sets a target of providing half of marijuana licenses to individuals from under-represented communities. And police could no longer use the odor of cannabis as a reason for searching someone's car for contraband.

New York will start automatically expunging some past marijuana-related convictions, and people won't be arrested or prosecuted for possession of pot up to 3 ounces. A 2019 law already expunged many past convictions and reduced the penalty for possessing small amounts.

In a unique provision, New Yorkers 21 and over can now smoke cannabis in public, including on sidewalks. No other state allows that, said Paul Armentano, deputy director of pro-legalization group NORML.

Still, New Yorkers can't smoke or vape marijuana in locations where smoking is prohibited by state law, including workplaces, indoor bars and restaurants and within 100 feet of a school. And stricter local smoking rules apply: New York City bans smoking in parks and on beaches, for instance.

Local governments can pass stricter rules on marijuana use, prohibit retail dispensaries or cannabis lounges, and impose small civil penalties — as long as they don't "completely or essentially prohibit a person" from lawful marijuana use.

Mackenzie Stevenson, a portrait photographer and dental assistant in central New York, was thrilled at the news. She has a relative with epilepsy who's been greatly helped by medical marijuana.

"I've seen the benefits it's had for her, so I'm excited for more people to be able to benefit from it," the 20-year-old said.

"Once I'm 21, I'm going to be very excited to go out and be able to use it myself," added Stevenson, who said she has tried it occasionally.

Law enforcement organizations, parents' groups and many Republican lawmakers opposed the new law. They suggested legalization will encourage kids to use marijuana and will increase impaired-driving crashes, among other concerns.

"For 27 years in the military, I fought drugs, every single year... What will we do to our children here?" Republican state Rep. John Lemondes Jr., a retired Army colonel, asked as lawmakers debated Tuesday night.

Legalization supporters say that it's already easy for young adults to get pot and that there's no clear link between marijuana legalization and traffic accidents. Officials plan to study the driving issue, and the law also lets state police get money to train more officers as "drug recognition experts," though University at Buffalo professor R. Lorraine Collins said there's no evidence those experts can tell whether someone's high.

The trade publication Marijuana Business Daily estimates New York could become the East Coast's largest recreational marijuana market — generating a potential \$2.3 billion in annual sales by its fourth year.

Cuomo, a Democrat, said annual tax revenues could eventually total \$300 million, though Republicans are skeptical. California was forced to cut \$223 million from state budget projections in 2019 due to slower-than-expected pot sales.

After covering the state's costs of regulation and enforcement, tax revenues would go to schools, drug treatment and prevention programs and a fund for investing in job skills, adult education, mental health and other services in communities that bore the brunt of the national and state drug war.

The taxes are considerable: a 9% statewide sales tax, an additional 4% county and local tax and another tax based on the level of THC, marijuana's active ingredient.

Sen. Liz Krueger, a Democrat and the legislation's senate sponsor, estimates the total tax rate will come out to about 20%.

The state will provide loans, grants and incubator programs to encourage cannabis entrepreneurs from minority communities, as well as small farmers, women and disabled veterans. Krueger said the state can't mandate giving 50% of licenses to such applicants because it could be unconstitutional.

Instead, the law sets 50% as "a goal."

"Fifty percent is a very high bar to try to reach, but if it happens, it would be amazing," said Hillary Peckham, chief operator of Etain Health, a women-owned New York medical cannabis company that is considering applying for a recreational marijuana license.

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"The next step is to see how the regulations and the program are stood up to actually provide those opportunities," added Peckham, whose company has four dispensaries around the state.

Social equity emerged as a key theme in marijuana legalization in recent years, with newly legal states trying to build it in and others seeking to make up for a lack of diversity in the businesses they approved earlier. But plans haven't always played out as intended.

Illinois, for instance, was touted for the equity provisions in its 2019 law. But that has drawn criticism and legal action from some Black-owned businesses that were passed over. Illinois has since revised its process to try to address those issues.

Associated Press reporters Jennifer Peltz and Karen Matthews contributed reporting from New York.

## COVID-19 pushed total US deaths beyond 3.3 million last year

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed total U.S. deaths last year beyond 3.3 million, the nation's highest annual death toll, the government reported Wednesday.

The coronavirus caused approximately 375,000 deaths, and was the third leading cause of death in 2020, after heart disease and cancer. COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. now top 550,000 since the start of the pandemic.

COVID-19 displaced suicide as one of the top 10 causes of death, according to the report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The data should serve again as a catalyst for each of us to continue to do our part to drive down cases and reduce the spread of COVID-19 and get people vaccinated as quickly as possible," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Wednesday.

The U.S. death toll increases most years, but last year's death rate was up nearly 16% compared to the previous year. That's the largest one-year leap since 1918, when U.S. soldier deaths in World War I and the flu pandemic pushed deaths up 46% compared with 1917.

Death rates last year overall were highest among Black people and American Indian and Alaska Native people. The COVID-19 death rate was highest among Hispanic people.

"Sadly, based on the current state of the pandemic, these impacts have remained in 2021 where we continue to see that communities of color account for an outsize portions of these deaths," Walensky said.

Preliminary data in December suggested 2020 would be an especially deadly year and the CDC's new report showed it was even worse than anticipated. The new numbers are still considered preliminary and are based on an analysis of death certificates.

Typically, analyzing death certificates takes about 11 months. But the CDC speeded up the timeline, the report said, to address "the pressing need for updated, quality data during the global COVID-19 pandemic."

In a separate report, the CDC responded to concerns about deaths being misattributed to COVID-19. The agency took a close look at death certificates, finding that most that listed COVID-19 also named other contributing problems. They included conditions such as diabetes, known to increase the danger of severe disease, or conditions such as pneumonia that occurred in the chain of events leading to the deaths.

Only about 5% of the death certificates listed only COVID-19, and that was more frequently the case when the person died at home.

The CDC said its review confirms the accuracy of the death count for COVID-19. \_\_\_\_\_

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## Pfizer says its COVID-19 vaccine protects younger teens

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

Pfizer announced Wednesday that its COVID-19 vaccine is safe and strongly protective in kids as young as 12, a step toward possibly beginning shots in this age group before they head back to school in the fall.

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Most COVID-19 vaccines being rolled out worldwide are for adults, who are at higher risk from the coronavirus. Pfizer's vaccine is authorized for ages 16 and older. But vaccinating children of all ages will be critical to stopping the pandemic — and helping schools, at least the upper grades, start to look a little more normal after months of disruption.

In the vaccine study of 2,260 U.S. volunteers ages 12 to 15, preliminary data showed there were no cases of COVID-19 among fully vaccinated adolescents compared to 18 among those given dummy shots, Pfizer reported.

It's a small study, that hasn't yet been published, so another important piece of evidence is how well the shots revved up the kids' immune systems. Researchers reported high levels of virus-fighting antibodies, somewhat higher than were seen in studies of young adults.

Kids had side effects similar to young adults, the company said. The main side effects are pain, fever, chills and fatigue, particularly after the second dose. The study will continue to track participants for two years for more information about long-term protection and safety.

Dr. Philip J. Landrigan of Boston College said the results are encouraging.

"It's hard to get kids to comply with masking and distancing, so something that gives them hard protection and takes them out of the mix of spreading the virus is all for the good," said Landrigan, who was not involved in the study.

It's another positive development in the race against the virus even as U.S. cases, at 66,000 new infections a day, are rising again and deaths are averaging nearly 1,000 a day. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Dr. Rochelle Walensky warned Americans again Wednesday that "we can't afford to let our guard down."

Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech in the coming weeks plan to ask the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and European regulators to allow emergency use of the shots starting at age 12.

"We share the urgency to expand the use of our vaccine," Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla said in a statement. He expressed "the hope of starting to vaccinate this age group before the start of the next school year" in the United States.

Pfizer isn't the only company seeking to lower the age limit for its vaccine. Results also are expected by the middle of this year from a U.S. study of Moderna's vaccine in 12- to 17-year-olds.

But in a sign that the findings were promising, the FDA already allowed both companies to begin U.S. studies in children 11 and younger, working their way to as young as 6-month-old.

"We are longing for a normal life. This is especially true for our children," BioNTech CEO Ugur Sahin said in a statement.

AstraZeneca last month began a study of its vaccine among 6- to 17-year-olds in Britain. Johnson & Johnson is planning its own pediatric studies. And in China, Sinovac recently announced it has submitted preliminary data to Chinese regulators showing its vaccine is safe in children as young as 3.

While most COVID-19 vaccines being used globally were first tested in tens of thousands of adults, pediatric studies won't need to be nearly as large. Scientists have safety information from those studies and from subsequent vaccinations in millions more adults.

One key question is the dosage: Pfizer gave the 12-and-older participants the same dose adults receive, while testing different doses in younger children.

It's not clear how quickly the FDA would act on Pfizer's request to allow vaccination starting at age 12. The agency has taken about three weeks to review and authorize each of the vaccines currently available for adults. That process included holding a public meeting of outside experts to review and vote on the safety and effectiveness of each shot.

The process for reviewing data in children could be shorter, given FDA's familiarity with each vaccine. An agency spokeswoman said the FDA had no information to share on how the review would work, including whether additional public meetings would be required.

Another question is when the country would have enough supply of shots — and people to get them into adolescents' arms — to let kids start getting in line.

Supplies are set to steadily increase over the spring and summer, at the same time states are opening

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vaccinations to younger, healthier adults who until now haven't had a turn.

Children represent about 13% of COVID-19 cases documented in the U.S. And while children are far less likely than adults to get seriously ill, at least 268 have died from COVID-19 in the U.S. alone and more than 13,500 have been hospitalized, according to a tally by the American Academy of Pediatrics. That's more than die from the flu in an average year. Additionally, a small number have developed a serious inflammatory condition linked to the coronavirus.

Caleb Chung, who turns 13 later this week, agreed to volunteer after his father, a Duke University pediatrician, presented the option. He doesn't know if he received the vaccine or a placebo.

"Usually I'm just at home doing online school and there's not much I can really do to fight back against the virus," Caleb said in a recent interview. The study "was really somewhere that I could actually help out."

His father, Dr. Richard Chung, said he's proud of his son and all the other children volunteering for the needle pricks, blood tests and other tasks a study entails.

"We need kids to do these trials so that kids can get protected. Adults can't do that for them," Chung said.

AP video journalist Federica Narancio contributed to this report.

The Associated Press Health and Science Department receives support from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute's Department of Science Education. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

## 'My soul is lighter': Serial killer's death brings closure

By NICHOLAS K. GERANIOS Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — Serial killer Joseph Edward Duncan III died in U.S. prison recently, having admitted to slaughtering seven people — including five children — in Idaho, Washington state, Montana and California.

Some question whether Duncan, whose victims included four members of a single family, killed even more people. Following his arrest in 2005 for the slayings of that Idaho family, the FBI reviewed unsolved missing child cases nationwide.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Traci Whelan believes all of Duncan's killings were revealed in court. She prosecuted him in what she described as the only federal death penalty case in Idaho history.

"His crimes were all publicly acknowledged and reviewed by a judge or jury," Whelan said Tuesday from Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. "He was held accountable."

Duncan, 58, died Sunday at a hospital in Indiana near the United States Penitentiary, Terre Haute, where he was on death row. The native of Tacoma, Washington, had recently been diagnosed with terminal brain cancer.

He had been implicated as a possible suspect in several crimes that occurred between 1994 and 1997, when he was on parole, and between 2000 and 2005, when he was out of prison. Duncan was cleared as a suspect in some cases, but authorities in California and Washington believed Duncan had committed unsolved murders in their jurisdictions.

Duncan was a registered sex offender, telling a therapist that he estimated he had raped 13 younger boys by the time he was 16. He spent much of his life in prison.

Duncan's most violent string of crimes occurred in May 2005, when he was driving across the Idaho Panhandle on Interstate 90 and spotted two children playing in their swimsuits in the yard of a home next to the freeway. He pulled off the road and started surveillance of the home.

Using night-vision goggles, he broke in and tied up Brenda Groene, 40; her boyfriend, Mark McKenzie, 37; and her son, Slade Groene, 13. Then he beat them to death with a hammer. Two of Brenda Groene's other children, 9-year-old Dylan and 8-year-old Shasta, were missing when authorities got to the house.

Duncan had taken the children into the wilds of western Montana, where he tortured and abused them for weeks before killing Dylan.

In the early morning hours of July 2, 2005, Shasta Groene was recognized by employees and customers

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inside a Denny's restaurant in Coeur d'Alene. She was with a man.

Employees called police and positioned themselves to prevent the man from leaving. Police arrived with their lights off, drew their weapons and entered the restaurant. Duncan was arrested without incident.

Two days later, investigators found human remains at a remote makeshift campsite in the Lolo National Forest near St. Regis, Montana. They were identified as those of Dylan Groene. During the trial, it was revealed that Duncan shot the boy at point-blank range by holding a sawed-off 12-gauge shotgun to his head.

Duncan maintained in court that he took Shasta to the restaurant, located a few miles from where he killed her family, with the intent of returning her to authorities. He was convicted and sentenced to death in 2008.

Shasta Groene, now in her mid-20s, issued a written statement following Duncan's death.

"For so long I have been struggling with hate towards that man. Today, I woke up feeling like my soul was finally free," the statement said. "I hope other people affected by Joseph Duncan were able to wake up feeling the same way."

The Kootenai County Sheriff's Office in Idaho, which conducted the investigation, also released a statement.

"In May of 2005, the Groene Family of Kootenai County, living in the Wolf Lodge Bay area, was brutally victimized by a serial killer passing through our community. The family was stalked, attacked and tortured," the statement said. "It was one of the worst tragedies Idaho has ever seen."

Following his conviction, Duncan was extradited to Southern California to be tried for the death of 10-year-old Anthony Martinez of Riverside County in 1997. Duncan pleaded guilty and received a life sentence.

"The sun is brighter today, and my soul is lighter," Anthony's mother, Diana, said in a statement this week.

Duncan also admitted to the murders of 11-year-old Sammie Jo White and her 9-year-old half-sister, Carmen Cubias, who vanished after leaving a Seattle motel on July 6, 1996. Their skeletal remains were found on Feb. 10, 1998, in Bothell, Washington. Duncan confessed to beating the two girls to death but was not prosecuted because he was already facing multiple death penalties.

From the time he was taken into custody in 2005, Duncan confessed to all of his crimes and repeatedly sought to plead guilty, according to court records. Against his wishes, Duncan's lawyers pursued numerous appeals right up until his death.

Whelan, the assistant U.S. attorney in Idaho, said the case weighed heavily on everyone involved, including lawyers, officers, jurors, victims and the community.

"A serial child murderer presents difficulties for everyone," she said. "There is a human aspect of wanting to protect people, and you can't protect them."

Whelan said there is no question that Duncan deserved the death penalty, but there is no disappointment that he died of cancer.

"He is no longer here," she said.

## AP-NORC poll: Biden bolstered by strong marks on pandemic

By JULIE PACE and EMILY SWANSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Americans are broadly supportive of President Joe Biden's early handling of the coronavirus pandemic, a new poll finds, and approval of his stewardship of the economy has ticked up following passage of a sprawling \$1.9 trillion relief bill.

But Americans are more critical of Biden's early approach to some of the hot-button issues that are moving to the forefront, including guns and immigration, according to the survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. The president has outlined goals for tackling both issues but has made clear that they are not his immediate legislative priorities.

"I'm going to deal with all those problems. The question is the priorities as they come and land on my plate," Biden said in a news conference last week.

Biden's early weeks in office have made it abundantly clear that his top priority is curtailing the pandemic: urging Americans to take precautionary measures to slow the spread of COVID-19, prioritizing the rollout of

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vaccines and pushing the relief bill through Congress in a party line vote. Vaccine distribution has soared since Biden took office, with more than 96 million Americans having received at least one dose.

Americans have responded favorably to the president's approach, with 73% approving of his handling of the pandemic. That includes about half of Republicans, a rarity given how divided Americans have been along party lines on many key issues in recent years.

Gwen Medley, a nurse from Galveston, Texas, who has been administering vaccines in her state, is among them. The 66-year-old Republican is critical of Biden on a range of other issues, including immigration, but said the president is doing a "pretty good job" on the pandemic so far — in part, she says, because of vaccine efforts he inherited from the Trump administration.

"Trump got the ball rolling, and Biden is continuing to push that ball," Medley said.

Notably, Biden's approval rating on the economy has ticked up slightly since passage of the relief bill, which included direct payments to millions of Americans and aid to schools and state and local governments. Sixty percent of Americans now say they approve of Biden's handling of the economy, compared with 55% a month ago.

Overall, Biden's job approval sits at a healthy 61% as he enters his third month in office, according to the AP-NORC survey. That's well above the approval ratings for his predecessor, Donald Trump, at this same point in his presidency. Trump's overall approval rating never topped 50% in an AP-NORC survey.

Biden and his advisers contend that despite the litany of issues facing the country, he will be judged foremost on his handling of the pandemic, now in its second year. The virus has killed more than 550,000 people in the U.S., and even with vaccines more accessible, some states are experiencing a surge in cases as new variants take hold.

"Our work is far from over," Biden said this week as he implored states to keep mask mandates and other restrictions in place. "The war against COVID-19 is far from won. This is deadly serious."

Much of Biden's efforts have been in sharp contrast to Trump, who emphasized the need to keep businesses open and the U.S. economy humming, even if that meant flouting public health guidelines for controlling the pandemic. Biden has flipped that approach, but also tried to supplement the economy through the legislation he signed into law in early March.

No Republicans in Congress voted for the measure, with some arguing that it unnecessarily added to the federal budget deficit at a time when the economy was already moving in a more positive direction.

Americans are split over Biden's handling of the deficit, with 48% saying they approve and 50% saying they disapprove. The majority of Democrats — 77% — approve, while the majority of Republicans — 83% — disapprove.

Biden faces a similar partisan divide on gun policy and immigration, two issues that have quickly disrupted Biden's carefully laid plans for his opening months in office.

On gun policy, 45% say they back Biden's approach, while 52% disapprove. The survey was conducted after a pair of deadly mass shootings, one in Atlanta that killed eight people, including six Asian Americans, and another at a grocery store in Colorado that left 10 people dead. Biden has said he's considering executive actions to tighten gun restrictions, but has also said he believes "rational" legislation could pass the narrowly divided Senate.

He's called on the Senate, in particular, to pass measures already approved by the House that would expand background checks, though he's putting his own political muscle first into a \$2 trillion infrastructure package the White House unveiled this week.

Biden is also confronting mounting concerns along the U.S.-Mexico border, where the number of families and migrant children arriving is on the rise. Republicans have blamed the increases on Biden's swift rollback of some of Trump's most aggressive immigration deterrent policies, moves the White House has warned should not be viewed as an open invitation to cross the border.

The White House, in turn, has blamed the situation at the border in large part on the conditions it inherited from the Trump administration. In addition to his executive actions, Biden has unveiled a legislative proposal that would provide an eight-year path to citizenship for millions of people currently in the U.S. illegally.

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So far, just 42% say they approve of how Biden is handling immigration, and a similar share, 44%, say they approve of how he's handling border security.

While much of Biden's early focus has been on domestic matters, foreign policy concerns also loom. The president has a 55% approval rating on foreign policy, putting that issue slightly below his overall job performance. The poll also finds Americans cite the threat to the U.S. from the spread of infectious diseases and the threat from extremist militant groups as among their top concerns, along with China's influence around the world.

Democrats and Republicans have differing concerns about the greatest threats facing the United States. Democrats are more likely than Republicans to cite the spread of infectious diseases (69% to 47%), extremist militant groups (67% to 51%) and climate change (76% to 22%) as threats to the U.S. They also are slightly more concerned about Russia's global influence (50% to 42%).

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to be very concerned about the threat posed by illegal immigration (72% to 22%), China's influence around the world (68% to 44%), the Iranian nuclear program (58% vs 39%), and the North Korean nuclear program (51% to 41%).

The AP-NORC poll of 1,166 adults was conducted March 26-29 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.6 percentage points.

## Russia: Navalny on hunger strike to protest prison treatment

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said Wednesday he has started a hunger strike to protest authorities' failure to provide proper treatment for his back and leg pains.

In a statement posted on Instagram, Navalny complained about prison officials' refusal to give him the right medicines and to allow his doctor to visit him behind bars.

He also protested the hourly checks a guard makes on him at night, saying they amount to sleep deprivation torture.

The 44-year-old Navalny, who is President Vladimir Putin's most outspoken domestic opponent, was arrested in January upon his return from Germany, where he spent five months recovering from a nerve-agent poisoning that he blames on the Kremlin. Russian authorities have rejected the accusation.

Navalny's poisoning and conviction have further strained Russia's ties with the United States and the European Union, which sank to post-Cold War lows after Moscow's 2014 annexation of Ukraine's Crimea, its meddling in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, hacking attacks and other actions.

His arrest fueled a series of protests that drew tens of thousands across Russia. Authorities detained about 11,000 people, many of whom were fined or given jail terms of up to two weeks.

Navalny said the August poisoning made him wonder about the cause of his current ailments. He said he had no choice but to start a hunger strike because his physical condition has worsened, with back pains having spread to his right leg and numbness in his left leg.

"What else could I do?" he wrote. "I have declared a hunger strike demanding that they allow a visit by an invited doctor in compliance with the law. So I'm lying here, hungry, but still with two legs."

Last month, Navalny was sentenced to 2 1/2 years in prison for violating the terms of his probation during convalescence in Germany. The sentence stems from a 2014 embezzlement conviction that Navalny has rejected as fabricated — and which the European Court of Human Rights has ruled to be unlawful.

Navalny was moved this month from a Moscow jail to a penal colony in Pokrov in the Vladimir region, 85 kilometers (53 miles) east of the Russian capital. The facility called IK-2 stands out among Russian penitentiaries for its particularly strict inmate routines, which include standing to attention for hours.

Navalny's Instagram also had a picture of a letter to the prison chief, dated Wednesday, in which he announced the hunger strike.

"Every convict has the right to invite a specialist for a check and consultation," he wrote. "So I demand



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to let a doctor see me and declare a hunger strike until it happens.”

In a sarcastic reference to the nerve agent poisoning that he blamed on Russia’s top security agency, the FSB, Navalny wrote to the prison chief that “given a recent attempt by the FSB operatives to kill me with chemical weapons, which state-controlled medics cast as a ‘metabolic problem,’ I’m haunted by vague doubts about the cause of my illness and recovery prospects.”

Russia’s prison service said last week that Navalny had undergone medical check-ups and described his condition as “stable and satisfactory.” In a statement that followed his declaration of a hunger strike, it claimed that Navalny is being given “all the necessary medical assistance in accordance with his current health indicators.”

But Navalny has complained that authorities only gave him basic painkiller pills and ointment for his back and legs while refusing to accept medications prescribed earlier by his doctor or to share the diagnosis from his examination.

In a note earlier this month, Navalny described his prison as a “friendly concentration camp.” He said he hadn’t seen “even a hint of violence” there but lived under controls that he compared to those described in George Orwell’s novel “Nineteen Eighty-Four.”

Earlier this week, he said he already had received six reprimands — warnings that could lead to solitary confinement — for offenses such as getting up 10 minutes before the wake-up call and refusing to watch a video lecture that he called “idiotic.”

Navalny, whom prison authorities had earlier marked as a flight risk, said he was subject to particularly close oversight, including a guard waking him up every hour at night and filming him to demonstrate he is in the required place.

“Instead of medical assistance, I’m subjected to sleep deprivation torture, being woken up eight times every night,” he said in Wednesday’s statement.

The prison service insisted that Navalny has been treated in strict conformity with the law and the night checks are part of a regular routine that “don’t disrupt convicts’ rest.”

During a video call with Putin on Tuesday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron emphasized the need for Russia to protect Navalny’s health and to respect his rights in compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights, according to Macron’s office.

The Kremlin said in its readout of the call that Putin offered an “objective explanation” in response to questions Merkel and Macron asked about Navalny.

Russian officials have rejected U.S. and EU demands to free Navalny and to stop a police crackdown on his supporters. Moscow also has rebuffed a European Court of Human Rights ruling in favor of his release as “inadmissible” meddling in Russia’s home affairs.

Navalny’s associates have urged Russians to sign up for the next protest to demand his release, promising to set a date for the demonstration when the number of people willing to take part reaches at least 500,000 nationwide.

More than 360,000 have registered since a dedicated website opened on March 23.

## Ruh roh! Biden pooch drops doggie doo in White House hallway

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Doggie doo in the White House?

One of President Joe Biden’s dogs apparently deposited the pile of poo in the hallway outside the Diplomatic Reception Room, just off the South Lawn, on Wednesday.

Reporters accompanying Jill Biden on a trip to California spotted the brown stuff on the red-carpeted hallway as they waited just inside the mansion to be escorted to the first lady’s motorcade.

It was unclear which pooch — Major or Champ — dropped the poo.

Earlier this week, Major, the younger dog, was involved in his second biting incident in March.

Michael LaRosa, a spokesperson for Jill Biden, said the 3-year-old German shepherd “nipped someone while on a walk” on Monday. The person, who was not identified, was examined by the White House

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medical staff and returned to work without injury, LaRosa said.

He said Major was still adjusting to White House life. Both dogs had lived with the Bidens in Delaware before Joe Biden took office.

Champ, 12, and Major recently had returned to the White House after Major caused a minor injury to a Secret Service employee on March 8. They had spent some down time back in Delaware, and the president had said Major was being trained.

Champ and Major were later seen on the South Lawn before the first lady's motorcade departed Wednesday. Major was on a leash while Champ roamed freely.

What happened Wednesday wasn't the first known instance of dog poop inside the White House, given the long history of presidential dog ownership.

President Barack Obama's dog Sunny liked to sneak off and poop in the mansion, his wife, Michelle, once said.

President Donald Trump did not have a pet at the White House.

## **EXPLAINER: What we know about AstraZeneca blood clot reports**

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — German officials have decided to limit the use of AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine in people under 60 after more unusual blood clots were reported in a small number of people who received the shots.

In response, Europe's drug regulator reiterated Wednesday that "there is no evidence that would support restricting the use of this vaccine in any population," though an expert said more brain clots were being reported than would be expected, and it continues to investigate.

Earlier in March, more than a dozen countries, including Germany, suspended their use of AstraZeneca over the blood clot issue. Most restarted — some with the kinds of restrictions Germany imposed Tuesday — after the European Medicines Agency said the benefits of the vaccine outweighed the risks of not inoculating people against COVID-19.

But the seesawing back and forth in some countries on who can take the vaccine has raised concerns that its credibility could be permanently damaged. Here's a look at what we know — and what we don't.

### **WHAT HAPPENED IN GERMANY?**

Earlier this week, Germany's medical regulator released new data showing a rise in reported cases of unusual kinds of blood clots in people who recently got a dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine. In response, Health Minister Jens Spahn and state officials agreed to only give the vaccine to people aged 60 or older, unless they are at high risk of developing serious complications from COVID-19 and have agreed to take the shot.

"It's about weighing the risk of a side effect that is statistically small, but needs to be taken seriously, and the risk of falling ill with corona," Spahn said.

Germany's medical regulator said its tally of the rare blood clots reported by March 29 had increased to 31. Some 2.7 million doses of AstraZeneca have been administered in Germany so far. Nine of the people died and all but two of the cases involved women, who were aged 20 to 63, the Paul Ehrlich Institute said.

Some clots have also been reported elsewhere, among the tens of millions of people who have received the AstraZeneca vaccine.

### **WHAT HAVE PREVIOUS INVESTIGATIONS FOUND?**

The EMA's initial investigation concluded the AstraZeneca shot did not raise the overall risk of blood clots but could not rule out a link to rare clots and recommended a new warning be added to the vaccine's leaflet. The shot is authorized for people 18 and over.

The EMA is continuing to look closely at two rare types of blood clots, including one that affects the brain, reported in people who got at least one dose of the AstraZeneca vaccine and could update its recommendations for the vaccine next week.

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On Wednesday, Dr. Peter Arlett of the EMA said that the agency is seeing “more cases of (brain clots) than we would expect to see,” and noted that more younger women have been affected — but it wasn’t clear if that was significant since younger women were also more likely to receive the AstraZeneca vaccine in Europe. He did not say how many of these kinds of clots would typically show up in the general population.

Emer Cooke, the agency’s executive director, said its experts had not been able to identify specific risk factors for those who might be at higher risk for the rare clots.

The World Health Organization’s expert committee also evaluated available data for the AstraZeneca vaccine and said the shot was safe and effective. On Wednesday, Dr. Kate O’Brien, who heads WHO’s vaccines department, said they were continuing to review the situation.

It’s normal to continue to look for side effects as new vaccines are rolled out since they are typically tested in tens of thousands of people, but some rare problems might only occur once millions receive the shot.

## HOW CAN SCIENTISTS FIGURE OUT IF THE VACCINE IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RARE BLOOD CLOTS?

“The way to tell if cases are caused by vaccination is to look to see if there is an excess of cases in people who have been vaccinated,” said Dr. Peter English, past chair of the British Medical Association’s Public Health Medicine Committee.

That will take some time. It took about a year, for instance, before scientists were able to conclude that a swine flu vaccine was responsible for some cases of narcolepsy in Europe.

Adam Finn, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Bristol, said there was no compelling evidence yet that the vaccine is to blame for the rare clots.

“The mechanism by which these blood clotting abnormalities come about, and why they affect this very small proportion of individuals, has still not been properly worked out,” he said in a statement.

In a statement, AstraZeneca said it was analyzing the tens of millions of records for people who received its vaccine “to understand whether these very rare cases of blood clots ... occur any more commonly than would be expected naturally population of millions of people.”

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR COVID-19 VACCINATIONS?

It’s bad news. Health officials worry the repeated suspensions and restrictions for the AstraZeneca vaccine could undermine confidence in a shot that is key to global efforts to stamp out the pandemic since it’s cheaper and easier to store than some others.

In Norway, which recently extended its suspension of the AstraZeneca vaccine for three weeks, officials say the confusion is prompting a wave of vaccine hesitancy.

The leader of the Norwegian Association for General Practice, Marte Kvittum Tangen, told broadcaster NRK that resuming the vaccination with AstraZeneca “will be very difficult if we want the greatest possible vaccination coverage in the population in the long run.”

Finn, of the University of Bristol, said the biggest health threat to the world is currently COVID-19 and that any doubts about the effectiveness of authorized coronavirus vaccines is problematic.

“We need to stay focused on the need to prevent (COVID-19) taking millions more human lives before it is brought under control, and the only effective way to do that is through vaccination,” he said.

Associated Press writers Frank Jordans and Geir Moulson in Berlin and Jamey Keaten in Geneva contributed to this report.

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## In quieter Mexico City, rare bats make an appearance

By FABIOLA SANCHEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — At a Mexico City university campus, researchers are stringing mesh nets between trees, hoping to capture evidence that a rare bat has begun visiting its favorite plants in this metropolis of 9 million.

The National Autonomous University's botanical gardens are filled with flowering morning glory, agave plants and cactuses that provide the bats with food; their long tongues and noses have evolved to drink nectar from the blooms.

The protected Mexican long-tongued bat was first sighted this year in an even more unlikely location: a zoo at the Chapultepec park in the city's center. Under pandemic rules, the park was closed or placed under strict visitation limits for much of the past year, and that may have encouraged the bats to come and feast.

"It is clear that we have seen that, as human activity declined in the city, wild animals have begun to re-take the city," said Rodrigo Medellín, a biologist at the university's Ecology Institute. "It is really divine justice that the bats are showing they can coexist with us, if only we give them a chance."

As people across the globe stay home to stop the spread of the coronavirus, animals have been venturing into places they aren't usually seen. Coyotes have meandered along downtown Chicago's Michigan Avenue and near San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge. A puma roamed the streets of Santiago, Chile. Goats took over a town in Wales. In India, already daring wildlife has become bolder with hungry monkeys entering homes and opening refrigerators to look for food.

In Mexico, bioluminescent plankton appeared at some beaches in the normally bustling resort of Acapulco for the first time in memory, though researchers are not clear about whether a decrease in human activity was responsible. Some think the decline in man-made lighting may have simply made the phenomenon easier to spot.

As night begins to fall in the botanical garden in Mexico City, a shout rang out among the researchers. "We got one!"

With carefully gloved hands, a student began to take the tiny, 4-inch (10-centimeter) animal out of the net. It could fit in the palm of one hand. Medellín was certain as soon as he saw it: It's a long-tongued bat, distinguishable by the elongated tip of its nose.

"I never would have thought it," he said of seeing the bat in Mexico City. Listed as threatened in 1994, the bat normally lives in dry forests and deserts, in a range that extends from the southwestern United States to Central America.

But it's not clear whether the long-tongued bat has begun re-colonizing Mexico City, or whether the city is just a seasonal island the bats are visiting now when its favorite plants are in bloom. Key facts like the bats' migration patterns, or how far they fly, remain unclear.

So researchers are trying to learn as much about the bat's incursion in Mexico City as they can.

Once the tiny bat was freed from the net, one researcher rubbed the bat's wings, back, nose and head with a small cube of gelatin, to pick up and preserve possible samples of pollen, to determine what plants the bat has been visiting.

The bat also got a small dose of sugar water from a syringe, to help it recover from the stress and help obtain stool samples that can shed further light on its diet.

Finally, a tiny microchip the size of a grain of rice was inserted into the animal's back, to help track its movements.

There are 140 species of bats in Mexico and they serve as important pollinators for several species of plants. But the tiny mammals have been vilified and persecuted.

Bats can harbor a host of viruses, including some of the ones that spread among humans.

Scientists believe the coronavirus likely originated in wild horseshoe bats in China, before jumping — perhaps through an intermediary species — to humans. That bat species is not found in Mexico.

Medellín says bats avoid humans, and help us a lot.

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"If we give bats a chance, they can be here with us, helping us in our lives," he said. "They are not going to mess with us, they are not going to give us COVID, they are not going to give us rabies. They are not going to do anything other than help and benefit us."

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, April 1, the 91st day of 2021. There are 274 days left in the year. This is April Fool's Day.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 1, 1954, the United States Air Force Academy was established by President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

On this date:

In 1789, the U.S. House of Representatives held its first full meeting in New York; Frederick Muhlenberg of Pennsylvania was elected the first House speaker.

In 1933, Nazi Germany staged a daylong national boycott of Jewish-owned businesses.

In 1945, American forces launched the amphibious invasion of Okinawa during World War II. (U.S. forces succeeded in capturing the Japanese island on June 22.)

In 1970, President Richard M. Nixon signed a measure banning cigarette advertising on radio and television, to take effect after Jan. 1, 1971.

In 1972, the first Major League Baseball players' strike began; it lasted 12 days.

In 1975, with Khmer Rouge guerrillas closing in, Cambodian President Lon Nol resigned and fled into exile, spending the rest of his life in the United States.

In 1976, Apple Computer was founded by Steve Jobs, Steve Wozniak and Ronald Wayne.

In 1977, the U.S. Senate followed the example of the House of Representatives by adopting, 86-9, a stringent code of ethics requiring full financial disclosure and limits on outside income.

In 1984, Marvin Gaye was shot to death by his father, Marvin Gay (correct), Sr. in Los Angeles, the day before the recording star's 45th birthday. (The elder Gay pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter and received probation.)

In 1987, in his first speech on the AIDS epidemic, President Ronald Reagan told doctors in Philadelphia, "We've declared AIDS public health enemy no. 1."

In 1992, the National Hockey League Players' Association went on its first-ever strike, which lasted 10 days.

In 2003, American troops entered a hospital in Nasiriyah (nah-sih-REE'-uh), Iraq, and rescued Army Pfc. Jessica Lynch, who had been held prisoner since her unit was ambushed on March 23.

Ten years ago: Afghans angry over the burning of a Quran at a small Florida church stormed a U.N. compound in northern Afghanistan, killing seven foreigners, including four Nepalese guards.

Five years ago: World leaders ended a nuclear security summit in Washington by declaring progress in safeguarding nuclear materials sought by terrorists and wayward nations, even as President Barack Obama acknowledged the task was far from finished.

One year ago: President Donald Trump acknowledged that the federal stockpile of personal protective equipment used by doctors and nurses was nearly depleted, and he warned of some "horrific" days ahead for the country. Resisting calls to issue a national stay-at-home order, Trump said he wanted to give governors "flexibility" to respond to the coronavirus. Under growing pressure, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis joined his counterparts in more than 30 states in issuing a stay-at-home order. Navy officials struggling to quarantine crew members in the face of an outbreak on a U.S. aircraft carrier said nearly 3,000 sailors would be taken off of the USS Theodore Roosevelt in Guam. Grand Canyon National Park joined some other national parks in shutting down indefinitely in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus. England's Wimbledon tennis tournament was canceled for the first time since World War II.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Jane Powell is 92. Actor Don Hastings is 87. Actor Ali MacGraw is 82. R&B singer Rudolph Isley is 82. Reggae singer Jimmy Cliff is 73. Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito is 71. Rock musi-

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cian Billy Currie (Ultravox) is 71. Actor Annette O'Toole is 69. Movie director Barry Sonnenfeld is 68. Singer Susan Boyle is 60. Actor Jose Zuniga is 59. Country singer Woody Lee is 53. Actor Jessica Collins is 50. Rapper-actor Method Man is 50. Movie directors Albert and Allen Hughes are 49. Political commentator Rachel Maddow is 48. Former tennis player Magdalena Maleeva is 46. Actor David Oyelowo (oh-YEHLOH'-oh) is 45. Actor JJ Field is 43. Singer Bijou Phillips is 41. Actor Sam Huntington is 39. Comedian-actor Taran Killam is 39. Actor Matt Lanter is 38. Actor Josh Zuckerman is 36. Country singer Hillary Scott (Lady A) is 35. Rock drummer Arejay Hale (Halestorm) is 34. Actor Asa Butterfield is 24. Actor Tyler Wladis is 11.