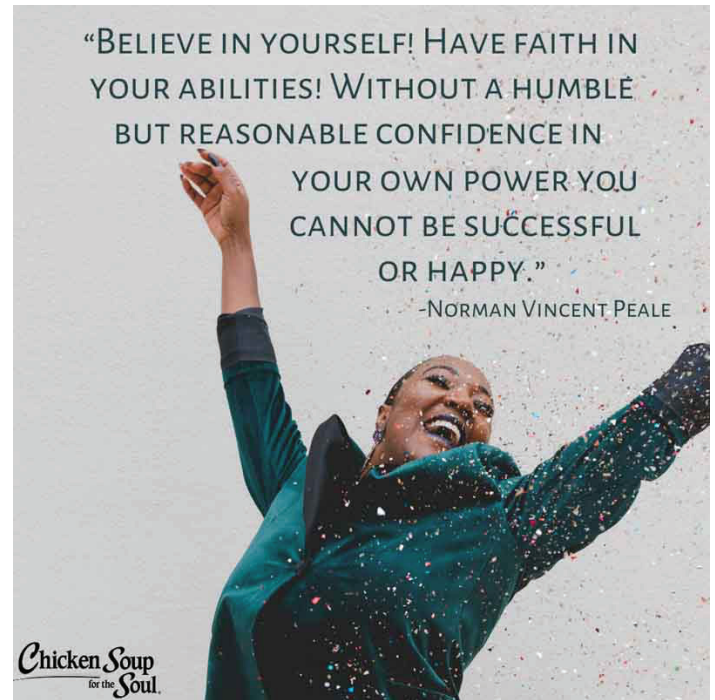


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The junior high track meet scheduled for today in Milbank and the varsity track meet scheduled for tomorrow, in Milbank, have been cancelled.

The girls varsity golf meet scheduled for April 19 in Milbank has been rescheduled for Thursday, May 13.

Groton School Play, Frozen Jr., will be performed Thursday, April 15 at 7 p.m. and Saturday, April 17, at 5 p.m. There is a \$5 admission fee.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

**Weber
Landscaping
Greenhouse
opening this
Spring!**



**We will have a full greenhouse of beautiful
annuals and vegetables.**

Opening First Week of May!

**Located behind 204 N State St, Groton
(Look for the flags)**

**LET US HELP YOU BRIGHTEN
UP YOUR YARD!**

Addiction... Reality vs Mythology

Bacchus was a member of the Roman pantheon of gods. In ancient times he had a variety of attributes, but modern culture primarily remembers

him as a god of wine and debauchery. Perhaps the image of his followers, or Bacchantes, as individuals who have abandoned society to live in a raucous state of perpetual inebriation has contributed to our perception of alcoholism and addiction.

When I talk to my patients about their use of substances, be it alcohol, prescription medications, or street drugs, I find that most believe they don't have a problem. They tell me they aren't using every day, or they still make it to work in the morning, or they haven't been arrested, or, my personal favorite, they only drink beer.

There are many substances that people can misuse, and to which people can become addicted. If one peruses the current handbook that guides diagnosis in psychiatry, it is easy to see the similarities between alcohol use disorder, and opioid use disorder, and cannabis use disorder, and a myriad of other addictions.

Sufferers may use more, or more often, than they intended. They may want to cut back but be unsuccessful when they try. They may spend unusual amounts of time seeking, using, or recovering from the use of their preferred substance. They may have strong cravings. They may give up other activities in favor of using. Their performance at work or school may suffer, or they may fail to meet family commitments. They may find themselves needing a greater quantity to achieve the same effect or having withdrawal symptoms. They may continue to use, despite knowing their use is detrimental to their relationships, or that it is dangerous and damaging their health.

It is important to recognize that a person does not need to have all the above-mentioned experiences to have a substance use disorder. Indeed, the diagnosis can be made in the absence of most these criteria. Most who suffer from addiction are not souls lost on skid row. They are our neighbors, our friends, our family.

Genetics is an important predictor of who will develop a substance use disorder, but it is not the only factor. Life experiences, particularly trauma experienced in childhood, personality traits, and the social environment all affect risk.

Addiction is a common disease. Drugs and alcohol kill hundreds of Americans every day. The same is true for heart disease and cancer, and we don't criticize the patient for these diseases. It's time we show the same compassion for people diagnosed with addiction and consign the image of the Bacchantes to mythology.

Debra Johnston, M.D. is part of The Prairie Doc® team of physicians and currently practices family medicine in Brookings, South Dakota. For free and easy access to the entire Prairie Doc® library, visit www.prairiedoc.org and follow Prairie Doc® on Facebook featuring On Call with the Prairie Doc® a medical Q&A show streaming on Facebook and broadcast on SDPB most Thursdays at 7 p.m. central.



By Debra Johnston, M.D ~ Prairie Doc® Perspectives

#416 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

I am editing this to show a data update that came in just before midnight—wasn't sure when I made my first post that I was going to have numbers for today at all. Understand these encompass about six more hours than usual in a daily Update, but also recognize that not a whole lot of reporting happens during these evening hours. That said, we're still showing some worrisome increases. New case reports today numbered 85,600. We are now at 31,444,600 total cases in the pandemic, 0.3% more than yesterday's total. You may recall that yesterday's hospitalizations took a weird upward spike to nearly 78,000 that was not supported by any sort of evidence. This is now looking like an anomaly because today we're back down in the realm of reality at 45,308, a concerning increase from two days ago, but nothing like yesterday. We have 563,926 deaths from this virus, which is 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 999 deaths reported today.

On April 14, 2020, one year ago today, the US had 606,800 cases reported and 25,922 deaths reported. Thirty food and grocery store workers had died in the US. We were on a downturn with rates of increase dropping. I was urging everyone to adhere to the precautions (same ones we're being urged to adhere to today—funny how that hasn't changed in a year) so that we could mop up and be done with this. That went well, didn't it? Combination of unrealistic optimism and terrible unwillingness to contribute.

The first reinfections were being reported; this has not been a big thing through all of this. Except for B.1.351, the new variant first identified in South Africa, reinfections have not been a common feature of this virus. The first study was published on a preprint server (not peer reviewed) showing hydroxychloroquine not only did not benefit patients, but actually caused toxic effects on the heart. Of course, the Hydroxychloroquine Fan Club was not prepared to believe—you know—facts, so there were more to come, many more. Cases continued to show up in the homeless population. Primary elections in some states were being postponed. A doctor told an interviewer that reopening the economy by May 1 was a "pipe dream." We were still seriously short of testing capacity.

Worldwide, we were over 1.9 million cases and 119,000 deaths. New Zealand had its worst day so far in the pandemic with four deaths; they were at just short of 1400 cases. Europe was a few weeks ahead of the US in this trajectory, so they were opening things up and relaxing restrictions; that pattern would repeat itself, even though we never seemed to learn from it. They would say, "This was the worst thing ever," and we'd reply, "Hold my beer" and declare the WWE an "essential service" or order governors to let churches hold superspreader events over and over.

We have an expanded enumeration of symptoms to watch for if you've received a dose of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine. Here's the current list: severe headache, leg pain, abdominal pain, and shortness of breath, also backache, new neurological symptoms, leg swelling, and new or easy bruising. If you experience any of these within four weeks of your vaccination, you should seek medical attention. If your platelet (a cell fragment involved in clotting) count is low at that time, then you should not be treated with heparin, but with another anticoagulant ("blood thinner") instead. I think every physician in the country is aware of these warnings by now. This is probably a good time to mention that we have not yet definitively linked the clots to the vaccine, although the link is at least plausible, probably more than plausible.

One issue which is apparently being investigated is whether there is an association with the use of oral hormonal contraception. It is dangerous to generalize based on just six cases, but it appears at least one of those six cases was using this medication. Because cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST) is not uncommon among users of hormonal birth control, this is at least a promising avenue for exploration considering all of the cases seen so far are in women of child-bearing age (although in the trials there was one male who experienced abnormal blood clotting which could not necessarily be attributed to the vaccine). Mostly, folks who experience abnormal blood clotting are people with significant health problems, so these associations sort of stick out. No one is making any assertions about what's happening in these cases at this point, but this is going to get a thorough look.

Most important to recognize is that what we still don't know is more than what we do know. That's why

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we're pausing administration of the vaccine until we know more. And I'll add that, if you're among those who've received this vaccine in the past four weeks, this is not the time to freak out. From all the available evidence, these cases are extremely rare and we do know enough to make reasonable decisions about treatment if one occurs. We should also note that after administration of some 700 million doses of vaccines worldwide, the number of severe side effects is in the hundreds. And again, the risks from infections with this coronavirus are substantial in the unvaccinated.

Remember when I said one thing that would be investigated is whether there were additional cases? That's ongoing, and a couple of potential additional cases have been identified. There is the trial participant, a 25-year-old male, and a possible seventh case in a 59-year-old woman with a somewhat different type of blood clots. The company continues to look for more potential cases. There was also one case of a pulmonary embolism, a blood clot in the lung, in a South African trial. These additional cases may or may not be associated with the vaccine; their differing clinical picture puts any easy assumptions in doubt.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) met today in emergency session and did not come to any recommendation from that meeting; members are not prepared to say the blood clots are the same as the blood clots seen in recipients of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine or are likely to be caused by the vaccine at all. I think, however, that most reasonable people think there is an association with the vaccine. Members indicated they do not yet have enough information. The potential additional cases will be investigated further. Of the six confirmed cases of abnormal blood clotting, one has died, three are hospitalized (two of these are in intensive care), and two are at home. Four of the six received heparin, a drug which is very likely to have made things worse because of a quirky feature of this particular condition; I am not sure whether these are the four who have been hospitalized. There will be another ACIP meeting scheduled soon so that this matter can be resolved expeditiously.

Two tigers at the Virginia Zoo had developed mild respiratory symptoms and were subsequently confirmed to have the coronavirus; a third one also has symptoms and could be presumed to also be infected. There was no information released about infections among zookeepers, but it seems reasonable to presume there was one somewhere on the staff because the zoo has been closed to the public for months. As with other cats who've been infected, they are doing well; the only cases of Covid-19 in cats that ended badly were in a couple of 11-week-old white tiger cubs who died. There is no evidence any cat has ever transmitted to a human.

There have now been 194,791,836 doses of vaccine given in the US out of 250,998,265 doses delivered to vaccination sites. We're down a bit from our average today at 2.5 million doses. Thirty-seven percent of our population have received at least one dose, and nearly 77 million are fully vaccinated.

A new modeling study shows blocking off middle seats on an airplane can reduce the risk of exposure to the virus by 23 to 57 percent compared with a full flight. The work was done by the CDC and Kansas State University and deals with exposure risk, which is not necessarily the same as transmission risk. The modeling did not take into account the effect of masking.

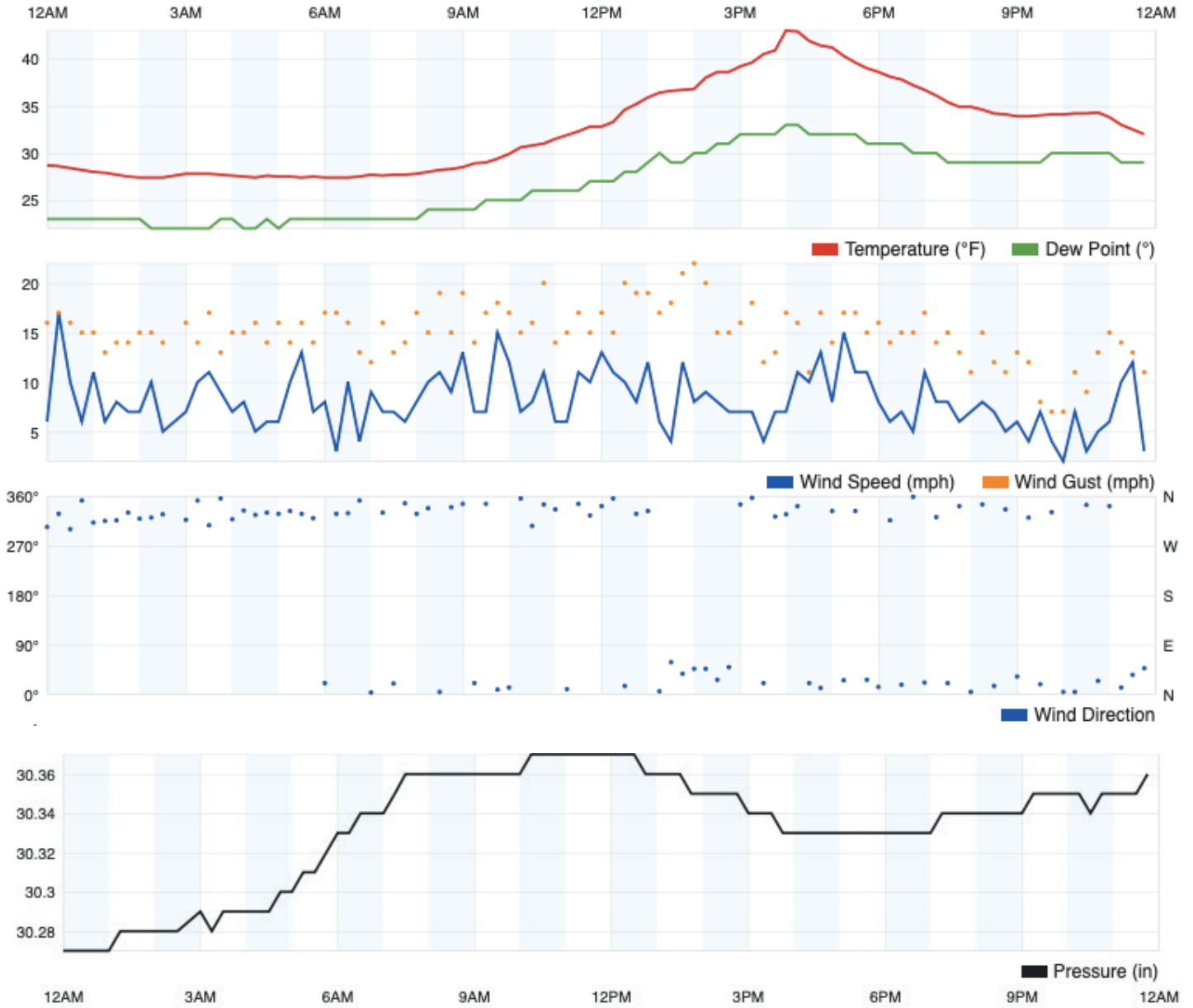
There has been a major trial underway since February in the UK to determine whether a mix-and-match approach to vaccination can be effective or perhaps even beneficial. It has included the Oxford/AstraZeneca and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines and is being expanded to also include the Moderna and Novavax vaccines. There have been some hints that this approach could give a better immune response than our current one-vaccine approach. Participants are over 50. If this gives equal or better results, then that would be most helpful in getting second doses out to folks, easing the logistical challenges of making doses of the appropriate vaccine available to each person.

Wrapping up another day. Take care. We'll talk again.

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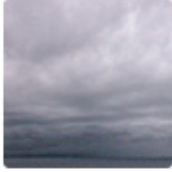
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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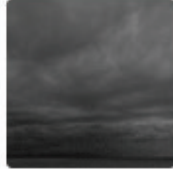
Today



Cloudy

High: 44 °F

Tonight



Cloudy

Low: 30 °F

Friday



Mostly Cloudy

High: 47 °F

Friday Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 28 °F

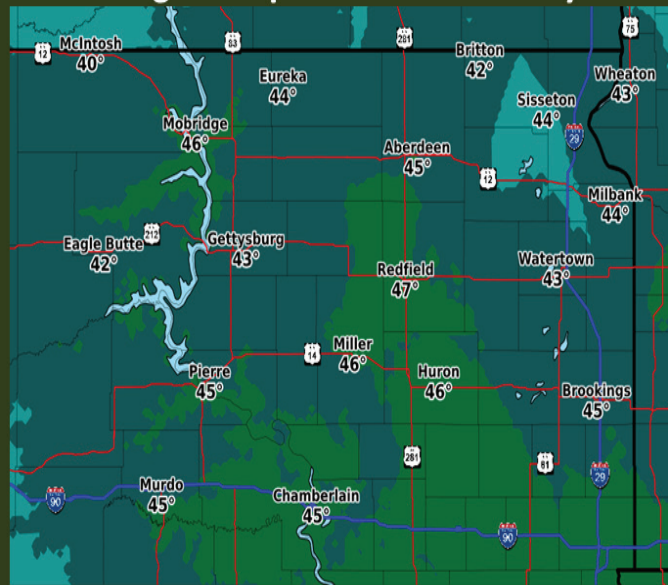
Saturday



Mostly Sunny

High: 51 °F

High Temperatures Thursday



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
4/15/2021 5:25 AM

Today



Mostly Cloudy
&
Cool

Extended Forecast

Friday



43-49°

Saturday



47-56°

Sunday



55-64°

Weak high pressure will try and nose into our area through the day today. However, it won't have much influence as we expect cloudy skies to persist and the cooler than normal temps to continue. Most of the day will be dry for the area, however an upper level disturbance pushing into the Plains will bring some light rain or a rain/snow mixture to the Missouri Valley later today through tonight. Eventually the precip will turn to all snow overnight with some light accumulations under a half an inch possible across West River areas in the central part of the state. Drier conditions should take hold on Friday and into the weekend with a slow warming trend expected.

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Today in Weather History

April 15, 1896: A tornado, possibly an F3, moved northeast from Burkmere, which is 10 miles west of Faulkton. About half dozen farms were torn apart. Two children were killed, and the rest of the family critically injured as a home was leveled. 6 miles northwest of Faulkton, near Millard.

April 15, 2011: A strong upper-level low-pressure area brought widespread heavy snowfall to central and parts of northeast South Dakota. This early spring storm brought 6 to 14 inches of heavy snow to the area. The heavy wet snow caused a lot of travel problems along with a few accidents. Locations with a foot or more of snowfall included 12 inches 12 SSW Harrold, 23 N Highmore, and Orient; 13 inches 14 NNE Isabel and Eureka with 14 inches at Eagle Butte.

1927: The Great Mississippi River Flood of 1927 continued to rage. Tremendous rains all over the Mississippi River Valley during the preceding autumn and winter sent floodwaters raging southward over a wide area. On this date, the government levee at Dorena, MO collapsed. The surge of floodwater continued pushing downriver toward the Mississippi Delta, bursting more dams as it went. Also on this day, New Orleans saw 15 inches of rain in 18 hours. More than 4 feet of water covered parts of the city.

1998: An F3 tornado hits downtown Nashville causing extensive damage but no loss of life. An additional 62 tornadoes touched down in Arkansas, Kentucky, and Tennessee. These tornadoes caused 12 fatalities and approximately 120 injuries. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the NWS Office in Nashville.

2000: What a difference a day made (with the help of a strong cold front). Yesterday's 86 degrees in Goodland, Kansas, tied the record high for the date. Today's high of 29 degrees was also a date record high, but a record low high. It was a new record by 3 degrees.

1921 - Two mile high Silver Lake, CO, received 76 inches of snow in 24 hours, the heaviest 24 hour total of record for North America. The storm left a total of 87 inches in twenty-seven and a half hours. (David Ludlum)

1927 - New Orleans LA was drenched with 14.01 inches of rain, which established a 24 hour rainfall record for the state. (The Weather Channel)

1949 - A hailstone five inches by five and a half inches in size, and weighing four pounds, was measured at Troy NY. (The Weather Channel)

1958 - A tornado 300 yards in width skipped along a five mile path near Frostproof FL. A 2500 gallon water tank was found one mile from its original position (it is not known how much water was in the tank at the time). (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms developing along a cold front produced severe weather in the Southern Atlantic Coast Region. A tornado killed one person and injured seven others near Mount Dora FL. Drifts of hail up to two feet deep were reported in Davidson and Rowan counties in North Carolina. Myrtle Beach SC was deluged with seven inches of rain in three hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Death Valley, CA, was soaked with 1.53 inches of rain in 24 hours. Snow fell in the mountains of southern California. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Showers and thunderstorms soaked the eastern U.S. with heavy rain, pushing the rainfall total for the month at Cape Hatteras NC past their previous April record of 7.10 inches. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing along a stationary front produced severe weather from west central Texas to west central Arkansas during the late afternoon and evening. Thunderstorms spawned a tornado which caused more than half a million dollars damage at Fort Stockton TX, produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Dennison TX, produced baseball size hail at Silo OK and near Capps Corner TX, and drenched southeastern Oklahoma with up to 4 inches of rain in two hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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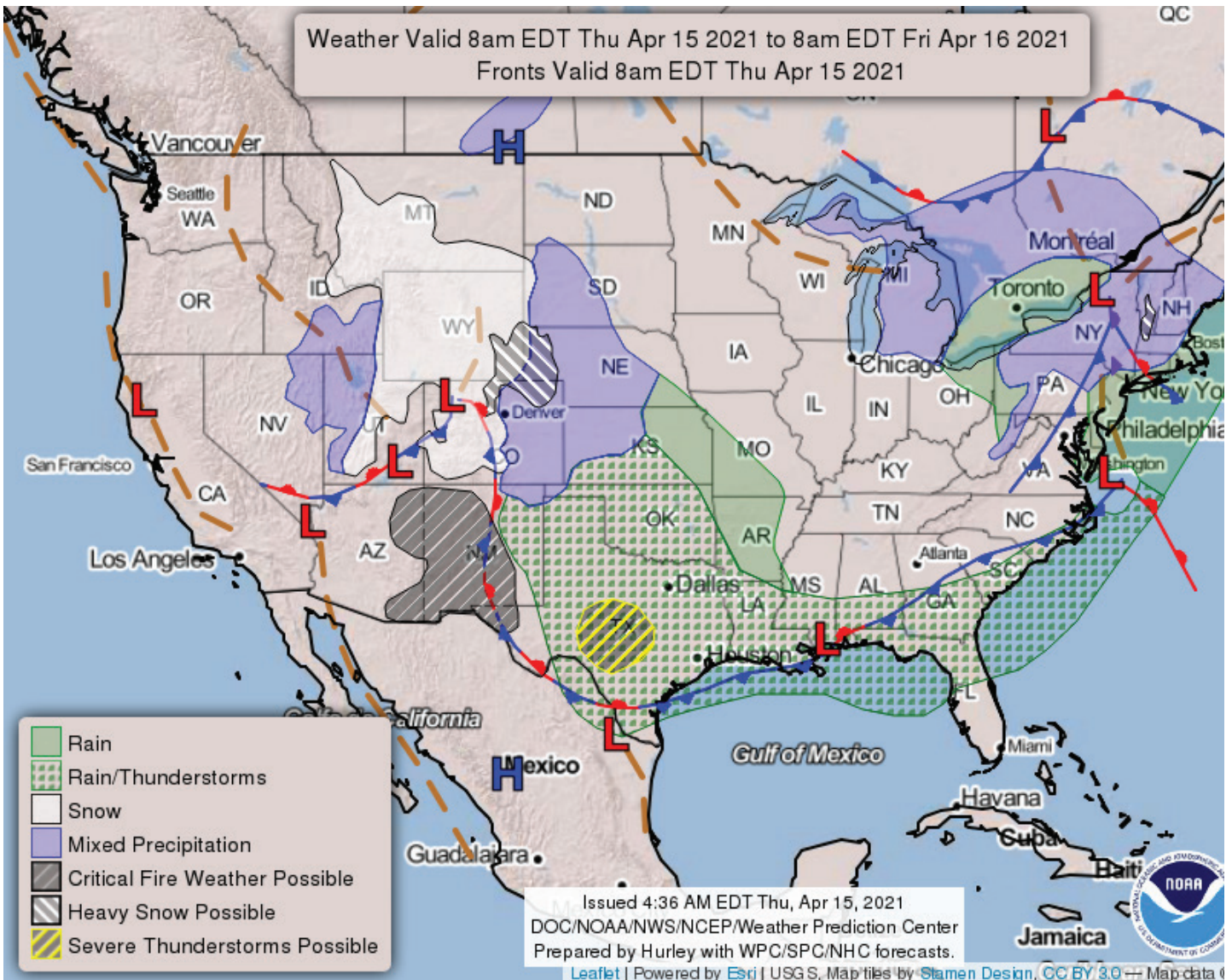
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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 43 °F at 3:59 PM
Low Temp: 27 °F at 1:53 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 1:55 PM
Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 91° in 1926
Record Low: 8° in 2014
Average High: 57°F
Average Low: 32°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 0.69
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.29
Average Precip to date: 2.87
Precip Year to Date: 2.47
Sunset Tonight: 8:20 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:46 a.m.



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THERE IS AN END TO LIFE

All of us are confronted by the passing of time – not only those who are elderly. It is an issue that all of us face whether we like it or not. Yet, our culture is in massive denial that everyone ages, and every life will end.

Our elderly now live in “retirement villages.” More cosmetics than ever are sold to “erase” the lines of aging. There are more products now available to “cover” gray hair that once stood for wisdom than the hairs on some heads. We have surgery to remove the signs of aging that are becoming less expensive and more available. But, it is all in vain. Time is the enemy of everyone, and judgment awaits us all.

David was well aware of the fact that his life was passing away. Overwhelmed by its shortness, he cried out, “Show me, O Lord, my life’s end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is.” He had some serious questions about life and death and wanted God’s answers. He was aware that his sickness was a result of his sin, and he knew that God was displeased with him and this fact caused him to be alarmed.

So, he wanted a “date” and the “number” of days he had left to live so he could prepare to die. He asked God to give him some assurance of the time he left. Having that information would enable him to “figure” out what to do “next.” But he didn’t get it.

In this simple verse, he admitted that he was frail, that his “days” were numbered, and his “life” short. He knew that one day he would eventually die and certainly face God!

Armand Nicholi said, “Only when we are ready to die can life be peaceful and fulfilled.” Being ready to die means one has peace with God through Christ.

Prayer: As we face the shortness of life and the reality of death, Lord, may we find peace and hope through Your Son, our Savior. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered - how fleeting my life is. Psalm 39:4

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Dakota Cash

05-24-27-31-32

(five, twenty-four, twenty-seven, thirty-one, thirty-two)

Estimated jackpot: \$128,000

Lotto America

02-03-06-38-39, Star Ball: 9, ASB: 2

(two, three, six, thirty-eight, thirty-nine; Star Ball: nine; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$4.91 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$240 million

Powerball

13-30-33-45-61, Powerball: 14, Power Play: 2

(thirteen, thirty, thirty-three, forty-five, sixty-one; Powerball: fourteen; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$67 million

North Dakota, Youngstown State football game canceled

ST. LOUIS (AP) — The Missouri Valley Football Conference said Wednesday it has canceled the North Dakota at Youngstown State game scheduled Saturday.

The league said in a release that the Penguins played a league-high seven games in eight weeks this spring and determined they could not play the game. The school said its players need to focus on academics.

North Dakota (4-1) will share the league title with Missouri State and the winner of Saturday's game between South Dakota State and North Dakota State.

The 16-team FCS playoff bracket is set to be announced Sunday morning. The winner of the SDSU-NDSU game earns the league's automatic berth into the postseason.

The FCS title is scheduled May 16 in Frisco, Texas.

Playoff berths at stake as FCS regular season winds down

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

The final weekend for most leagues playing FCS spring football has arrived with 11 of the 16 spots in the pandemic-shortened 16-team playoffs field still to be determined.

Weber State (Big Sky), Monmouth (Big South), Sacred Heart (Northeast), Jacksonville State (Ohio Valley) and Sam Houston (Southland) have already earned automatic berths as conference champions. Top-ranked James Madison and No. 2 North Dakota State have league championships on the line Saturday, though both are likely to be in the field regardless of the outcomes.

James Madison (4-0, 2-0 Colonial Athletic Association) hosts No. 11 Richmond (3-0, 3-0), the third time the teams have been scheduled to play this year. Each program was responsible for one postponement because of COVID-19 protocols.

The Dukes, who have played just once since March 6, need the game to meet the CAA's three-game requirement to qualify for the conference's automatic bid; Richmond needs the game to meet the NCAA's four-game minimum requirement for at-large consideration. Either school, as well as Delaware (4-0, 3-0), which faces Villanova (2-1, 2-1), could wind up as the automatic qualifier from the CAA.

The Bison (6-1, 5-1 Missouri Valley), winners of eight of the last nine national titles, play host to No. 4

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South Dakota State (4-1, 4—1). The loser will be eliminated from the MVC championship race, and the winner would share it with Missouri State (5-4, 5-1) and possibly North Dakota (4-1, 4-1), which plays Youngstown State (1-6, 1-6).

The CAA and Missouri Valley could each get at least two of the six at-large berths, and Eastern Washington (5-1, 5-1 Big Sky) is likely to lay claim to another.

VMI will win the Southern Conference's automatic bid for the first time if it beats The Citadel, or if Mercer loses at Samford. Bucknell and Holy Cross are meeting for the Patriot League title, and Davidson needs only to beat visiting Stetson to claim the Pioneer Football League's automatic berth, which would be the first in Wildcats history.

HARD TO WATCH

Deion Sanders probably wished he could have suited up.

Instead, the All Pro cornerback could only watch Alabama A&M quarterback Aqeel Glass light up his Jackson State squad with six TD passes in the Bulldogs' 52-43 victory.

Glass finished with 440 passing yards and also had a 5-yard TD run as the Bulldogs (3-0, 2-0 Southwest Athletic Conference) scored their most points against a Division I opponent in 12 years.

Alabama A&M coach Connell Maynor said having Sanders on the other sideline is "good for Black college football. It's good for Jackson State. It's good for the SWAC."

Benefits from Sanders' arrival as the Tigers' coach include additional exposure for the league, as well as a sponsorship deal with Pepsi that he helped broker for the SWAC.

"He's making a big splash in a positive way to help generate money for HBCUs and Black college football and the SWAC," Maynor said. "It's only going to help our league."

JUST STOPPING BY

Montana is only playing two games this spring, and based on how the first one went, their normal opponents are probably thrilled to have been left off the schedule.

Undeterred by snow flurries and the rust of 485 days without a game, the Grizzlies needed just three minutes to score, amassed 529 yards of offense and got points on eight consecutive possessions in a 59-3 victory against Division II Central Washington.

Montana plays its only other game at home Saturday against Portland State.

EXTRA POINTS

Jaylan Adams, quarterback at The Citadel, earned Southern Conference offensive player of the week honors despite not completing a pass. Adams did run for 98 yards, including scoring runs of 25 and 43 yards, in the Bulldogs' 26-7 victory over Furman. His misfired on both of his pass attempts. ... Northwestern State and Incarnate Word combined for two touchdowns and a field goal in the last 88 seconds with Eddie Godina's 32-yard field goal on the final play giving Northwestern State a 49-47 victory. The Demons scored with 1:28 left, but Incarnate Word blocked the extra point and scored 33 seconds later to lead 47-46. Godina's field goal came on the final play of a four-play, 58-yard drive.

Dakota Access asks for full appeals court review on permit

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Owners of the Dakota Access pipeline have asked the full Washington D.C. circuit court to review a panel's decision that essentially said the North Dakota project is operating without a key permit, even though the decision to keep oil flowing remains in the hands of a federal judge.

The appeal filed Monday calls for a rehearing on ruling by the three-judge panel affirming U.S. District Judge James Boasberg's opinion that the pipeline is operating without a federal permit granting easement to cross beneath Lake Oahe, a reservoir along the Missouri River. Opponents want the pipeline shut down while the U.S. Corps of Engineers conducts an extensive environmental review.

The chances of a full review by the D.C. Court are unlikely and lawyers for the pipeline opponents aren't required to file a response unless requested by the court.

"That would be an indication that there is some potential interest," said Earthjustice attorney Jan Haselmann, who is representing the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe in its lawsuit against Dakota Access. Standing

Rock straddles and North and South Dakota border.

Boasberg said at a hearing last week that he can issue a ruling independent of the appeals court. The Biden administration decided not to intervene in a possible shutdown, angering environmental groups and essentially leaving it up to Boasberg to decide.

Deaths in vehicle crashes up 38% in South Dakota last year

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — One-hundred-41 people died in traffic crashes in 2020, increasing 38% from a year earlier, the South Dakota Department of Public Safety said Wednesday.

The number of crashes in which the fatalities occurred was 132 last year according to statistics released by the DPS.

In 2019, 102 people were killed in motor vehicle crashes, the lowest in state history since records have been kept beginning in 1947. The number of fatal crashes in 2019 was 88, also a record low.

DPS Secretary Craig Price said the 2020 total is the state's highest since 2007. He said the department plans to increase its safety and enforcement efforts.

"Our efforts have worked in past years and we will continue our safety messages through the Office of Highway Safety and enforcement efforts between the Highway Patrol and local law enforcement," he said. "Even one motor vehicle death is one too many and we plan to encourage driver safety."

DPS said the three main factors associated with motor vehicle fatalities in 2020 were speed, alcohol use and failure to wear a seat belt. So far in 2021, fatality numbers are up compared to the same time in 2020 and those three factors are involved in most fatal crashes again this year, officials said.

Reward of \$15,000 offered in 1992 slaying of Yankton teen

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Law enforcement officials are hoping a \$15,000 reward will lead to a crack in the 1992 slaying of a Yankton teenager.

Yankton police Cmdr. Todd Brandt says he is hoping "someone who knows something is ready to do the right thing."

Nineteen-year-old Tammy Haas disappeared after attending Yankton's homecoming and then going to a party on a farm just across the Nebraska border. Her case is among South Dakota's most notorious unsolved mysteries.

Haas' body was found by a golfer in Cedar County, Nebraska at the bottom of a ravine. In 1996, Haas' boyfriend Eric Stukel was tried and acquitted of manslaughter in her death.

"There are people out there that know what happened to Tammy, and today, we're talking directly to them," FBI Minneapolis Special Agent Michael Paul said Tuesday in announcing the reward on what would have been Haas' 48th birthday.

"The burden of that knowledge that they carry, the weight of knowing for so many decades without speaking, coming forward now can lift that burden off their shoulders, their heart and their soul," Paul said.

Haas' gravesite was vandalized shortly after friends and family were in town to visit the site in May 2020.

"The vandalism of the grave did indicate to us that someone in this area still is thinking about this and may have some knowledge about it," FBI special agent Matt Miller said.

EXPLAINER: What are the Iran nuclear talks all about?

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Negotiations to bring the United States back into a landmark nuclear deal with Iran resumed Thursday in Vienna amid signs of progress — but also under the shadow of an attack this week on Iran's main nuclear facility.

WHAT IS THE DEAL THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT?

In 2015, Iran signed an agreement with the U.S., Russia, China, Germany, France and Britain that was intended to set limits on Tehran's nuclear program in order to block it from building a nuclear weapon —

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something it insists it doesn't want to do.

In exchange, Iran received relief from sanctions that those powers had imposed, including on its exports of oil and access to the global banking system. Iran was allowed to continue to pursue its nuclear program for civilian purposes, with strict limits on how much uranium it could enrich, the purity it could enrich it to and other measures.

Before the deal, conservative estimates were that Iran was within five to six months of being able to produce a bomb, while some feared it was within two to three months. With the deal safeguards in place, that "breakout time" was estimated to be more than a year.

But in 2018, then-President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. unilaterally out of the deal, criticizing clauses that ease restrictions on Iran in stages — and also the fact that eventually the deal would expire and Iran would be allowed to do whatever it wanted with its nuclear technology. He also said it needed to be renegotiated to address Iran's ballistic missile program and regional influence such as backing militant groups.

The crippling American sanctions that followed took their toll on Iran's economy — but failed to bring Tehran back to the table to broaden the deal as Trump wanted. Instead, Tehran steadily exceeded the limitations set by the deal to pressure the remaining members for economic relief.

In February, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said of Iran's estimated breakout time that "we're down to three or four months and heading in the wrong direction."

SO WHAT'S BEING DISCUSSED NOW?

U.S. President Joe Biden has said that he wants to rejoin the deal, but that Iran must reverse its violations.

The European Union called the talks in the hopes of doing just that. Though an American delegation is present in Vienna, they are not meeting directly with Iran. Instead, diplomats from the other countries shuttle back and forth between the two sides.

Heading into the talks as they started last week, Iran said it was willing to return to full compliance with the deal, but that the U.S. would first have to drop all of the sanctions imposed under Trump.

That is complicated, however. The Trump administration also added sanctions on Iran outside those related to its nuclear program, including over allegations of terrorism, human rights violations and for the country's ballistic missile program.

Still, there are signs of hope. The talks quickly moved past that "who goes first" debate and have already started addressing specifics, said Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi, an Iran scholar at Britain's Royal United Services Institute.

"It's a very good development that there are these working groups actually talking and looking at the nitty gritty," she told The Associated Press.

For Iran to return to the deal, it must revert to enriching uranium to no more than 3.67% purity, stop using advanced centrifuges and drastically reduce how much uranium it enriches, among other things.

Despite the challenges, Tabrizi said the task ahead is not as complicated as the one that faced the group in 2015 since they already have a deal to refer to.

HOW LONG WILL THE TALKS TAKE?

There is no specified timeframe. Diplomats involved say the issues cannot be solved overnight, but are hoping for a resolution in weeks rather than months — for several reasons.

The original deal was agreed after Iranian President Hassan Rouhani, widely seen as a moderate, first took office. Rouhani can't run again in upcoming June elections due to term limits, and he hopes to be able to leave office with Iran again able to sell oil abroad and access international financial markets.

Meanwhile, the U.S. could face a much tougher negotiation if it doesn't get a deal before Rouhani leaves. Hard-liners in Iran reject the nuclear deal, saying it hasn't delivered enough economic relief and is a slippery slope to more pressure on Iran. That doesn't necessarily mean they would end talks if elected, though it would complicate things, said Sanam Vakil, deputy director of the Chatham House policy institute's Middle East and North Africa program.

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There is another reason to move quickly: Iran in February began restricting International Atomic Energy Agency inspections of its nuclear facilities. Instead, it said that it would preserve surveillance footage of the facilities for three months and hand them over to the IAEA if it is granted sanctions relief. Otherwise, Iran said it would erase the recordings.

WHAT OBSTACLES COULD GET IN THE WAY?

Lots, as recent events have shown. Over the weekend, Iran's Natanz nuclear facility was sabotaged. It's not clear what exactly happened, but a blackout damaged centrifuges there.

The attack was widely suspected of being carried out by Israel, which opposes the nuclear deal, though authorities there have not commented.

Iran says Israel explicitly hopes to derail the talks with the sabotage. Rouhani said he still hoped the talks would yield a result — but the attack has complicated matters. For one, Iran responded by announcing it would increase uranium enrichment to 60% purity — far higher than ever before — and install more advanced centrifuges at the Natanz facility.

And in the wake of the developments, both sides have ramped up the rhetoric.

On Wednesday, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all matters of state in the Islamic Republic, dismissed all offers seen so far in Vienna as "not worth looking at." Still, he said he had confidence in his negotiators.

Blinken, meanwhile, said Washington had shown its seriousness by participating in the indirect talks in Vienna, but with Tehran's recent announcements, "it remains to be seen whether Iran shares that seriousness of purpose."

WHO: Europe has surpassed 1 million COVID-19 deaths

GENEVA (AP) — GENEVA — A top official from the World Health Organization says Europe has surpassed 1 million deaths from COVID-19 and the situation remains "serious," with about 1.6 million new cases reported each week in the region.

Overall, a tally by Johns Hopkins University shows nearly 3 million deaths have been linked to COVID-19 worldwide -- with the Americas hardest hit, followed by Europe. The United States, Brazil and Mexico have reported the highest number of deaths, collectively at more than 1.1 million.

Addressing recent concerns about vaccines, Dr. Hans Kluge also said the risk of people suffering blood clots is far higher for people with COVID-19 than people who receive AstraZeneca's coronavirus vaccine.

Speaking to reporters during a visit to Greece, Kluge did point to "early signs that transmission may be slowing across several countries" and cited "declining incidence" among the oldest people.

He said the proportion of COVID-19 deaths among people over 80, who have been prioritized for vaccines, had dropped to nearly 30% — the lowest level in the pandemic.

"For now, the risk of suffering blood clots is much higher for someone with COVID-19 than for someone who has taken the AstraZeneca vaccine," he said.

"Let there be no doubt about it, the AstraZeneca vaccine is effective in reducing COVID-19 hospitalization and preventing deaths," he added, saying WHO recommends its use for all eligible adults.

Blinken in Afghanistan to sell Biden troop withdrawal

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken made an unannounced visit to Afghanistan on Thursday to sell Afghan leaders and a wary public on President Joe Biden's decision to withdraw all American troops from the country and end America's longest-running war.

Blinken was meeting with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, chief executive Abdullah Abdullah, and civic figures, a day after Biden announced that the remaining 2,500 U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan would be coming home by the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks that led to the U.S. invasion.

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His trip also came after NATO immediately followed suit, saying its roughly 7,000 non-American forces in Afghanistan would be departing within a few months, ending the foreign military presence that had been a fact of life for a generation of Afghans already reeling from more than 40 years of conflict.

Blinken sought to reassure the Afghan leadership that the withdrawal did not mean an end to the U.S.-Afghan relationship.

"I wanted to demonstrate with my visit the ongoing to commitment of the United States to the Islamic Republic and the people of Afghanistan," Blinken told Ghani as they met at the presidential palace in Kabul. "The partnership is changing, but the partnership itself is enduring."

"We respect the decision and are adjusting our priorities," Ghani told Blinken, expressing gratitude for the sacrifices of US troops.

Blinken arrived in the Afghan capital from Brussels where he and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin briefed NATO officials on the move and NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg announced the alliance would also be leaving.

The Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahed warned Wednesday that "problems will be compounded," if the U.S. misses a May 1 deadline for withdrawal set during the Trump administration. The insurgent movement has yet to respond to Biden's surprise announcement that the pullout would only start on that date.

Biden, Blinken, Austin and Stoltenberg have all sought to put a brave face on the pullout, maintaining that the U.S.- and NATO-led missions to Afghanistan had achieved their goal of decimating Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network that launched the 9/11 attacks and clearing the country of terrorist elements that could use Afghan soil to plot similar strikes.

However, that argument has faced pushback from some U.S. lawmakers and human rights advocates who say the withdrawal will result in the loss of freedoms that Afghans enjoyed after the Taliban was ousted from power in late 2001.

Later, in a meeting with Abdullah, Blinken repeated his message, saying that "we have a new chapter, but it is a new chapter that we're writing together."

"We are grateful to your people, your country, your administration," Abdullah said.

Despite billions of U.S. dollars in aid, Afghanistan 20 years on has a poverty rate of 52 per cent according to World Bank figures. That means more than half of Afghanistan's 36 million people live on less than \$1.90 a day. Afghanistan is also considered one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman according to the Georgetown Institute for Women Peace and Security.

For many Afghans the past two decades have been disappointing, as corruption has overtaken successive governments and powerful warlords have amassed wealth and loyal militias who are well armed. Many Afghans fear worsening chaos even more once America leaves.

Peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government are at a stalemate but are supposed to resume later this month in Istanbul.

Under an agreement signed between the Trump administration and the Taliban last year, the U.S. was to have completed its military withdrawal by May 1. Although Biden is blowing through that deadline, angering the Taliban leadership, his plan calls for the pull-out to begin on May 1. The NATO withdrawal will commence the same day.

"It is time to end America's longest war," Biden said in his announcement in Washington on Tuesday, but he added that the U.S. will "not conduct a hasty rush to the exit."

"We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result," said Biden, who delivered his address from the White House Treaty Room, the same location where President George W. Bush announced the start of the war. "I am now the fourth United States president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans. Two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility to a fifth."

Biden, along with Blinken and Austin in Brussels, vowed that the U.S. would remain committed to Afghanistan's people and development.

"Bringing our troops home does not mean ending our relationship with Afghanistan or our support for the country," Blinken said. "Our support, our engagement and our determination remain."

Austin also said that the U.S. military, after withdrawing from Afghanistan, will keep counterterrorism

“capabilities” in the region to keep pressure on extremist groups operating within Afghanistan. Asked for details, he declined to elaborate on where those U.S. forces would be positioned or in what numbers.

India’s biggest cities shut down as new virus cases hit 200K

By ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India’s two largest cities imposed stringent restrictions on movement and one planned to use hotels and banquet halls to treat coronavirus patients as new infections in the country shot past 200,000 Thursday amid a devastating surge that is straining a fragile health system.

The soaring cases and deaths come just months after India thought it had seen the worst of the pandemic — and have forced the country to delay exports of vaccines abroad. India is a major producer of COVID-19 shots, and its pivot to focus on domestic demand has weighed heavily on global efforts to end the pandemic.

New Delhi announced stay-at-home orders for the weekend, though essential workers will be able to move about if they have a pass from local authorities. Restaurants, malls, gyms and spas will be shut down. Movie theaters will close on weekends, but can operate on weekdays at a third of their capacity.

Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi’s top elected official, said that despite rise in infections, 5,000 hospital beds are still available in the capital and more capacity is being added. But still, more than a dozen hotels and wedding banquet halls were ordered to be converted into COVID-19 centers where doctors from nearby hospitals will treat the moderately ill.

“The surge is alarming,” said S.K. Sarin, a government health expert in New Delhi.

The moves in the capital came after similar measures were imposed in the worst-hit state of Maharashtra, home to financial capital, Mumbai. The bustle of India’s biggest city ebbed after authorities closed most industries, businesses and public places Wednesday night and put limits on the movement of people for 15 days. Train and plane travel was still allowed, however.

In recent days, the city has seen an exodus of panic-stricken day laborers, hauling backpacks and flocking to overcrowded trains.

Dozens of other towns and cities have also imposed nighttime curfews.

The surge in cases was weighing on hospitals in Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and several other states, where many reported a shortage of oxygen tanks. Imran Sheikh, a resident of the city of Pune in Maharashtra, said he was asked to supply his own oxygen tank for a relative undergoing COVID-19 treatment.

Cremation and burial grounds in the worst-hit areas were finding it difficult to cope with the increasing number of bodies arriving for last rites, according to Indian media reports.

Shahid Jamil, a virologist, said the recent local and state elections with massive political rallies and a major Hindu festival during which hundreds of thousands of devotees bathed in the Ganges river were super-spreader events.

The 200,739 new infections recorded Thursday are about twice the number of daily cases that were recorded during the last peak, in September. The Health Ministry also reported 1,038 deaths from COVID-19 in the past 24 hours, pushing the toll over 173,000.

India’s toll of 14 million cases puts it second behind the United States. It ranks fourth in deaths after the U.S., Brazil and Mexico — though, with nearly 1.4 billion people, it has a much larger population than any of those countries. Experts say even these figures are likely an undercount.

As it struggles with the caseload, India is ramping up its vaccination drive. The Health Ministry said the total vaccinations crossed 114 million with more than 3 million doses administered on Wednesday.

When infections began plummeting in India in September, many concluded the worst had passed. Masks and social distancing were abandoned. When cases began rising again in February, authorities were left scrambling.

Defense expert: Floyd died from heart trouble, not restraint

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By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — George Floyd died of a sudden heart rhythm disturbance as a result of his heart disease, a forensic pathologist testified for the defense at former Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial, contradicting prosecution experts who said Floyd succumbed to a lack of oxygen from the way he was pinned down.

Dr. David Fowler, a former Maryland chief medical examiner who is now with a consulting firm, said Wednesday the fentanyl and methamphetamine in Floyd's system, and possibly carbon monoxide poisoning from auto exhaust, were contributing factors in the 46-year-old Black man's death last May.

"All of those combined to cause Mr. Floyd's death," he said on the second day of the defense case.

Fowler also testified that he would classify the manner of death "undetermined," rather than homicide, as the county's chief medical examiner ruled. He said Floyd's death had too many conflicting factors, some of which could be ruled homicide and some that could be considered accidental.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson is trying to prove that the 19-year Minneapolis police veteran did what he was trained to do and that Floyd died because of his illegal drug use and underlying health problems.

Prosecutors say Floyd died because the white officer's knee was pressed against Floyd's neck or neck area for 9 1/2 minutes as he lay on the pavement on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind him and his face jammed against the ground.

Fowler listed a multitude of factors or potential ones: Floyd's narrowed arteries, his enlarged heart, his high blood pressure, his drug use, the stress of his restraint, the vehicle exhaust, and a tumor or growth in his lower abdomen that can sometimes play a role in high blood pressure by releasing "fight-or-flight" hormones.

Fowler said all of those factors could have acted together to cause Floyd's heart to work harder, suffer an arrhythmia, or abnormal rhythm, and suddenly stop.

Prosecutor Jerry Blackwell launched an aggressive cross-examination, attacking Fowler's findings down the line. He got Fowler to acknowledge that even someone who dies from being deprived of oxygen ultimately dies of an arrhythmia.

He also got Fowler to admit that he didn't take the weight of Chauvin's gear into account when he analyzed the pressure on Floyd's body. Blackwell further accused Fowler of jumping to conclusions and suggesting to the jury that Floyd had a white pill in his mouth in the video of his arrest. Fowler denied saying that.

Blackwell also attacked Fowler's testimony about carbon monoxide, which displaces oxygen in the bloodstream.

In his original testimony, Fowler said carbon monoxide could have contributed to oxygen depletion in Floyd, noting that he was facing the tailpipe end of a squad car. But Floyd's blood was never tested for carbon monoxide.

"You haven't seen any data or test results that showed Mr. Floyd had a single injury from carbon monoxide. Is that true?" Blackwell asked.

"That is correct, because it was never sent," Fowler said.

Blackwell also noted that the squad car was a gas-electric hybrid and that Fowler had no data on how much carbon monoxide was actually released. And he suggested that the witness assumed the engine was running at the time. Fowler said he believed it was.

The prosecutor also got Fowler to agree that it would take four minutes to cause irreversible brain damage if the brain is starved of oxygen, and that insufficient oxygen can cause the heart to stop.

"And if a person dies as a result of low oxygen, that person is also going to die ultimately of a fatal arrhythmia, right?" Blackwell asked.

Fowler responded: "Correct. Every one of us in this room will have a fatal arrhythmia at some point."

Fowler further agreed that Floyd should have been given immediate attention when he went into cardiac arrest because there still was a chance to save him at that point.

A number of medical experts called by prosecutors have said Floyd died from a lack of oxygen because his breathing was constricted by the way he was held down. A cardiology expert rejected the notion that Floyd died of heart problems, saying all indications were that he had "an exceptionally strong heart."

But Fowler said that Chauvin's knee on Floyd was "nowhere close to his airway" and that Floyd's speaking and groaning showed that his airway was still open. He also testified that Chauvin's knee was not applied with enough pressure to cause any bruises or scrapes on Floyd's neck or back.

And he said that Floyd did not complain of vision changes or other symptoms consistent with hypoxia, or insufficient oxygen to the brain, and that he was coherent until shortly before he suddenly stopped moving.

"The bottom line is, moving air in and out, and speaking and making noise is very good evidence that the airway was not closed," Fowler said.

Blackwell ended his cross-examination by getting two questions before the jury: Whether Chauvin's actions played a role in Floyd's death, or whether Floyd's death was coincidental and unrelated. But the defense objected, and Fowler was not permitted to answer.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death after his arrest on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market. The video of Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe as bystanders yelled at Chauvin to get off him triggered worldwide protests, violence and a furious examination of racism and policing in the U.S.

The defense hasn't said whether Chauvin will take the stand.

Ex-Minnesota cop faces hearing in shooting of Black motorist

By SCOTT BAUER and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — A white former police officer faced her first court appearance Thursday in the traffic-stop shooting of a Black motorist that has engulfed a small Minneapolis suburb with four straight days of bitter conflict between protesters and police.

Kim Potter, who quit her job on the Brooklyn Center force two days after Daunte Wright's death, was charged Wednesday with second-degree manslaughter in what her chief said appeared to be a case of confusing her Taser with her handgun.

Many protesters and Wright's family members have rejected that, saying either that they don't believe it or that the incident reflects bias in policing, with Wright stopped for an expired car registration and ending up dead.

Potter, a 26-year veteran, was training another officer at the time of the stop. She was arrested and later freed after posting a \$100,000 bond.

Wright's death came as the broader Minneapolis area nervously awaits the outcome of the trial for Derek Chauvin, the first of four officers charged in George Floyd's death.

"Certain occupations carry an immense responsibility and none more so than a sworn police officer," Imran Ali, Washington County assistant criminal division chief, said in a statement announcing the charge against Potter. "(Potter's) action caused the unlawful killing of Mr. Wright and she must be held accountable."

Intent isn't a necessary component of second-degree manslaughter in Minnesota. The charge — which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison — can be applied in circumstances where a person is suspected of causing a death by "culpable negligence" that creates an unreasonable risk and consciously takes chances to cause a death.

Potter's first court appearance was expected to be via Zoom at 1:30 p.m. Her attorney did not respond to messages from The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Potter, 48, and Police Chief Tim Gannon both resigned Tuesday, a day after the City Council voted to fire the city manager, who controls the police force. Acting City Manager Reggie Edwards said Wednesday that because Potter resigned, she is entitled to "all accrual and benefits that is due." Mayor Mike Elliott has said that the city had been moving toward firing Potter when she submitted her resignation.

Police say Wright was pulled over for expired tags on Sunday, but they sought to arrest him after discovering he had an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

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Body camera video that Gannon released Monday shows Potter approaching Wright as he stands outside of his car as another officer is arresting him.

As Wright struggles with police, Potter shouts, "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" before firing a single shot from a handgun in her right hand.

The criminal complaint noted that Potter holstered her handgun on the right side and her Taser on the left. To remove the Taser — which is yellow and has a black grip — Potter would have to use her left hand, the complaint said.

Wright family attorney Ben Crump said the family appreciates the criminal case, but he again disputed that the shooting was accidental, arguing that an experienced officer knows the difference between a Taser and a handgun.

"Kim Potter executed Daunte for what amounts to no more than a minor traffic infraction and a misdemeanor warrant," he said.

Experts say cases of officers mistakenly firing their gun instead of a Taser are rare, usually less than once a year nationwide.

Transit officer Johannes Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to two years in prison after responding to a fight at a train station in Oakland, California, killing 22-year-old Oscar Grant in 2009. Mehserle testified at trial that he mistakenly pulled his .40-caliber handgun instead of his stun gun.

In Oklahoma, a white volunteer sheriff's deputy for Tulsa County, Robert Bates, was convicted of second-degree manslaughter after accidentally firing his handgun when he meant to deploy his stun gun on Eric Harris, a Black man who was being held down by other officers in 2015.

Potter was an instructor with Brooklyn Center police, according to the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association.

Brooklyn Center had a 10 p.m. curfew Wednesday, the fourth night in a row that the city has taken that action. Elliott, the mayor, urged people to protest without violence, saying "your voices have been heard."

But for the fourth straight night, demonstrators clashed with police stationed behind a chain-link fence protecting the city's police station. Several hundred protesters filled the street in front of the station despite a mix of snow and rain, chanting "Say his name! Daunte Wright!"

With an hour before curfew, police declared the protest and unlawful assembly and ordered people to disperse, citing objects being thrown at officers and attempts to dismantle the fence — the same reason given for a similar order Tuesday.

Shortly before the dispersal order, some protesters threw objects at police, who responded with occasional gas canisters. Some officers could be seen spraying a chemical on protesters who came near the fence surrounding the heavily guarded station, and officers fired sporadic projectiles. Protesters near the fence formed a wall with umbrellas.

Outside Potter's home in Champlin, north of Brooklyn Center, concrete barricades and tall metal fencing had been set up and police cars were in the driveway. After Floyd's death last year, protesters demonstrated several times at the home of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer now on trial in Floyd's death.

Brooklyn Center, a suburb just north of Minneapolis, has seen its racial demographics shift dramatically in recent years. In 2000, more than 70% of the city was white. Today, a majority of residents are Black, Asian or Hispanic.

However, Elliott has acknowledged that the police force has "very few people of color."

US Capitol Police watchdog to testify on Jan. 6 failures

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The top watchdog for the U.S. Capitol Police will testify for the first time on Thursday about the department's broad failures before and during the Jan. 6 insurrection, including missed intelligence predicting a "war" and weapons that were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them.

Capitol Police Inspector General Michael A. Bolton has investigated the force's missteps since the siege, when hundreds of President Donald Trump's supporters broke into the building and sent lawmakers fleeing

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for their lives. In a report obtained by The Associated Press, he paints a dire picture of his agency's ability to respond to future threats and casts serious doubt on whether the force would be able to respond to another large-scale attack.

The Capitol Police have so far refused to publicly release the report — prepared in March and marked as "law enforcement sensitive" — despite congressional pressure. Democratic Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, who heads the House Administration Committee, said last month that she found the report, along with another the department had circulated internally, "detailed and disturbing." Lofgren's committee is holding Thursday's hearing.

Bolton found that the department's deficiencies were — and remain — widespread: Equipment was old and stored badly; officers didn't complete required training; and there was a lack of direction at the Civil Disturbance Unit, which exists to ensure that legislative functions of Congress are not disrupted by civil unrest or protest activity. That was exactly what happened on Jan. 6 when Trump supporters violently pushed past police and broke into the Capitol as Congress counted the Electoral College votes that certified Joe Biden's victory.

The report also focuses on several pieces of missed intelligence, including an FBI memo sent the day before the insurrection that then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund told lawmakers he never saw. The memo warned of threatening online postings by Trump backers, including one comment that Congress "needs to hear glass breaking, doors being kicked in" and blood being spilled.

"Get violent ... Stop calling this a march, or rally, or a protest," read one post recounted in the memo. "Go there ready for war. We get our President or we die. NOTHING else will achieve this goal."

A separate report prepared by the Department of Homeland Security in December alerted the police to messages on a blog where people appeared to be planning for Jan. 6. One online post included a map of tunnels under the Capitol used by lawmakers and staff. "Take note," the message said.

The Capitol Police said in a statement Wednesday that officials had already made some of the improvements recommended in the report, and that the siege was "a pivotal moment" in history that showed the need for "major changes" in how the department operates. Still, they said that they would need more money and staff to make improvements.

"It is important to note that nearly all of the recommendations require significant resources the department does not have," the statement said.

The report also provides new information on the movements of the Capitol Police as officers scrambled to evacuate lawmakers. An appendix to the document details previously unknown conversations among officials as they disagreed on whether National Guard forces were necessary. It quotes an Army official telling Sund, after the insurrectionists had broken in, that "we don't like the optics of the National Guard standing in a line at the Capitol."

The riot has pushed the Capitol Police force toward a state of crisis, with officers working extra shifts and forced overtime to protect the Capitol. The acting chief, Yogananda Pittman, received a vote of no confidence from the union in February, reflecting widespread distrust among the rank and file who were left exposed and injured as the violent mob descended on the building. Morale has plummeted.

The entire force is also grieving the deaths of three of their own. Officer Brian Sicknick collapsed and died after engaging with protesters on Jan. 6. Officer William "Billy" Evans was killed April 2 when he was hit by a car that rammed into a barricade outside the Senate. Evans laid in honor in the Capitol Rotunda on Tuesday.

A third officer, Howard Liebengood, died by suicide in the days after the insurrection.

The report describes in detail how department equipment was substandard, including at least 11 different types of munitions that appeared to have expired. Some equipment hadn't been replaced in more than two decades. Riot shields that shattered upon impact as the officers fended off the violent mob had been improperly stored. Weapons that could have fired tear gas were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them. Other weapons that could have done more to disperse the crowd were never staged before a Trump rally held near the White House, and those who were ordered to get backup supplies to the front

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lines could not make it through the aggressive crowd.

In other cases, weapons weren't used because of "orders from leadership," the document says. Those weapons — called "less lethal" because they are designed to disperse rather than kill — could have helped the police repel the rioters as they moved toward the Capitol after Trump's speech, according to the report.

The timeline attached to the report also gives a more detailed look at Capitol Police movements, commands and conversations as the chaos unfolded. It recounts several instances in which police and SWAT teams rescued individual lawmakers trapped in the Capitol and sheds new light on conversations in which Sund begged for National Guard support. Sund and others, including the head of the D.C. National Guard, have testified that Pentagon officials were concerned about the optics of a military response.

The document quotes Army Staff Secretary Walter Piatt telling Sund and others on a call that "we don't like the optics" of the National Guard at the Capitol and he would recommend not sending them. That was at 2:26 p.m.; rioters had already smashed their way into the building.

The Pentagon eventually did approve the Guard's presence, and Guard members arrived after 5 p.m. While they were waiting, Sund also had a teleconference with Vice President Mike Pence, the timeline shows. Pence was in a secure location in the Capitol because he had overseen the counting of the electoral votes. Some rioters were calling for his hanging because he refused to try and overturn Biden's win.

The AP reported on Saturday that Pence also had a conversation that day with the acting defense secretary, Christopher Miller, in which Pence demanded, "Clear the Capitol."

AP sources: Tool behind crackdown on opioids could expire

By MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration has been slow-walking its work on the extension of a legislative order that would keep in place a sweeping tool that's helped federal agents crack down on drugs chemically similar to fentanyl, three people familiar with the matter told The Associated Press.

In recent weeks, the people said, the White House and Justice Department leaders have, on several occasions, canceled meetings with officials at the Drug Enforcement Administration to discuss the plan around so-called fentanyl analogues, which are generally foreign-made drugs with a very close chemical makeup to the dangerous opioid. The people had direct knowledge of the discussions but were not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity.

The legislation temporarily classifies the synthetic opioids as a Schedule 1 drug under the federal Controlled Substances Act, making it easier for prosecutors to build cases against traffickers. The emergency authority, initially authorized in 2018, is set to expire next month and requires Congress to reauthorize it.

The Biden administration will need to either quickly move forward to lobby Congress to pass another extension, propose a permanent legislative solution that could quickly pass the House and the Senate or put a plan in place to prosecute cases involving the synthetic opioids if the temporary authorization expires.

"The Biden-Harris Administration is committed to avoiding expiration of this legislation, and we have communicated that clearly to both parties in Congress," White House spokesman Andrew Bates said.

There is growing concern from lawmakers and law enforcement officials, who fear that failing to act could lead to a surge in opioid deaths, and the rapidly approaching deadline makes it nearly impossible to reauthorize it in time. The U.S. is in the midst of an opioid crisis.

But saying a quick yes isn't quite so simple. The situation is politically thorny and has the potential to anger both Democrats and Republicans. Most of the drugs are coming in from China, and if President Joe Biden were to skip the reauthorization it could create foreign policy issues, but there are concerns from some in the administration over mandatory minimum sentences attached to the order that have the potential to anger reformists.

The law triggers some mandatory penalties for possessing large quantities of fentanyl or fentanyl analogues, and it's been a hold-up, the people said. For example, possessing 100 grams (3.5 ounces) of a fentanyl analogue triggers a 10-year mandatory minimum penalty; the same penalty would apply for possessing 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of heroin.

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But in the last three years, only eight prosecutions would have even qualified for mandatory minimum sentences, according to the people.

The rate at which federal law enforcement encounters fentanyl analogues has dropped drastically in the last few years. Law enforcement officials say that's in part because there is little incentive for drug traffickers to change the chemical compound given that the law had categorized both fentanyl and analogues in the same class. But they worry it will skyrocket if the order isn't extended.

The analogues are powerful synthetic opioids that can be significantly more potent than morphine or heroin.

The number of deaths from fentanyl-related substances is unknown, but the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that there were more than 50,000 deaths involving all synthetic opioids in the 12-month period ending July 2020.

The Justice Department during President Donald Trump's administration lobbied to make the ban permanent, putting fentanyl analogues in the same legal category as heroin and cocaine forever. But Congress only voted to extend the temporary ban.

Justice officials said they were seeking a seven-month extension while working on a more permanent solution and were taking the May 6 deadline seriously. But no one has submitted legislation sponsoring that extension in Congress.

"We will work with Congress to seek a clean, seven-month extension to prevent this important law enforcement tool from lapsing while we address legitimate concerns related to mandatory minimums and researcher access to these substances," the Justice Department said in a statement.

The U.S. topped 50,000 opioid-related overdose deaths for the first time in 2019, and several states last year reported a record pace of overdose deaths due to all drugs. Nearly 74,000 overdose deaths were counted from April 2019 to March 2020, up from the 68,000 reported for the comparable period one year earlier.

The Justice Department took the unusual step of suing Walmart over the opioid crisis, accusing it of fueling the crisis by pressuring its pharmacies to fill even potentially suspicious prescriptions for the powerful painkillers. Walmart Inc., which is based in Bentonville, Arkansas, and operates more than 5,000 pharmacies around the country, said the lawsuit "invents a legal theory that unlawfully forces pharmacists to come between patients and their doctors, and is riddled with factual inaccuracies and cherry-picked documents taken out of context."

Biologists defy Cyprus' ethnic divide to protect environment

By MENELAOS HADJICOSTIS Associated Press

NICOSIA, Cyprus (AP) — There's something regal in the sprightly step and curious gaze of the long-horn sheep that roam the hills near Varisia, an abandoned village inside a U.N. buffer zone that cuts across ethnically divided Cyprus.

The endangered Mouflon sheep that's endemic to the eastern Mediterranean island nation is one of many rare plant and animal species that have flourished in this no-man's land, which stretches for 120 miles (180 kilometers) and divides the island's breakaway north from its internationally recognized south.

Devoid of human habitation since a 1974 war that spawned the country's ethnic cleave, the buffer zone has become an unofficial wildlife reserve. Its residents include the threatened Egyptian fruit bat, the bee orchid and the Eurasian Thick-knee, a dwindling species of shorebird also known as a stone-curlew. All have multiplied largely unperturbed.

This unlikely refuge has been embraced by two environmental scientists, one Greek Cypriot and one Turkish Cypriot, as an open-air laboratory where complex politics and physical divisions can be put aside to focus on the overriding concern of protecting the parched country's fragile ecosystem.

Greek Cypriot Iris Charalambidou and Turkish Cypriot Salih Gucl, both biologists, headed a pioneering survey in 2007 that explored the thriving flora and fauna inside the buffer zone.

Among the survey's findings were that some areas in the no-man's land were important for the birds

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that use Cyprus as a stopover during spring and autumn migration, like buzzards, ospreys and harriers, as well as the Northern lapwing whose numbers in Europe have been in decline. Another important finding was that of the Cyprus spiny mouse, a rare endemic species not frequently found elsewhere on the island.

The survey garnered international accolades and provided impetus to a budding ecological consciousness-raising on the island. It also underscored the need for cooperation for the sake of what all Cypriots share — their environment.

Located in the island's remote northwest, Varisia has offered the scientists a deeper understanding of nature's dynamics in a formerly inhabited area. Abandoned in the wake of a 1974 Turkish invasion prompted by coup aimed at union with Greece, the village's empty crumbling homes stand as a silent witness to the conflict. But for Gucel, the area speaks volumes about how to "be more sensitive toward the environment and to have a common implementation plan and laws" to protect the entire island's ecosystem.

The scientists' efforts to engage experts from both sides of the political divide on environmental protection is an ongoing project. Earlier this year, Gucel became the co-head of the Environmental Committee, a body to promote island-wide idea-sharing on environmental issues.

Charalambidou serves on the board of the Cyprus Environmental Stakeholder Forum — a group of scientists seeking "to tackle environmental issues in Cyprus as one united island." She said the forum is talking with the U.N. peacekeeping force in Cyprus to create a communications campaign.

"In order to adequately protect and conserve the environment on such a small island, it is important to cooperate and manage the plant, animal and other species, as well as habitats and ecosystems, as a common resource," said Charalambidou.

U.N. peacekeeping force spokesman Aleem Siddique said there's been a groundswell of interest in environmental issues, especially among young people who come together online to share ideas on how to tackle environmental challenges.

"We see a lot of interest from people on both sides of the island to bridge the divide, work together, overcome the mistrust for the common good of building a more environmentally friendly Cyprus," Siddique said..

If Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot leaders overcome deep political differences and forge a peace accord reunifying the country, the buffer zone that makes up 3% of Cyprus' total land mass will revert back to human use as people reclaim their property.

In that scenario, both Charalambidou and Gucel say any decisions about environmental protection within the buffer zone should be carefully thought out in full collaboration with local communities.

For instance, safeguarding fragile areas inside the buffer zone could be part of an overall plan to develop ecotourism and agrotourism, producing and marketing high-grade food products from the area.

"What is needed is vision and the passion to come up with sustainable solutions," said Charalambidou.

Despite progress, there's still a long way to go in raising environmental awareness among all Cypriots, the scientists say. Illegal dumping and poaching are still a problem within the buffer zone, and a bicomunal committee on the environment that was part of peace accord confidence measures remains dormant.

"While we should be proud that our island has a wealth of unique and important species ... instead we seem to be content to allow many species and populations disappear quietly into oblivion," said Charalambidou.

US troop pullout will leave behind an uncertain Afghanistan

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — The Biden administration's surprise announcement of an unconditional troop withdrawal from Afghanistan by Sept. 11 appears to strip the Taliban and the Afghan government of considerable leverage and could ramp up pressure on them to reach a peace deal.

The Taliban and Afghan government can no longer hold the U.S. hostage — the Taliban with escalating violence and the Afghan president with dragging his feet on a power-sharing deal with the insurgents that doesn't include him as president — because Washington made it clear that U.S. troops are leaving,

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no matter what.

Still, there are growing fears that Afghanistan will collapse into worsening chaos, brutal civil war, or even a takeover by the Taliban once the Americans are gone — opening a new chapter in the constant war that has lasted for decades.

Already, violence and seemingly random attacks on civilians have surged since the Trump administration reached a deal with the Taliban in February 2020 that had committed Washington to withdraw by May 1. More than 1,700 civilians were killed or wounded in attacks the first three months of this year, up 23% from the same period last year, according to the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

On Wednesday, the Biden administration set a new timetable. It said it would begin pulling out its remaining 3,500 troops on May 1 and complete the pullout at the latest by Sept. 11 — the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaida terror attack on the U.S. that had triggered the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. NATO announced it would follow the same timetable for withdrawing nearly 10,000 troops.

In leaving, Washington has calculated that it can manage its chief security interest — ensuring Afghanistan doesn't become a base for terror attacks on the United States — from a distance.

Still, it is hoping to leave a country with a chance at peace. The U.S. is pressing the Taliban and the Afghan government to reach a peace agreement during an April 24-May 4 conference in Turkey.

At the moment, it's not even sure the Taliban will attend.

In response to the new withdrawal timeline, the Taliban said they won't attend any conference on Afghanistan's future while foreign forces are still in the country. A spokesman, Zabihullah Mujahed, said that if the original May 1 deadline is not met, "problems will be compounded." Still, he did not explicitly threaten a resumption of Taliban attacks on U.S. troops.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken upped the pressure with a phone call Wednesday to Pakistan's powerful Army Chief of Staff Javed Qamar Bajwa, presumably seeking help in getting the Taliban to the Turkey conference.

With their leadership headquartered in Pakistan, the Taliban ignore Islamabad at their own peril. Until now Pakistan has been key to getting the insurgent militia to earlier rounds of talks.

The Pakistani army said afterwards that Pakistan was behind an "Afghan-owned and Afghan-led" peace process, a seeming nod to the upcoming Turkey conference. It also said the two discussed "further enhanced" relations between their countries — perhaps a sign Blinken tied future U.S.-Pakistani relations on Islamabad's help.

The Taliban control around half of Afghanistan. But they also have much to lose if they walk away from the peace process, particularly a chance at international recognition. The group has been courting world powers since 2013 when they set up their political office in the Qatari capital Doha.

The U.S. has warned that the Taliban won't get that recognition if they are not part of a new government. The Turkey conference, jointly convened by the United Nations, lends international support to that warning.

The bet is that the Taliban won't want to rule as a pariah, as they did from 1996 until their overthrow by the U.S.-led coalition in 2001. They had no money to feed their people, unemployment was rampant and drought and poverty devastated farmers. Their only source of income in the final years was from al-Qaida and its wealthy Saudi leader at the time, Osama bin Laden.

"If the Taliban wants recognition, if they want international support ... that can't happen" if they press war further, Blinken said on Meet The Press on Sunday. "We'll see how the parties calculate their interest."

Torek Farhadi, a former Afghan government adviser, said he doesn't expect the insurgents to attend in Turkey.

Instead, he said, they are likely to negotiate with local leaders around Afghanistan and wait for the Americans to leave, further weakening and isolating President Ashraf Ghani. The Taliban have refused to even sit across the table from him.

Responding to the U.S. strategy shift, Ghani pledged to pursue peace, without elaborating. He tweeted late Wednesday that he had spoken with President Biden and "we will work with our U.S. partners to ensure a smooth transition."

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Previously, Ghani had floated an alternative peace plan that calls for him to head an interim government until fresh elections can be held. Rejected by the Taliban, it's seen by his political opponents as an attempt to cling to power.

Ghani's government has been denounced for runaway corruption and divisive politics. He has embraced warlords he once shunned, like Uzbek powerhouse Rashid Dostum, accused of war crimes.

The many warlords who hold sway in Kabul have amassed considerable wealth in the last 20 years and boast loyal militias with well-equipped arsenals. Most Afghans say the U.S. and NATO troop presence has kept feuding warlords apart and fear that without it the country will collapse back into the brutal infighting that raged from 1992-1996, giving rise to the Taliban.

The previous Trump deal with the Taliban had imposed conditions. The big one was that the Taliban break with their longtime ally, al-Qaida, and stand against other militants before U.S. troops would withdraw.

A senior Taliban official earlier told The Associated Press that the group last month ordered the remnants of al-Qaida and other militants out of the country and told its own fighters not to associate with foreign fighters.

Asfandyar Mir, at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University, said the order against foreign fighters was a good first step. But he noted it only confirms the Taliban's use of foreign fighters, which it long denied — even as publications affiliated to the Taliban and al-Qaida touted al-Qaida's oath of loyalty to the Taliban leader, Hibatullah Akunzada.

Mir also pointed to the evidence of al-Qaida operations even in recent years in areas under Taliban control.

Controlling militant groups will be even harder if Afghanistan tumbles into chaos.

Michael Kugelman, deputy director of the Asia Program at the U.S.-based Wilson Center said that it's "hard to imagine any scenario under which peace would break out post-Sept. 11 in Afghanistan."

"The best hope is that the peace process won't be dead," he said.

Colorful coffins lighten mood at New Zealand funerals

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — When the pallbearers brought Phil McLean's coffin into the chapel, there were gasps before a wave of laughter rippled through the hundreds of mourners.

The coffin was a giant cream donut.

"It overshadowed the sadness and the hard times in the last few weeks," said his widow, Debra. "The final memory in everyone's mind was of that donut, and Phil's sense of humor."

The donut was the latest creation by Phil's cousin Ross Hall, who runs a business in Auckland, New Zealand, called Dying Art, which custom builds colorful coffins.

Other creations by Hall include a sailboat, a firetruck, a chocolate bar and Lego blocks. There have been glittering coffins covered in fake jewels, a casket inspired by the movie "The Matrix," and plenty of coffins depicting people's favorite beaches and holiday spots.

"There are people who are happy with a brown mahogany box and that's great," said Hall. "But if they want to shout it out, I'm here to do it for them."

The idea first came to Hall about 15 years ago when he was writing a will and contemplating his own death.

"How do I want to go out?" he thought to himself, deciding it wouldn't be like everyone else. "So I put in my will that I want a red box with flames on it."

Six months later, Hall, whose other business is a signage and graphics company, decided to get serious. He approached a few funeral directors who looked at him with interest and skepticism. But over time, the idea took hold.

Hall begins with special-made blank coffins and uses fiberboard and plywood to add details. A latex digital printer is used for the designs. Some orders are particularly complex, like the sailboat, which included a keel and rudder, cabin, sails, even metal railings and pulleys.

Depending on the design, the coffins retail for between about 3,000 and 7,500 New Zealand dollars

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(\$2,100 and \$5,400).

Hall said the tone of funerals has changed markedly over recent years.

"People now think it's a celebration of life rather than a mourning of death," he said. And they've been willing to throw out stuffy conventions in favor of getting something unique.

But, a donut?

Debra McLean said she and her late husband, who was 68 when he died in February, used to tour the country in their motorhome and Phil loved comparing cream donuts in every small town, considering himself something of a connoisseur.

He considered a good donut one that was crunchy on the outside, airy in the middle, and definitely made with fresh cream.

After Phil was diagnosed with bowel cancer, he had time to think about his funeral and, along with his wife and cousin, came up with the idea for the donut coffin. Debra said they even had 150 donuts delivered to the funeral in Tauranga from Phil's favorite bakery in Whitianga, more than 160 kilometers (100 miles) away.

Hall said his coffins are biodegradable and are usually buried or cremated along with the deceased. The only one he's ever gotten back is his cousin's, he said, because he used polystyrene and shaping foam, which is not environmentally friendly.

Phil was switched to a plain coffin for his cremation and Hall said he'll keep the donut coffin forever. For now, it remains in the back of his white 1991 Cadillac hearse.

As for his own funeral? Hall said he's changed his mind about those red flames. He's emailed his kids saying he wants to be buried in a clear coffin wearing nothing but a leopard-pattern G-string.

"The kids say they're not going," he says with a laugh.

Bangkok nightlife clusters expose Thailand's virus stumbles

By BUSABA SIVASOMBOON and GRANT PECK Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — When Thailand's transport minister was recently diagnosed with COVID-19, it was Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha who got a headache.

Prayuth was not particularly lauded for his leadership last year against the coronavirus, but for much of 2020 Thailand fought the disease to a standstill, with low infection and death rates envied by more developed countries.

Now, an outbreak at nightspots in the capital Bangkok has sent new infections surging, suggesting the country may have been lulled into a false sense of security before mass vaccinations begin.

On Thursday, 1,543 new cases were confirmed, taking the total to 37,453, with 97 deaths. While that is much better than most other countries, Thailand's cases in the first three months of this year were triple what the country had all of last year and its daily numbers are rising fast.

The new outbreak has spread among mostly young, affluent and mobile Thais, and some of the newly infected had the more contagious variant first identified in the U.K.

The government says Transport Minister Saksayam Chidchob caught the virus from an aide who patronized some of the infectious nightspots, including a club described by Thai media as a glorified strip joint that was blatantly ignoring social distancing precautions. That has added to widespread skepticism over the government's handling of the latest crisis.

Thailand only recently began easing strict border controls that for the past year have kept out most travelers, especially all-important tourists whose spending supports millions of jobs. The restrictions have included mandatory testing and 14-day quarantines for almost all arrivals.

Officials had appeared reluctant to impose sweeping restrictions like curfews, bans on serving alcohol and closures of bars, parks and shopping malls that were the rule this time last year, when Songkran Thai New Year holidays were cancelled.

This week, the holiday went ahead, and as many as a million Thais headed out to visit family or crowded onto beaches, even as some hospitals halted COVID-19 testing due to a rush by thousands of people

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worried they had been exposed or needing proof they were virus-free. Some hospitals claimed to have run out of testing supplies, but the government said the real reason was an unintended consequence of a well-meaning regulation — they are required to admit infected patients right away, but believed they lacked enough beds to accommodate them.

Officials pivoted to allow referrals, and thousands of beds have filled up at field hospitals set up to house those with confirmed infections, following the government's protocol of isolating all known patients. Online photos show exhausted medical staff in protective gear, slumped over sleeping on their desks and chairs.

A worst case scenario from the Department of Disease Control's epidemiology division calculated that without safety measures, the country could see a maximum of 28,678 daily cases.

"The situation is still worrisome; more measures are to come," Dr. Opas Karnkavinpong, the department's director-general, warned Tuesday.

Gen. Natthapon Nakpanich, operations chief for the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration, elaborated Wednesday, saying the government was considering instituting lockdowns in several areas after the holiday. They include Bangkok and its surrounding provinces, Prachuab Khiri Khan to the south, where the resort town of Hua Hin is, the northern city of Chiang Mai, and parts of the Eastern Seaboard, where another popular holiday destination, Pattaya, is located.

On Tuesday, the government raised eyebrows by posting photos of soldiers spraying forest areas along the border, even though experts say the greatest virus risk is airborne.

The latest crisis has made glaringly apparent an Achilles heel in Thailand's strategy, a failure to secure enough doses this year to inoculate a targeted 70% of the population believed necessary to achieve herd immunity.

So far, under 1% of 69 million Thais have been vaccinated, a smaller proportion than in many of its Southeast Asian neighbors.

Thailand's early success in containing the virus was remarkable given the millions of international travelers, especially from China, that it usually hosts each year. The first case outside China was a Chinese traveler whose fever was detected at Bangkok's airport.

It's unclear why Thailand and several other Southeast Asian nations succeeded in constraining the pandemic for much of last year. Thailand's extensive and experienced public health system played a large role, and Prayuth's government generally deferred to medical experts' advice.

But the nation has paid a heavy price for its aggressive effort to control outbreaks: The economy contracted 6.1% in 2020 and the resurgence of cases makes a tourism recovery unlikely anytime soon. Household debt rose 42% last year as incomes fell or stalled, to 87% of the country's GDP.

And Thailand's lucky streak faded late last year, when a virus cluster was found among migrant workers working in factories and seafood markets and living in crowded dormitories. Severe restrictions and a massive testing campaign near the outbreak's epicenter seemed to contain it after several weeks.

"We don't want to lock down the entire country, because we know what the problems are, so can you all lock down yourselves?" Prayuth said at the time. "This is up to everyone, if you don't want to get infected just stay home for 14 to 15 days."

That flare-up drew attention to the government's vaccination plans just as the U.S. and European countries began doubling down on their inoculations.

In early January, Prayuth said Thailand was trying to secure 63 million doses, which at two doses per person would cover less than half its population. Local production of the AstraZeneca vaccine is expected to begin in June.

Complaints emerged that well-connected companies might profit unfairly from government contracts to produce and supply vaccines, allegations denied by the government and the companies involved. Prayuth's political opponents piled on, complaining about mismanagement, a lack of transparency and a failure to diversify beyond the AstraZeneca and Chinese Sinovac vaccines.

Registration for vaccines for the general public is set to begin in early May, with inoculations to start later in the month. So far, inoculations have mostly gone to medical workers, areas considered at particularly high risk, and communities that may be opened early as so-called bubbles where foreign tourists who

have been vaccinated may be allowed to stay without undergoing quarantine.

On Wednesday, 1,681 people got their first shot and 388 their second jabs. So far, only 73,949 people have been fully vaccinated.

EXPLAINER: Charmed by Madoff, SEC later tightened its rules

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Until Bernie Madoff's scheme came crashing down and the biggest Ponzi scheme in Wall Street's history came to light, he appeared as a charming wizard with a Midas touch. His investment advisory business attracted a devoted legion of clients, including A-list celebrities, rewarding them with steady returns that defied market fluctuations.

But he not only conned investors, he seduced regulators. The Securities and Exchange Commission esteemed him as a Nasdaq Stock Market chairman and prominent Wall Street figure — and failed to detect his fraudulent scheme despite receiving warnings and credible complaints over 10 years. After it was exposed in December 2008, a shaken SEC scrambled to put controls in place to prevent such episodes from recurring and uncover them early.

Madoff was sentenced to 150 years in jail for his crimes. He died behind bars Wednesday at age 82.

A look at federal regulators' actions with regard to Madoff before his conduct became publicly known and afterward with an eye to prevention:

WHAT WAS MADOFF'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SEC?

For years, Madoff was a bright star in the SEC's constellation, a legendary investment manager with celebrity clients, as well as multitudes of ordinary investors. He was chairman of the Nasdaq Stock Market in 1990, 1991 and 1993. He sat on SEC advisory committees.

All the while, the financier was running a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme: the classic swindle in which early investors are paid with later investors' money rather than actual profits on their investments. By all accounts, Madoff's scam wasn't terribly sophisticated or high-tech, utilizing phony account statements sent to clients, for example. But it wiped out thousands of people's life savings.

In Madoff's words in 2009, it seemed "it never entered the SEC's mind that it was a Ponzi scheme." Agency examiners "never asked" for basic records to corroborate his operations, he said in a prison interview with the SEC inspector general.

DID THE RELATIONSHIP CAUSE THE SEC TO IGNORE MADOFF'S CONDUCT?

That was the question posed in Washington after Madoff was arrested and confessed in December 2008, when the SEC already was dealing with the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression that struck in the previous fall. Top SEC officials were hauled before Congress. Lawmakers from both parties said Madoff's fraud exposed deep, systemic problems at the SEC. The agency's enforcement and inspections staff had received credible complaints about Madoff, including specific red flags on his operations from financial analyst whistleblower Harry Markopolos and his investigators, which were conveyed to SEC staff in Boston, New York and Washington headquarters.

Criticism mounted from lawmakers and investor advocates that Wall Street and regulators in Washington had grown too close. Some called for a shakeup of the SEC.

A 2009 report by the inspector general detailed how SEC investigations of Madoff were bungled, with disputes among inspection staffers over the findings, lack of communication among SEC officials in various cities and repeated failures to act on legitimate complaints from outside the agency.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER REGULATORS?

An internal review by the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, the securities industry's regulator, found a breakdown on the part of the organization in the Madoff case. Like the SEC, FINRA made periodic examinations of Madoff's brokerage operation, which functioned separately from his secretive investment

business, and did not catch wind of Madoff's fraud.

WHAT PREVENTIVE ACTION AGAINST FUTURE FRAUDS DID THE SEC TAKE?

Under public pressure, the SEC took a series of actions and made rule changes, starting in 2009. The most significant were changes in how the agency carries out inspections of investment advisers and brokerage firms. It also took steps aimed at providing better protection of customers' assets held by brokerages and advisers against theft and abuse. Investment advisers were pushed toward putting clients' assets in the custody of an independent firm, something Madoff hadn't done. Also, the SEC and the stock exchanges were given greater oversight of how brokerages manage custody of their clients' funds.

Inspection practices were revised to focus more closely on assessing potential risk to investors, and financial firms were required to submit more information.

In addition, the agency put in a centralized electronic system for taking tips and complaints to help detect fraud. And the enforcement division was reorganized to emphasize more significant cases; specialized units were created, including one for asset management. Industry experts were hired to work with staff attorneys and accountants.

HOW EFFECTIVE WERE THE CHANGES?

"The examinations and inspection systems and programs have all been enhanced," says James Fanto, a professor at Brooklyn Law School who specializes in banking and securities law. "Moreover, the specific problem in the Madoff case — verifying what an adviser does with the assets — was specifically addressed, and we have had few problems at the level of Madoff since then."

Even in Madoff's case, the SEC likely would have found the problems if staff had done a thorough inspection, Fanto noted. "Things have improved but SEC examiners run the risk of missing problems in successful firms because the success deters them from actually seeing the problems before them," he said.

Homeless Americans finally getting a chance at COVID-19 shot

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Homeless Americans who have been left off priority lists for coronavirus vaccinations — or even bumped aside as states shifted eligibility to older age groups — are finally getting their shots as vaccine supplies increase.

While the U.S. government has only incomplete data on infections among homeless people, it's clear that crowded, unsanitary conditions at shelters and underlying poor health increase the danger of COVID-19 infections, severe complications and death.

COVID-19 outbreaks have been documented at homeless shelters in cities such as Boston, San Francisco and Seattle. Vaccinating in vulnerable areas will be a key to achieving herd immunity, the goal of building a barrier of protected people to stop uncontrolled spread.

"It was important for me to protect myself and the health and welfare of others," said Cidney Oliver, 39, who got her first dose of Moderna vaccine April 7 at the Seattle YWCA shelter where she sleeps.

Wanona Thibodeaux-Lee, 43, has lived in several Seattle shelters while trying to get back on her feet, most recently at WHEEL, a 26-bed women's shelter in a church basement. On April 5, she received the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

"I feel like I can move around without anyone getting me sick," she said. "It's good to know that I don't have to go back for a second one."

The single-shot vaccine is preferred by many clinics who serve homeless people and by homeless people themselves, said Bobby Watts, CEO of the National Health Care for the Homeless Council.

The U.S. government on Tuesday recommended a "pause" in using the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to investigate reports of rare but potentially dangerous blood clots. It is a temporary setback in the drive to vaccinate homeless people, forcing organizers this week to switch to other vaccines or postpone events.

Watts said he's worried the pause will lead to more vaccine hesitancy.

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"Assuming it is ultimately found to be safe and effective, it will be harder to convince people — especially people experiencing homelessness — that it is safe," Watts said.

Seattle, with the third-largest homeless population in the U.S., has seen at least 1,400 of them test positive for COVID-19 and 22 die since the pandemic began. More than 100 shelters and other homeless service sites have had outbreaks. Seattle's health department will switch to the Moderna vaccine for its planned events targeting homeless people.

Homeless people are at greater risk of being infected and greater risk of hospitalization and death than the average person, Watts said. Shorter lifespans — chronic homelessness can take 20 to 30 years off a person's life — should have qualified them for vaccination priority much earlier, Watts said.

Instead, political pressure to vaccinate older adults moved them to the back of the line. Clinics serving them, Watts said, "were put in the unreasonable position of saying, 'I know all of you are at high risk, but I can vaccinate only the few or you who are over age 70.'"

Now, that's changing. With eligibility opening widely, homeless service providers are mobilizing to get vaccine to shelters and encampments.

In Nashville, 19 organizations have set a goal of bringing the vaccine to all homeless people by Memorial Day. In Salt Lake City, vaccinators offer incentives such as \$5 grocery store gift cards or donated pizza. The Los Angeles Fire Department is delivering vaccine to the tent cities of Skid Row, MacArthur Park and other neighborhoods.

"Looking people in their eyes, telling them the truth about the vaccine ... I love what I do every day," said Melanie McConaughy who works for Community Organized Relief Effort, a nonprofit that's helping Los Angeles firefighters at mobile vaccine events. Her job is to answer questions and build trust.

She described a homeless woman, covered in tattoos, who at first said she didn't want the shot because she didn't like needles. Pointing to her tattoos, "we said, 'How can you say you're afraid of needles?' She said, 'You're right, you're right. I'm going to go tell my brother. He's over there.'" Both siblings got vaccinated that day.

Vaccinating homeless people is good for the health of everyone, said Los Angeles Deputy Mayor Jose "Che" Ramirez.

"We're all in it together. The more shots in arms the better," Ramirez said. "The more folks who are vaccinated, the stronger we are in building herd immunity and the faster we can reopen our city and engage with each other like we were before."

Giving outreach workers a unified message was important in Nashville, where organizers put together a one-page fact sheet about the vaccines in English and Spanish.

"Let's please all sing off the same song sheet," said Brian Haile, CEO of Neighborhood Health in Nashville. "This is Music City, so we have a vaccine song sheet."

All homeless adults in Washington, D.C., became eligible for the vaccine in January, long before most states and before the J&J vaccine was available. The city has fully vaccinated more than 1,300 by giving out yellow bracelets printed with second-dose appointment dates as reminders.

The district also trained key shelter residents "so they could be ambassadors for the vaccine and talk about it to their peers," said Dr. Catherine Crosland of Unity Health Care, a clinic system serving homeless people.

Walk-up vaccine events are crucial for a population with limited access to cars, cellphones or Wi-Fi, organizers say.

In Salt Lake City, the health department and a homeless clinic have given more than 1,000 doses of vaccine to homeless people. Pizza, candy bars, "whatever we can get donated," helps keep people waiting if there's a line, said Janida Emerson, CEO of Fourth Street Clinic.

"In our area, there are 10,000 people experiencing homelessness. We've got a ways go to. It's a start," Emerson said.

Even before the pandemic, homelessness had been rising across the U.S., with the biggest increases seen outside the shelter system — those people living on sidewalks, under bridges and in abandoned buildings.

The pandemic's economic downturn uprooted people from their homes despite a moratorium on evic-

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tions. Cities closed crowded shelters to prevent infection, offering rooms in motels, but some shelter users who didn't want to move to unfamiliar neighborhoods joined those on the streets.

How much the pandemic is further increasing the number of homeless Americans isn't entirely clear. Many cities, under stay-at-home orders, canceled their annual homeless counts this year.

In January 2020, a one-night tally showed 580,000 homeless people in the United States. Advocates say that total should be multiplied by three to get the true scope of Americans using shelters and living on the streets.

In Seattle, it will take at least two months to get the vaccine to an estimated 575 housing, shelter and service sites, 85 unsanctioned encampments and nine youth service sites.

For Oliver, the pandemic was the least of her worries when she arrived in Seattle last month without family, friends or a job.

"Abuse, unemployment, losing everything," Oliver said. "My life, it wasn't that great. I was experiencing things prior to COVID that prepared me to deal with this pandemic."

She says Seattle has been a good move so far. She found a job and is learning about housing options from the staff at Angeline's, the YWCA facility where she keeps her top bunk neatly made.

She sums up her philosophy: "You wake up and you're still living. You're breathing, you got two legs, you got two feet. Be thankful."

Months after hack, US poised to announce sanctions on Russia

By AAMER MADHANI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is preparing to announce sanctions in response to a massive Russian hacking campaign that breached vital federal agencies, as well as for election interference, a senior administration official said.

The sanctions, foreshadowed for weeks by the administration, would represent the first retaliatory action announced against the Kremlin for last year's hack, familiarly known as the SolarWinds breach. In that intrusion, Russian hackers are believed to have infected widely used software with malicious code, enabling them to access the networks of at least nine agencies in what U.S. officials believe was an intelligence gathering operation aimed at mining government secrets.

Besides that hack, U.S. officials last month alleged that Russian President Vladimir Putin authorized influence operations to help Donald Trump in his unsuccessful bid for reelection as president, though there's no evidence Russia or anyone else changed votes or manipulated the outcome.

The measures are to be announced Thursday, according to the official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter by name and spoke on condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately clear what, if any, other actions might be planned. Officials had previously said they expected to take actions both seen and unseen.

The sanctions, presumably intended to send a clear retributive message to Russia and to deter similar acts in the future, come amid an already tense relationship between the U.S. and Russia.

President Joe Biden told Putin this week in their second call to "de-escalate tensions" following a Russian military buildup on Ukraine's border, and said the U.S. would "act firmly in defense of its national interests" regarding Russian intrusions and election interference.

In a television interview last month, Biden replied "I do" when asked if he thought Putin was a "killer." He said the days of the U.S. "rolling over" to Putin were done. Putin later recalled his ambassador to the U.S. and pointed at the U.S. history of slavery and slaughtering Native Americans and the atomic bombing of Japan in World War II.

It remained unclear whether the U.S. actions would actually result in changed behavior, especially since past measures by the U.S. have failed to bring an end to Russian hacking. The Obama administration expelled diplomats from the U.S. in 2016 in response to interference in that year's presidential election. And though Trump was often reluctant to criticize Putin, his administration also expelled diplomats in 2018 for Russia's alleged poisoning of an ex-intelligence officer in Britain.

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U.S. officials are still grappling with the aftereffects of the SolarWinds intrusion, which affected agencies including the Treasury, Justice, Energy and Homeland Security departments, and are still assessing what information may have been stolen. The breach exposed vulnerabilities in the supply chain as well as weaknesses in the federal government's own cyber defenses.

The actions would represent the second major round of sanctions imposed by the Biden administration against Russia. Last month, the U.S. sanctioned seven mid-level and senior Russian officials, along with more than a dozen government entities, over a nearly fatal nerve-agent attack on opposition leader Alexei Navalny and his subsequent jailing.

Analysis: Biden takes a risk pulling troops from Afghanistan

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

BRUSSELS (AP) — At its start, America's war in Afghanistan was about retribution for 9/11. Then it was about shoring up a weak government and its weak army so that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida could never again threaten the United States.

Now it's about over. With bin Laden long since dead and the United States not suffering another major attack, President Joe Biden is promising to end America's longest war and move on to what he believes are bigger, more consequential challenges posed by a resurgent Russia and a rising China.

Even so, by withdrawing the remaining few thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Biden is taking a calculated risk that extremists in Afghanistan can be countered by U.S. and partner forces elsewhere in the region — and that he won't become the president who underestimated the resilience and reach of extremists who still aim to attack the United States.

CIA Director William Burns told Congress on Wednesday the U.S. unavoidably will lose some intelligence leverage against the extremist threat, although he suggested the losses would be manageable.

"The U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact," Burns said. "It is also a fact, however, that after withdrawal, whenever that time comes, the CIA and all of our partners in the U.S. government will retain a suite of capabilities, some of it remaining in place, some of them that we will generate, that can help us to anticipate and contest any rebuilding effort."

There were 2,500 to 3,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan when Biden took office, the smallest number since early in the war. The number peaked at 100,000 during President Barack Obama's first term. As U.S. war casualties have declined, so has the American public's attention. The war was barely mentioned during last year's presidential contest, and pulling the plug may prove politically popular.

Yet worries remain. Stephen Biddle, a Columbia University professor who has advised U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, says it's possible al-Qaida could re-establish its base structure in Afghanistan once the Americans and their coalition partners leave. The Taliban in Afghanistan pledged in a February 2020 agreement with the Trump administration that they would not allow al-Qaida or other extremist groups to use Afghan territory to threaten the United States. But that deal may be imperiled by Biden's decision not to complete the withdrawal of forces by May 1, as the Trump administration had promised.

The bigger peril, Biddle said in an email exchange, is that the withdrawal could lead to the collapse of Afghan security forces and multi-sided civil warfare involving Taliban factions and others "in a more-lethal version of the civil war of the 1990s."

"This would be a humanitarian disaster for Afghans — far worse than today's insurgency," he said.

More broadly, the absence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan could lead to further instability in a region with two rival nuclear powers — Pakistan and India, which have insurgencies of their own to contend with.

"This is already a dangerous part of the world; making it worse by allowing the collapse of the Afghan government is the biggest risk here," Biddle said.

At a previously pivotal moment in the war, Obama took a similar view. When he announced a surge of 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan in December 2009, he argued against trying to contain extremist threats in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region only with what the U.S. military calls "over-the-horizon" forces — troops and aircraft positioned beyond Afghan borders.

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"To abandon this area now — and to rely only on efforts against al-Qaida from a distance — would significantly hamper our ability to keep the pressure on al-Qaida and create an unacceptable risk of additional attacks on our homeland and our allies," Obama said.

So Obama went ahead with a troop buildup aimed at hitting the Taliban so hard that they would agree to negotiate a peace deal. It didn't work. The Taliban kept fighting. Even after President Donald Trump authorized a more muscular military approach to the Taliban in 2017, the hard-hit militant group did not give up. It agreed to negotiate with the Afghan government, but those talks have stalled.

It's difficult to judge what has been gained in the 12 years since Obama escalated the war. Afghan security forces likely are stronger, although their resilience will be tested in the absence of U.S. support they grew to rely upon. The Afghan government has not strengthened its authority across the country, and the Pentagon argues that its intense focus on countering insurgents there and in the Middle East has been such a drain on resources that the U.S. is losing ground against China and Russia.

The war has cost more than 2,300 U.S. lives and immeasurable suffering among Afghans since the United States invaded in October 2001. Ten years into the war, in May 2011, U.S. forces killed bin Laden in Pakistan, and for a short time it seemed possible that Washington would see an opening for ending the war.

A few weeks after bin Laden's death, a young American soldier at a dusty outpost in eastern Afghanistan asked visiting Defense Secretary Robert Gates what effect the al-Qaida leader's demise would have on the war, suggesting hope that it would hasten its end and allow troops to go home.

"It is too early to tell," Gates replied.

Ten years later, Biden has decided the time has come, although for Afghans the war may be far from over.

A retiring Castro to bring younger face to Cuba's communists

By ANDREA RODRIGUEZ and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

HAVANA (AP) — This week's Communist Party congress could be the last with a Castro at the helm of Cuba's all-powerful political institution.

Six years after the death of Fidel Castro, his brother and fellow leader of the island's 1959 revolution, Raul Castro, is being watched to see if he fulfills his commitment to give up the reins of the only political organization permitted in the country of 11 million people.

Raul Castro in 2016 said that he would give up the post of party secretary-general at the party's eighth congress, which is scheduled to begin Friday. Standing down would complete the move to turn control over to a younger generation of revolutionaries led by Miguel Díaz-Canel, who took over the presidency from Castro in 2018.

Many Cubans are anxious over the change after having their daily affairs guided for more than six decades by a Castro, and Raul Castro's expected exit from the political scene couldn't come at a more difficult time.

The coronavirus pandemic, painful financial reforms and restrictions re-imposed by the Trump administration have again brought food lines and shortages reminiscent of the "special period" that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s. But unlike past crisis that brought Cubans together, concern is on the rise, fueled by the spread of the Internet and growing inequality that has laid bare the socialist system's failings.

"We've lost an entire decade," said Alina Lopez, a Havana historian who runs a blog that is a forum for leftist criticism of the government. "They don't know how to bring real change because any change must start with a lot of self-critique."

At the previous Communist Party congress, in 2016, Castro announced that owing to the "inexorable laws of life," he would step down as first secretary-general of the Communist Party in 2021 and yield power to Díaz-Canel. Also expected to resign at the gathering is Castro's deputy, 90-year-old José Ramón Machado.

That would potentially leave the 17-member Politburo for the first time without any veterans of the guerrilla insurgency, or what many Cubans affectionately refer to as the "historic generation."

William LeoGrande, an American University expert on Cuba, said such an outcome could greatly enhance Díaz-Canel's ability to push through overdue reforms as part of a broader economic opening approved a decade ago.

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In January, Diaz-Canel finally pulled the trigger on a plan approved two congresses ago to unify the island's dual currency system, giving rise to fears of inflation. After the economy contracted 11% last year, he also threw the doors open to private enterprise that had been stamped out by state planning, permitting Cubans to legally operate almost any self-run businesses from their homes.

But authorities have yet to tackle what LeoGrande considers the elephant in the room — an overhaul of the bloated state-run companies and government agencies on which the vast majority of Cubans depend for their meager salaries and subsistence.

"They keep saying they will require the state enterprises to become profitable but that's precisely where there's resistance because the private sector isn't growing fast enough," said LeoGrande, who frequently conducts research in Cuba but hasn't traveled there since prior to the pandemic. "Laying off a lot of people could lead to social and political problems."

To be sure, any change in Cuba is likely to be slow. The word "continuity" scrawled in red is repeated multiple times on a giant billboard touting the party gathering erected in the same Revolutionary Plaza where Fidel Castro at his height in the 1960s and 1970s used to mesmerize Cubans with his anti-imperialist harangues.

But at least some on the island are agitating for more radical change. Hundreds of artists, some of them wrapped in the Cuban flag, have in recent months carried out anti-government protests.

Top leaders have tried to vilify the demonstrators, accusing them of being paid by exiles in Miami. But the movement has gained momentum thanks to the arrival of mobile internet service two years ago that has made it easier for dissidents to organize.

LeoGrande said the discontent running through Cuban society is about the basics of daily life, not political freedom and certainly not the rights of performance artists to wear the Cuban flag.

He says a bigger threat comes from the gaping inequality visible for the first time with the advent of special stores selling merchandise in dollars to the lucky few receiving hard currency from relatives abroad or who work in what, prior to the pandemic, had been a booming foreign tourism industry.

"Back in 1990s, there was a sense that we're all in this together. There was no ostentation consumption," said LeoGrande. "Today, the inequality is not only worse but it's also more manifest."

As always in Cuba's history, the wildcard is the "Northern Empire," as communist stalwarts refer to the U.S. This year's congress, like the two before it, coincides with the anniversary of the 1961 invasion by CIA-funded Cuban exiles at the Bay of Pigs.

President Joe Biden campaigned on the promise to partially revive the Obama administration's opening that saw the U.S. raise the American flag at its long-shuttered embassy in Havana, ease the decades-old trade embargo and boost air connections between the two countries. Most of those policies were reversed by Trump administration, which at the last minute even declared Cuba a state sponsor of terrorism despite having helped broker a peace deal between Colombia's government and leftist rebels.

"Beyond trying to alleviate Cuba's severe humanitarian conditions by removing remittance and travel restrictions, the Biden administration is likely to be very cautious in re-engaging Cuba," said Michael Shifter, president of the Inter-American Dialogue in Washington. "The potential political costs of doing so are just much higher than the benefits."

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By AAMER MADHANI and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

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Former Minnesota cop charged in shooting of Black motorist

By SCOTT BAUER and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. (AP) — A white former suburban Minneapolis police officer was charged Wednesday with second-degree manslaughter for killing 20-year-old Black motorist Daunte Wright in a shooting that ignited days of unrest and clashes between protesters and police.

The charge against former Brooklyn Center police Officer Kim Potter was filed three days after Wright was killed during a traffic stop and as the nearby murder trial progresses for the ex-officer charged with killing George Floyd last May.

The former Brooklyn Center police chief has said that Potter, a 26-year veteran and training officer, intended to use her Taser on Wright but fired her handgun instead. However, protesters and Wright's family members say there's no excuse for the shooting and that it shows how the justice system is tilted against Blacks, noting Wright was stopped for an expired car registration and ended up dead.

"Certain occupations carry an immense responsibility and none more so than a sworn police officer," Imran Ali, Washington County assistant criminal division chief, said in a statement announcing the charge against Potter. "(Potter's) action caused the unlawful killing of Mr. Wright and she must be held accountable."

Intent isn't a necessary component of second-degree manslaughter in Minnesota. The charge — which carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison — can be applied in circumstances where a person is suspected of causing a death by "culpable negligence" that creates an unreasonable risk and consciously takes chances to cause a death.

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Potter posted \$100,000 bond Wednesday evening and was released from the Hennepin County jail, online records showed. She was scheduled to make her initial court appearance Thursday afternoon. Her attorney did not respond to messages from The Associated Press.

Potter, 48, and Police Chief Tim Gannon both resigned Tuesday, a day after the City Council voted to fire the city manager, who controls the police force. Acting City Manager Reggie Edwards said Wednesday that because Potter resigned, she is entitled to "all accrual and benefits that is due." Mayor Mike Elliott has said that the city had been moving toward firing Potter when she submitted her resignation.

Police say Wright was pulled over for expired tags on Sunday, but they sought to arrest him after discovering he had an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

Body camera video that Gannon released Monday shows Potter approaching Wright as he stands outside of his car as another officer is arresting him.

As Wright struggles with police, Potter shouts, "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" before firing a single shot from a handgun in her right hand.

The criminal complaint noted that Potter holstered her handgun on the right side and her Taser on the left. To remove the Taser — which is yellow and has a black grip — Potter would have to use her left hand, the complaint said.

Wright family attorney Ben Crump said the family appreciates the criminal case, but he again disputed that the shooting was accidental, arguing that an experienced officer knows the difference between a Taser and a handgun.

"Kim Potter executed Daunte for what amounts to no more than a minor traffic infraction and a misdemeanor warrant," he said.

Experts say cases of officers mistakenly firing their gun instead of a Taser are rare, usually less than once a year nationwide.

Transit officer Johannes Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and sentenced to two years in prison after responding to a fight at a train station in Oakland, California, killing 22-year-old Oscar Grant in 2009. Mehserle testified at trial that he mistakenly pulled his .40-caliber handgun instead of his stun gun.

In Oklahoma, a white volunteer sheriff's deputy for Tulsa County, Robert Bates, was convicted of second-degree manslaughter after accidentally firing his handgun when he meant to deploy his stun gun on Eric Harris, a Black man who was being held down by other officers in 2015.

Potter was an instructor with Brooklyn Center police, according to the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association. She was training two other officers when they stopped Wright, the association's leader, Brian Peters, told the Star Tribune.

Brooklyn Center announced a curfew of 10 p.m. Wednesday — the fourth night in a row that the city has taken that action. Elliott, the mayor, urged people to protest without violence, saying "your voices have been heard."

As night fell, several hundred demonstrators had gathered outside the Brooklyn Center police headquarters for a fourth, tense night. Video showed several protesters carrying Black Lives Matter banners and one demonstrator with a fake pig's head hoisted on a pole near a metal fence surrounding the station. Police monitored the growing crowd from the structure's rooftop.

"Say his name! Daunte Wright!" demonstrators chanted under a mix of snow and rain.

Shortly after 9 p.m., police announced over a loudspeaker that the protest was an unlawful assembly and ordered people to disperse.

The well-before-curfew dispersal order came after state officials said people were throwing things at police and trying to dismantle the fence — the same reason cited for Tuesday's early order.

Shortly before the dispersal order, some protesters threw objects at police, who responded with occasional gas canisters. Some officers could be seen spraying a chemical on protesters who came near the fence surrounding the heavily guarded station, and officers fired sporadic projectiles. Protesters near the

fence formed a wall with umbrellas.

Outside Potter's home in Champlin, north of Brooklyn Center, concrete barricades and tall metal fencing had been set up and police cars were in the driveway. After Floyd's death last year, protesters demonstrated several times at the home of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer now on trial in Floyd's death.

Brooklyn Center, a suburb just north of Minneapolis, has seen its racial demographics shift dramatically in recent years. In 2000, more than 70% of the city was white. Today, a majority of residents are Black, Asian or Hispanic.

However, Elliott has acknowledged that the police force has "very few people of color."

Capsized ship off Louisiana: 12 missing, 1 dead, 6 rescued

By STACEY PLAISANCE, KEVIN MCGILL and JEFF MARTIN Associated Press

PORT FOURCHON, La. (AP) — Coast Guard boats and aircraft have covered an area larger than the state of Rhode Island to search for 12 people still missing Wednesday off the Louisiana coast after their offshore oilfield vessel capsized in hurricane-force winds.

One worker's body was recovered Wednesday and six people were rescued Tuesday after the Seacor Power overturned Tuesday afternoon in the Gulf of Mexico, the Coast Guard said.

The search, interrupted by darkness and bad weather, has totaled nearly 40 hours and more than 1,440 square miles (3,730 square kilometers) of Gulf waters by Wednesday afternoon, according to a news release. The hunt for the missing continued into the evening, said Petty Officer Carlos Galarza.

Coast Guard Capt. Will Watson said earlier that winds were 80 to 90 mph (130 to 145 kph) and waves rose 7 to 9 feet high (2.1 to 2.7 meters) when the lift boat overturned.

"That's challenging under any circumstance," Watson said. "We don't know the degree to which that contributed to what happened, but we do know those are challenging conditions to be out in the maritime environment."

The bulky vessel, also called a jackup rig because it has three long legs it can lower to the sea floor to lift the boat out of the water as an offshore platform, flipped over Tuesday afternoon south of Port Fourchon, a major base for the U.S. oil and gas industry.

One worker was found dead on the surface of the water, Watson said at a news conference Wednesday. Asked about the missing workers' prospects, he said, "We are hopeful. We can't do this work if you're not optimistic, if you're not hopeful."

Divers were heading to the local area Wednesday afternoon, Coast Guard spokesman Petty Officer John Micheli said.

Numerous other agencies helped with the search.

Marion Cuyler, the fiancée of crane operator Chaz Morales, was waiting with family of other missing workers at a Port Fourchon fire station near a landing site where helicopters were coming and going. She said she talked to her fiancé before he left Tuesday.

"He said that they were jacking down and they were about to head out, and I'm like, 'The weather's too bad. You need to come home.' And he's like, 'I wish I could.'"

The relationship of those on board to owner Seacor Marine was not immediately clear. The boat, capable of working in up to 195 feet (nearly 60 meters) of water, can carry a crew of 12, two "special personnel" and 36 passengers, according to the company website.

"We are deeply saddened by the news of the vessel capsizing and are working closely with the U.S. Coast Guard and local authorities to support all efforts to locate our valued team members and partners," the Houston-based company said in a statement.

Watson said the Coast Guard is investigating what part the harsh weather played in the accident. The vessel left Port Fourchon at 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, bound for Main Pass off the southeast Louisiana coast, he said.

"We did have some weather reports yesterday that there would be some challenging weather. But this level of weather was not necessarily anticipated," he said.

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The National Weather Service in New Orleans issued a special marine warning before 4 p.m. Tuesday that predicted steep waves and winds greater than 50 knots (58 mph).

The Coast Guard received a distress message from a good Samaritan at 4:30 p.m. and issued an urgent marine broadcast that prompted multiple private vessels in the area to respond, saving four people, the agency said. Coast Guard crews rescued another two people.

At one point, video showed the boat — 129 feet (39 meters) long at its beam — with one leg pointed awkwardly skyward as rescuers searched the heaving water.

Although the Coast Guard said the lift boat capsized during a microburst, a National Weather Service meteorologist said the system was more like an offshore derecho — or straight winds storm.

"This was not a microburst -- just a broad straight-line wind event that swept over a huge area," Phil Grigsby said.

He said the weather service's nearest official gauge, at Grand Isle, showed about 30 minutes of 75 mph (120 km/h) winds, followed by hours of winds over 50 mph (80 km/h).

The initial storm system was followed by a low-pressure system called a wake low, which amplified the winds and made them last longer, Grigsby said.

"It was the strongest wake low I've seen in almost 18 years here," he said.

Shrimp boat captain Aaron Callais said the bad weather started with small, quickly dissipating waterspouts that buffeted his father's boat, the Ramblin' Cajun.

"There was nothing we could do. One minute we were facing north, the next south, then east and west," he said. "Things were flying in the cabin."

Callais posted video on Facebook of wind battering the boat as he talked on the boat's satellite phone to friends and family, including his dad, "letting him know the situation, that it wasn't looking good. We didn't know if we were going to make it out."

Prosecutor: Missing student killed during 1996 rape attempt

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The suspect in the 1996 disappearance of California college student Kristin Smart killed her while trying rape her in his dorm room and his father helped hide the body, the San Luis Obispo County district attorney said Wednesday.

District Attorney Dan Dow said prosecutors would seek to prove Paul Flores tried to sexually assault Smart by showing prior sex acts he engaged in and crimes they believe he committed in more recent years.

Prosecutors filed a first-degree murder charge against Paul Flores, 44, and an accessory after murder charge against his father, Ruben Flores, 80, for helping him conceal Smart's body, which has never been found.

The two were arrested Tuesday after years of investigation and a search last month using ground-penetrating radar and cadaver dogs at the elder Flores' home that led to evidence connected to Smart's death, authorities said. They didn't revealed what was found.

Smart, 19, of Stockton, was last seen May 25, 1996, with Flores while returning to her dorm at California Polytechnic State University campus in San Luis Obispo after an off-campus party. She was inebriated at the time, and Flores, a fellow freshman, had offered to walk her home.

Dow revealed that investigators think Flores killed Smart in his dorm room during the Memorial Day weekend when many students had left the campus.

Investigators, who launched a renewed search Tuesday at his father's property in nearby Arroyo Grande, believe they know where the body was buried but have not yet found it or disclosed the location.

Paul and Ruben Flores are in jail and scheduled to be arraigned Thursday in San Luis Obispo Superior Court.

A lawyer for Paul Flores declined to comment on the arrest or charges. Harold Mesick, a lawyer for Ruben Flores, told the Los Angeles Times his client is "absolutely innocent."

Paul Flores has remained mum through the years, invoking his Fifth Amendment right to not answer

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questions before a grand jury and in a deposition for the lawsuit brought against him.

Susan Flores, the mother of Paul and estranged wife of Ruben, broke years of public silence last month in an interview with KSBY-TV in which she said her family had no role in the death and her son had been a scapegoat.

"They keep trying to find the answers with us and they keep failing because the answers are not here," she said. "We have no responsibility for her disappearance and what happened to that young woman."

Susan Flores hung up the phone when contacted by The Associated Press on Tuesday.

The criminal charges include a disclosure that prosecutors intend to admit evidence of prior sexual acts by Paul Flores.

"These prior sexual acts include ... incidents described in the investigative reports and audio/video provided to defense, and other alleged incidents of abuse, which will be provided as they are obtained by the prosecution," the document said.

Dow said investigators have evidence Paul Flores continued to prey on women after Smart's death and the prosecutor appealed to any victims to come forward.

Dow didn't disclose what investigators found, but said Flores frequented bars around his home in the San Pedro area of Los Angeles area since 2005 and may have committed crimes there. He has a record of several convictions for driving under the influence.

"We have evidence that we do believe there were other people not yet identified that have had some kind of a criminal act perpetrated on them by Mr. Flores," Dow said. "We're concerned about sexual assault."

Flores has been under suspicion from the earliest days of Smart's disappearance. He has gone from being a "person of interest" to a "suspect" to "the prime suspect" — and, now, defendant.

Sheriff Ian Parkinson acknowledged Tuesday that early missteps by law enforcement, including a slow response to reports of Smart's disappearance, hampered the investigation.

The revelation that the alleged crime scene was in Paul Flores' dorm room highlighted one of those failures.

Smart was reported missing May 28, 1996, but no search began until two days later. Flores' room wasn't searched for another two weeks — after he had moved out for the summer.

Smart's family, who welcomed news of the arrest as a step toward bringing their daughter home, noted that "an indifference and lack of resolve we experienced early on set the course for many years."

A renewed effort to investigate the case led to new witnesses coming forward and warrants that allowed investigators to intercept and monitor Paul Flores' phone and text messages and search his own home, along with those of his mother, father and sister that turned up new evidence, Parkinson said. He declined to offer more details because search warrants are sealed.

Investigators served over 40 search warrants at 16 locations over the years, collected nearly 200 new items of evidence and used modern DNA techniques to test more than three dozen older pieces of evidence. So much evidence was compiled that it would fill three terabytes on a computer hard drive, he said.

EXPLAINER: Chauvin defense suggests prone position not risky

By KATHLEEN FOODY Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The attorney for the former officer charged with killing George Floyd says several studies suggest police can safely use their bodyweight to hold a handcuffed suspect facedown on the ground — or prone — as Floyd was in the last minutes of his life.

But those findings aren't universally accepted and have been contradicted by a parade of law enforcement and medical experts central to prosecutors' efforts to convict Derek Chauvin of murder and manslaughter.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT FLOYD'S POSITION?

Bystander and surveillance camera video shows Floyd on his stomach with his hands cuffed behind his back, pinned to the ground by three officers.

Chauvin was closest to Floyd's head, and a use-of-force expert testified that Chauvin applied pressure to Floyd's neck area for 9 minutes, 29 seconds.

Defense attorney Eric Nelson suggested Chauvin's knee was not on Floyd's neck for that entire time,

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but moved to his upper back, shoulder blades and arm.

WHAT DID PROSECUTORS' EXPERTS SAY ABOUT THE PRONE POSITION?

Medical experts testified for the prosecution that the prone position cuts lung volume, reduces oxygen levels and makes it harder to breathe.

They also pointed to Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck, his body being pressed against the hard asphalt and his head being turned to the side as factors that prevented Floyd from breathing, resulting in his death.

WHAT RESEARCH IS THE DEFENSE USING?

Nelson leaned on studies conducted by doctors at the University of California San Diego that concluded prone positions are not inherently risky.

Prosecutors showed jurors one photo of participants in a 2013 study laid on their stomach on a gymnastics mat, hands and feet tied together behind them. A disc-shaped weight rests on a towel covering one of the 25 volunteer's bare back while researchers monitored the effect on his heart.

The researchers acknowledged that limitations included the generally healthy volunteers between the ages of 22 and 42 and the study's controlled environment. They tested weights totaling 50 and 100 pounds (23 and 46 kilograms) and acknowledged it's "possible larger amounts of force are used in actual practice in the field." The source of the study's funding was not provided.

A spokeswoman for UC San Diego Health on Wednesday said the researchers declined to speak with The Associated Press about their work and its role in the trial.

A retired medical examiner testifying for the defense, Dr. David Fowler, also described a Canadian law enforcement study on the use of prone positioning during arrests; it found no fatalities among about 3,000 arrests. That information was provided by police officers and the Canadian government paid for the research.

The study's authors said they didn't know how long officers held suspects in the prone position or whether the officers used their bodyweight to hold them down.

WHAT DO CRITICS SAY?

Geoffrey Alpert, a professor of criminology at the University of South Carolina, said he has testified opposite the authors of several of the studies referenced during Chauvin's trial. Alpert considers them flawed recreations of interactions between police and citizens.

He said police agencies have adopted training that recommends limiting the amount of time someone spends in the prone position — a clear sign that it is dangerous.

The U.S. Department of Justice warned agencies of the risks more than 25 years ago. Among the recommendations in that 1995 bulletin: "As soon as the suspect is handcuffed, get him off his stomach."

Alpert recalled the words of a police trainer in Florida: "The ground is your friend and then it becomes angry."

Minneapolis committed to training officers on the dangers of positional asphyxia in a \$3 million settlement following the 2010 death of David Smith, whom officers subdued with a Taser and pinned face down for minutes.

Dr. Steven Bird, a professor of emergency medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, said restraining and weighing down volunteers is "completely different" to police holding handcuffed suspects to the ground.

"You can't do a study that would adequately recapitulate the circumstances under which the patient died in restraint," he said.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Legal experts say the case against Chauvin boils down to two questions: Did his actions cause Floyd's death? Were those actions reasonable?

Nelson says Chauvin did what he was trained to do and that Floyd's drug use and underlying health conditions caused his death. He's hoping jurors will agree the research supports those arguments.

But several prosecution experts testified that Floyd died due to lack of oxygen because of how the officers were holding him down. Even the Minneapolis Police Department's chief said Floyd should not have

been pinned to the pavement for 9 1/2 minutes. Police officials also said Minneapolis officers are trained to turn suspects on their sides once handcuffed to ease breathing.

One use-of-force expert said no "reasonable" officer would have done what Chauvin did.

HOW ARE PROSECUTORS HANDLING THE RESEARCH?

Dr. Martin Tobin, a lung and critical care specialist at the Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital and Loyola University's medical school in Illinois who was called as a witness by the prosecution, testified that the research involving weights on volunteers' backs "highly misleading."

The force of an officer's knee, Tobin said, is 10 times greater than a large, flat weight spread over a volunteer's upper back, and no study has pressed a weight onto someone's neck.

"I suspect you'd have major trouble getting that through the ethics committee in any medical school," Tobin said.

Prosecutor Jerry Blackwell on Wednesday aggressively questioned the studies' relevance to Floyd's experience, getting Fowler, the former medical examiner, to acknowledge that the research did not examine the effect of a knee pressing into someone's neck or keep weight on subjects for the same length of time Floyd was kept on the ground.

Defense expert blames George Floyd's death on heart trouble

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — George Floyd died of a sudden heart rhythm disturbance as a result of his heart disease, a forensic pathologist testified for the defense Wednesday at former Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial, contradicting prosecution experts who said Floyd succumbed to a lack of oxygen from the way he was pinned down.

Dr. David Fowler, a former Maryland chief medical examiner who is now with a consulting firm, said the fentanyl and methamphetamine in Floyd's system, and possibly carbon monoxide poisoning from auto exhaust, were contributing factors in the 46-year-old Black man's death last May.

"All of those combined to cause Mr. Floyd's death," he said on the second day of the defense case.

Fowler also testified that he would classify the manner of death "undetermined," rather than homicide, as the county's chief medical examiner ruled. He said Floyd's death had too many conflicting factors, some of which could be ruled homicide and some that could be considered accidental.

Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson is trying to prove that the 19-year Minneapolis police veteran did what he was trained to do and that Floyd died because of his illegal drug use and underlying health problems.

Prosecutors say Floyd died because the white officer's knee was pressed against Floyd's neck or neck area for 9 1/2 minutes as he lay on the pavement on his stomach, his hands cuffed behind him and his face jammed against the ground.

Fowler listed a multitude of factors or potential ones: Floyd's narrowed arteries, his enlarged heart, his high blood pressure, his drug use, the stress of his restraint, the vehicle exhaust, and a tumor or growth in his lower abdomen that can sometimes play a role in high blood pressure by releasing "fight-or-flight" hormones.

Fowler said all of those factors could have acted together to cause Floyd's heart to work harder, suffer an arrhythmia, or abnormal rhythm, and suddenly stop.

Prosecutor Jerry Blackwell launched an aggressive cross-examination, attacking Fowler's findings down the line. He got Fowler to acknowledge that even someone who dies from being deprived of oxygen ultimately dies of an arrhythmia.

He also got Fowler to admit that he didn't take the weight of Chauvin's gear into account when he analyzed the pressure on Floyd's body. Blackwell further accused Fowler of jumping to conclusions and suggesting to the jury that Floyd had a white pill in his mouth in the video of his arrest. Fowler denied saying that.

Blackwell also attacked Fowler's testimony about carbon monoxide, which displaces oxygen in the bloodstream.

In his original testimony, Fowler said carbon monoxide could have contributed to oxygen depletion in

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Floyd, noting that he was facing the tailpipe end of a squad car. But Floyd's blood was never tested for carbon monoxide.

"You haven't seen any data or test results that showed Mr. Floyd had a single injury from carbon monoxide. Is that true?" Blackwell asked.

"That is correct, because it was never sent," Fowler said.

Blackwell also noted that the squad car was a gas-electric hybrid and that Fowler had no data on how much carbon monoxide was actually released. And he suggested that the witness assumed the engine was running at the time. Fowler said he believed it was.

The prosecutor also got Fowler to agree that it would take four minutes to cause irreversible brain damage if the brain is starved of oxygen, and that insufficient oxygen can cause the heart to stop.

"And if a person dies as a result of low oxygen, that person is also going to die ultimately of a fatal arrhythmia, right?" Blackwell asked.

Fowler responded: "Correct. Every one of us in this room will have a fatal arrhythmia at some point."

Fowler further agreed that Floyd should have been given immediate attention when he went into cardiac arrest because there still was a chance to save him at that point.

A number of medical experts called by prosecutors have said Floyd died from a lack of oxygen because his breathing was constricted by the way he was held down. A cardiology expert rejected the notion that Floyd died of heart problems, saying all indications were that he had "an exceptionally strong heart."

But Fowler said that Chauvin's knee on Floyd was "nowhere close to his airway" and that Floyd's speaking and groaning showed that his airway was still open. He also testified that Chauvin's knee was not applied with enough pressure to cause any bruises or scrapes on Floyd's neck or back.

And he said that Floyd did not complain of vision changes or other symptoms consistent with hypoxia, or insufficient oxygen to the brain, and that he was coherent until shortly before he suddenly stopped moving.

"The bottom line is, moving air in and out, and speaking and making noise is very good evidence that the airway was not closed," Fowler said.

Blackwell ended his cross-examination by getting two questions before the jury: Whether Chauvin's actions played a role in Floyd's death, or whether Floyd's death was coincidental and unrelated. But the defense objected, and Fowler was not permitted to answer.

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death after his arrest on suspicion of passing a counterfeit \$20 at a neighborhood market. The video of Floyd gasping that he couldn't breathe as bystanders yelled at Chauvin to get off him triggered worldwide protests, violence and a furious examination of racism and policing in the U.S.

The defense hasn't said whether Chauvin will take the stand.

Earlier Wednesday, Judge Peter Cahill turned down a defense request to acquit Chauvin, rejecting claims that prosecutors failed to prove Chauvin's actions killed Floyd. Requests for an acquittal are routinely made midway through a trial and are usually denied.

Big-business pushback against voting measures gains momentum

By DAVID KOENIG, BRIAN SLODYSKO and MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writers

Big business has ratcheted up its objections to proposals that would make it harder to vote, with several hundred companies and executives signing a new statement opposing "any discriminatory legislation."

The letter, published Wednesday in The New York Times and The Washington Post, was signed by companies including Amazon, Google, Starbucks and Bank of America, and individuals such as Warren Buffett and Michael Bloomberg, plus law firms and nonprofit groups.

It was the largest group yet to join protests against Republican efforts to change election rules in states around the country.

"Voting is the lifeblood of our democracy and we call upon all Americans to join us in taking a nonpartisan stand for this most basic and fundamental right of all Americans," the letter reads. "We all should feel a responsibility to defend the right to vote and oppose any discriminatory legislation or measures that

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restrict or prevent any eligible voter from having an equal and fair opportunity to cast a ballot.”

Many of the signers have been loyal donors to Republican political campaigns.

The letter is a direct challenge to Republican officials who have pushed for changes in state voting laws, citing former President Donald Trump’s false claim that he lost the November election because of fraud. At the same time, Democrats in Congress propose to overhaul federal voting law in a way that Republicans argue would interfere with state control of elections and hurt the GOP.

There were some notable absences from Wednesday’s letter, including Walmart, Delta Air Lines and the Coca-Cola Co.

A Delta spokeswoman declined to comment beyond pointing to a March 31 statement in which CEO Ed Bastian called the Georgia law unacceptable. A Coca-Cola spokeswoman said the company had not seen the letter but that it stands by its support for “free and fair elections.” Walmart CEO Doug McMillon has stated that the nation’s largest retailer is against legislation that unnecessarily restricts voting rights.

The business community traditionally has steered clear of taking public positions on political or social issues but that has been changing recently, with many of them putting out statements after the police killing of George Floyd last year.

Over the weekend, Yale University management professor Jeffrey Sonnenfeld helped organize a call with more than 100 corporate executives, academics and legal experts to discuss restrictive voting proposals, including the Georgia law. They talked about withholding campaign contributions to elected officials who try to restrict voting, and even withholding investment from states that adopt such laws — although the latter seemed to draw less support, he said.

Earlier this month, 72 Black business leaders signed a letter published in the New York Times that urged corporate leaders to publicly oppose laws that restrict voting by Blacks.

This week, the leaders of three dozen major Michigan companies, including General Motors and Ford, objected to Republican-sponsored election bills that would make it harder to vote in Michigan and other states.

Dennis Archer Jr. is the first signature on the statement. The son of a former Detroit mayor who runs a small consulting firm, he knows there’s less risk of backlash for him than for large multinational companies. But there’s also a risk that Black people and others will stop buying goods from companies that don’t take stands on issues like this.

“I think those companies that take that kind of passive position are really going to feel it in their pocketbook,” said Archer, who is Black.

It remains to be seen whether corporate activism will extend to political donations.

After a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6 to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden’s win over Trump, many companies said they would stop contributing to lawmakers voted to reject the outcome of the election or pause all giving to review their donation policies.

The freeze has begun to thaw.

A political action committee controlled by AT&T, which pledged to cut off lawmakers who objected to certifying the election, cut a \$5,000 check in February to House Conservatives Fund, a leadership PAC led by Indiana Rep. Jim Banks, who voted to object to the election results, records show. JetBlue Airways, which said it would pause donations after Jan. 6 — and signed Wednesday’s letter — recently gave \$1,000 to New York Republican Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, who also voted to object to the election outcome.

Some are donating to committees controlled by party leaders that spend big to boost the chances of all Republican candidates in the House and the Senate.

Most companies have not said whether they will withhold donations from lawmakers who are pushing the new voting laws.

“I’m dubious they will go that far. It’s easy to make political statements and continue to give money,” said Lawrence Glickman, a Cornell University history professor who wrote a book about the influence of business on U.S. politics. “It makes front-page news when Coca Cola, Delta or another big corporation says something about voting-rights laws, but how often does it make front-page news when they make a campaign contribution?”

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Companies have a natural fear of antagonizing politicians whose help they might need in the future. Or to avoid retribution.

Georgia lawmakers voted in 2018 to strip a tax break that Delta enjoyed on jet fuel after the airline ended a discount program for National Rifle Association members, although the then-governor restored the benefit. The Georgia House voted again to kill the tax break two weeks ago after the Delta CEO criticized the voting law, but the Senate adjourned without taking action.

More than 350 different voting bills are under consideration in dozens of states, according to a tally from the Brennan Center for Justice, a public-policy think tank. On Tuesday Arkansas was among the latest to approve changes to its election laws, including restrictions on outside polling places and on absentee ballots.

The pushback against GOP-backed voting laws drew a warning this month from Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, who told business leaders to "stay out of politics." He warned companies not to get involved in upcoming debates in Congress over environmental policy and gun violence.

McConnell backtracked a few days later, admitting "I didn't say that very artfully." Instead, he accused business leaders of not reading the Georgia bill before condemning it.

Biden to pull US troops from Afghanistan, end 'forever war'

By AAMER MADHANI and MATTHEW LEE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden said Wednesday he will withdraw remaining U.S. troops from the "forever war" in Afghanistan, declaring that the Sept. 11 terror attacks of 20 years ago cannot justify American forces still dying in the nation's longest war.

His plan is to pull out all American forces — numbering 2,500 now — by this Sept. 11, the anniversary of the attacks, which were coordinated from Afghanistan. Soon after Biden made his announcement, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg in Brussels said the alliance had agreed to withdraw its roughly 7,000 forces from Afghanistan, matching Biden's decision to begin a final pullout by May 1.

The U.S. cannot continue to pour resources into an intractable war and expect different results, Biden said.

The drawdown would begin rather than conclude by May 1, which has been the deadline for full withdrawal under a peace agreement the Trump administration reached with the Taliban last year.

"It is time to end America's longest war," Biden said, but he added that the U.S. will "not conduct a hasty rush to the exit."

"We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal conditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result," said Biden, who delivered his address from the White House Treaty Room, the same location where President George W. Bush announced the start of the war. "I am now the fourth United States president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans. Two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility to a fifth."

Biden's announcement, which he followed with a visit to Arlington National Cemetery, marks perhaps the most significant foreign policy decision in the early going of his presidency.

He's long been skeptical about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. As Barack Obama's vice president, Biden was a lonely voice in the administration who advised the 44th president to tilt towards a smaller counterterrorism role in the country while military advisers were urging a troop buildup to counter Taliban gains. Biden has also made clear he wants to recalibrate U.S. foreign policy to face bigger challenges posed by China and Russia.

Withdrawing all U.S. troops comes with clear risks. It could boost the Taliban's effort to claw back power and undo gains toward democracy and women's rights made over the past two decades. It also opens Biden to criticism, from mostly Republicans and some Democrats, even though former President Donald Trump had also wanted a full withdrawal.

"This administration has decided to abandon U.S. efforts in Afghanistan which have helped keep radical Islamic terrorism in check," said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. "And bizarrely, they have decided to do so by September 11th."

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While Biden's decision keeps U.S. forces in Afghanistan four months longer than initially planned, it sets a firm end to two decades of war that killed more than 2,200 U.S. troops, wounded 20,000, and cost as much as \$1 trillion.

Biden spoke with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Wednesday ahead of his speech. The White House said in a statement that Biden told Ghani the United States would continue to support the Afghan people through development, humanitarian and security assistance.

"The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan respects the U.S. decision, and we will work with our U.S. partners to ensure a smooth transition," Ghani said in a Twitter posting.

Biden spoke, too, with former President Bush ahead of announcing his decision. He also spoke with allies, military leaders, lawmakers and Vice President Kamala Harris to help make his decision, according to the White House. Bush, through his spokesman, declined to comment about his conversation with Biden.

Biden emphasized that his administration will continue to support peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban and assist international efforts to train the Afghan military.

He noted that the "forever war" has led to service members who weren't even alive at the time of the Sept. 11 attacks serving, as well as young troops following in the steps of their mothers and fathers in deploying to Afghanistan.

"The war in Afghanistan was never meant to be a multigenerational undertaking," Biden said.

Obama, who had hoped but ultimately failed to end the war during his time in office, said in a statement that he supported Biden's decision, that "it is time to recognize that we have accomplished all that we can militarily, and that it's time to bring our remaining troops home."

Following his speech, Biden visited Arlington National Cemetery to honor those who died in recent American conflicts. After paying his respects, Biden told reporters it was "absolutely clear" to him that ending the war was the right decision. Biden, in his speech and during his visit to the hallowed cemetery, reflected on his own late son Beau Biden's service. The president's son, who died of cancer in 2015, had deployed to Iraq with the Delaware Army National Guard.

"I'm always amazed that generation after generation, women and men give their lives to this country," Biden said. "It means I have trouble these days showing up to this cemetery and not thinking about my son."

CIA Director William Burns acknowledged at a hearing Wednesday that America's ability to contain the terrorist threat from Afghanistan has benefited from the military presence there, and that when that presence is withdrawn, "the U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish."

"That's simply a fact," Burns said. "It is also a fact, however, that after withdrawal, whenever that time comes, the CIA and all of our partners in the U.S. government will retain a suite of capabilities, some of it remaining in place, some of them that we will generate, that can help us to anticipate and contest any rebuilding effort."

A senior administration official said the September withdrawal date was an absolute deadline that won't be affected by security conditions in Afghanistan.

The long conflict has largely crippled al-Qaida and led to the death of Osama bin Laden, the architect of the Sept. 11 attacks. But an American withdrawal also risks many of the gains made in democracy, women's rights and governance, while ensuring that the Taliban, who provided al-Qaida's haven, remain strong and in control of large swaths of the country.

As Biden announced his decision, his top national security aides — Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin — were consulting in Brussels to coordinate NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan with the planned pullout of American troops.

Stoltenberg, the NATO chief, said the alliance's full withdrawal would be completed "in months" but did not mention the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"We went into Afghanistan together, we have adjusted our posture together and we are united in leaving together," he said.

J&J vaccine to remain in limbo while officials seek evidence

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writers

Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine will remain in limbo for a while longer after government health advisers declared Wednesday that they need more evidence to decide if a handful of unusual blood clots were linked to the shot — and if so, how big the risk really is.

The reports are exceedingly rare — six cases out of more than 7 million U.S. inoculations with the one-dose vaccine. But the government recommended a pause in J&J vaccinations this week, not long after European regulators declared that such clots are a rare but possible risk with the AstraZeneca vaccine, a shot made in a similar way but not yet approved for use in the U.S.

At an emergency meeting, advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention wrestled with the fact that the U.S. has enough alternative shots to vaccinate its population but other countries anxiously awaiting the one-and-done vaccine may not.

"I continue to feel like we're in a race against time and the variants, but we need to (move forward) in the safest possible way," said CDC adviser Dr. Grace Lee of Stanford University, who was among those seeking to postpone a vote on the vaccine.

Authorities have studied the clots for only a few days and have little information to judge the shot, agreed fellow adviser Dr. Beth Bell of the University of Washington.

"I don't want to send the message there is something fundamentally wrong with this vaccine," Bell said. "It's a very rare event. Nothing in life is risk-free. But I want to be able to understand and defend the decision I've made based on a reasonable amount of data."

These are not run-of-the-mill blood clots. They occurred in unusual places, in veins that drain blood from the brain, and in people with abnormally low levels of clot-forming platelets. The six cases raised an alarm bell because that number is at least three times more than experts would have expected to see even of more typical brain-drainage clots, said CDC's Dr. Tom Shimabukuro.

"What we have here is a picture of clots forming in large vessels where we have low platelets," Shimabukuro explained. "This usually doesn't happen," but it's similar to European reports with the AstraZeneca vaccine.

The good news: The government says there are no signs of similar clots after vaccination with the Pfizer and Moderna shots that are the mainstay of the COVID-19 fight in the U.S.

The J&J cases now under investigation are all among women younger than 50. But the advisory panel stressed that there's not enough information to tell if only certain groups would be at risk. In Europe, most but not all cases following AstraZeneca vaccinations have been among women under 60, leading different countries to use that vaccine in varying ways.

Also, a 25-year-old man experienced a similar clot during U.S. testing of J&J's vaccine, something the government scrutinized at the time but could not link to the shot. On Wednesday, the company also brought to the CDC's attention a woman whose clot did not occur in the brain, sparking more questions about what other evidence to examine.

The CDC expects its advisers to reconsider the evidence within two weeks. So far the clots have occurred between one and three weeks after people received the J&J vaccine, and officials cautioned that more reports could surface.

The clot concerns could undermine public confidence in a vaccine many hoped would help some of the hardest-to-reach populations — in poor countries or in places like homeless shelters in the U.S.

But the U.S. has intensive monitoring for COVID-19 vaccines, since side effects too rare to have occurred in studies of thousands of people sometimes pop up once shots are used in millions. Shimabukuro said spotting such a rare potential risk amid the nation's huge vaccine rollout "is an example of a success story for vaccine safety."

Some vaccine specialists who were closely watching the deliberations expressed dismay that the public — here and abroad — will have to wait for more advice.

"What they did was they punted," said Dr. Paul Offit, a vaccine expert at the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "I just don't think waiting is going to give you a critical amount of information that is going to help you make a decision."

He noted that many European countries are dealing with the AstraZeneca uncertainty without stopping its use.

Health officials recommended the J&J timeout in part to make sure doctors know how to recognize and treat the unusual condition. The CDC said Wednesday that four of the six women with the unusual clots were treated with a blood thinner named heparin — a treatment the government is warning doctors to avoid.

The setback for J&J comes as the worldwide death toll from COVID-19 approaches 3 million, including more than 560,000 who perished in the U.S., which continues to report tens of thousands of new infections every day and an average of almost 1,000 deaths.

So far, the J&J vaccine has been a minor player in U.S. vaccinations. More than 122 million Americans have received at least one vaccine dose, and nearly 23% are fully vaccinated. Moderna and Pfizer are on track to have delivered 300 million doses each by mid- to late July.

Vaccinations are slower in Europe, where many countries have struggled for supply. J&J delayed some of its European deliveries amid the clot evaluation, but Poland said it would use the batch it already has in hand. European medical regulators plan to issue their own evaluation of the J&J clot issue next week.

When the clots were spotted after AstraZeneca vaccinations, scientists in Norway and Germany raised the possibility that some people are experiencing an abnormal immune response, forming antibodies that disable their platelets. That's the theory as the U.S. now investigates the J&J reports.

Daunte Wright: Doting dad, ballplayer, slain by police

By DENISE LAVOIE Associated Press

Daunte Wright became a father while he was still a teenager, and seemed to relish the role of a doting young dad, his family and friends said.

A family photo shows a beaming Wright holding his son, Daunte Jr., at his first birthday party. Another shows Wright, wearing a COVID-19 face mask and his son wearing a bib with the inscription, "ALWAYS HUNGRY."

Wright, 20, was fatally shot Sunday by a police officer in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center. As protesters and civil rights advocates called for justice and police accountability over his death, his family asked people to also remember his life.

"He had a 2-year-old son that's not going to be able to play basketball with him. He had sisters and brothers that he loved so much," his mother, Katie Wright, said Tuesday on "Good Morning America."

His aunt, Naisha Wright, said he was "a lovable young man."

"His smile — oh, Lord — the most beautiful smile," she said.

An older cousin, Mario Greer, said he and Wright loved seeing each other on holidays, especially on the Fourth of July, when they liked to shoot off Roman candles together.

Wright attended three different high schools, including Edison High School in Minneapolis, where he was voted "class clown" as a freshman.

Jonathan Mason, who worked as a youth development specialist and mentor at the school, said Wright was a gregarious, popular student who had many friends.

"He was a charismatic kid. He would joke with you, and he was so witty," Mason said. "He was one of those kids that everybody looked up to."

Wright played on the freshman and junior varsity basketball teams, and was known for having a good left-hand shot, Mason said.

During mentoring sessions, Wright would talk about what he hoped to do with his life, Mason said.

"He said, 'I want to be an NBA player, I want to be a fashion designer, I want to be a business owner,'" Mason recalled. "I said, 'If you grow up, you can be whatever you want to be.'"

The two also talked about how Black men should behave during encounters with police, because of the history of Black Americans being shot by police during traffic stops and other encounters.

"I talked about if they pull you over, make sure your hands are on the top of the steering wheel, don't

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reach for anything," Mason said.

"He would always say, 'Man, why we gotta do all that just for people not to kill us?'"

Wright moved to Patrick Henry High School in Minneapolis in 2018, where his sister is also a student. Principal Yusuf Abdullah said he left after one semester and then went to Stadium View School.

"We got to know Daunte really well through his sister. Many staff worked with him through the years, trying to build a relationship with him, connect with him," Abdullah said.

He said Daunte wasn't a difficult kid, but had some of the typical issues of teenagers: "A troubled life? No. I think just along the lines of a teenage life." He wouldn't elaborate.

"He was a good kid — excitable," he said.

Police have described the shooting of Wright as "an accidental discharge" that happened as officers were trying to arrest Wright on an outstanding warrant after stopping his car for having expired registration tags. Wright's mother said he called her just before he was shot and told her police had pulled him over because he had air fresheners hanging from his rearview mirror.

The city's police chief, who resigned Tuesday, said he believed the officer who shot Wright, Kim Potter, meant to use her Taser on him, but instead shot him with her gun. A prosecutor on Wednesday charged Potter, who also resigned, with second-degree manslaughter.

According to court records, Wright was being sought after failing to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June.

A search of court records shows Wright had a minor criminal record, with petty misdemeanor convictions for possession/sale of a small amount of marijuana and disorderly conduct.

After he was killed Sunday, his family learned of a connection between Wright and George Floyd, the Black man whose death under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer nearly a year ago sparked nationwide protests. Floyd's girlfriend, Courteney Ross, said she worked with Wright while he was a student at Edison High School. Ross was a teacher's assistant and counselor at the school, said Mason, who worked with Ross.

"(I'm) crushed. It's enough that Floyd is gone, but for one of my youths to be gone as well," Ross said Tuesday during a protest against police brutality in Minneapolis.

"He was just a wonderful, beautiful boy," Ross said.

Stinging report raises new questions about Capitol security

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Shields that shattered upon impact. Weapons too old to use. Missed intelligence in which future insurrectionists warned, "We get our president or we die."

As Congress pushes for a return to normalcy months after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol, a damning internal report about the deadly siege is painting a dire picture of the Capitol Police's ability to respond to threats against lawmakers. The full report obtained by The Associated Press before the department's watchdog testifies at a House hearing casts serious doubt on whether the police would be able to respond to another large-scale attack.

The Capitol Police have so far refused to publicly release the report — prepared in March and marked as "law enforcement sensitive" — despite congressional pressure. Democratic Rep. Zoe Lofgren of California, who heads the House Administration Committee, said last month that she found the report, along with another she had reviewed, "detailed and disturbing." The inspector general who prepared it, Michael A. Bolton, was scheduled to testify before Lofgren's committee Thursday.

The Capitol Police said in a statement Wednesday that the siege was "a pivotal moment" in history that showed the need for "major changes" in how the department operates, but it was "important to note that nearly all of the recommendations require significant resources the department does not have."

Bolton found that the department's deficiencies were — and remain — widespread: Equipment was old and stored badly; officers didn't complete required training; and there was a lack of direction at the Civil

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Disturbance Unit, which exists to ensure that legislative functions of Congress are not disrupted by civil unrest or protest activity. That was exactly what happened on Jan. 6 when supporters of then-President Donald Trump violently pushed past police and broke into the Capitol as Congress counted the Electoral College votes that certified Joe Biden's victory.

The report also focuses on several pieces of missed intelligence, including an FBI memo sent the day before the insurrection that then-Capitol Police Chief Steven Sund told lawmakers he never saw. The memo warned of threatening online postings by Trump backers, including one comment that Congress "needs to hear glass breaking, doors being kicked in" and blood being spilled.

"Get violent ... Stop calling this a march, or rally, or a protest," read one post recounted in the memo. "Go there ready for war. We get our President or we die. NOTHING else will achieve this goal."

A separate report prepared by the Department of Homeland Security in December alerted the police to messages on a blog where people appeared to be planning for Jan. 6. One online post included a map of tunnels under the Capitol used by lawmakers and staff. "Take note," the message said.

An extensive timeline of that day included in Bolton's report describes the movements of the Capitol Police as officers scrambled to evacuate lawmakers. It details previously unknown conversations among officials as they disagreed on whether National Guard forces were necessary. It quotes an Army official telling Sund, after the insurrectionists had broken in, that "we don't like the optics of the National Guard standing in a line at the Capitol".

The riot has pushed the Capitol Police force toward a state of crisis, with officers working extra shifts and forced overtime to protect the Capitol. The acting chief, Yogananda Pittman, received a vote of no confidence from the union in February, reflecting widespread distrust among the rank and file who were left exposed and injured as the violent mob descended on the building. Morale has plummeted.

The entire force is also grieving the deaths of three of their own. Officer Brian Sicknick collapsed and died after engaging with protesters on Jan. 6. Officer William "Billy" Evans was killed April 2 when he was hit by a car that rammed into a barricade outside the Senate. Evans laid in honor in the Capitol Rotunda on Tuesday.

A third officer, Howard Liebengood, died by suicide in the days after the insurrection.

Bolton found that in many cases, department equipment had expired but was not replaced. Some was more than 20 years old. Riot shields that shattered upon impact as the officers fended off the violent mob had been improperly stored. Weapons that could have fired tear gas were so old that officers didn't feel comfortable using them. Other weapons that could have done more to disperse the crowd were never staged before a Trump rally held near the White House, and those who were ordered to get backup supplies to the front lines could not make it through the aggressive crowd.

In other cases, weapons weren't used because of "orders from leadership," the document says. Those weapons — called "less lethal" because they are designed to disperse rather than kill — could have helped the police repel the rioters as they moved toward the Capitol after Trump's speech, according to the report.

The report faults the Civil Disturbance Unit for a lack of preparation. Guidance was lacking for when to activate the unit, how to issue gear, what tactics to use and how to lay out the command structure. Some policies hadn't been updated in more than a decade and there was no firm roster of who was even in the division. Many officers didn't want to be a part of it.

The timeline in the report also gives a more detailed look at Capitol Police movements, commands and conversations as the chaos unfolded. It recounts several instances in which police and SWAT teams rescued individual lawmakers trapped in the Capitol and sheds new light on conversations in which Sund begged for National Guard support. Sund and others, including the head of the D.C. National Guard, have testified that Pentagon officials were concerned about the optics of a military response.

The document quotes Army Staff Secretary Walter Piatt telling Sund and others on a call that "we don't like the optics" of the National Guard at the Capitol and he would recommend not sending them. That was at 2:26 p.m.; rioters had already smashed their way into the building.

The Pentagon eventually did approve the Guard's presence, and Guard members arrived after 5 p.m. While they were waiting, Sund also had a teleconference with then-Vice President Mike Pence, the timeline

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shows. Pence was in a secure location in the Capitol because he had overseen the counting of the electoral votes. Some rioters were calling for his hanging because he refused to try and overturn Biden's win.

The AP reported Saturday that Pence also had a conversation that day with the acting defense secretary, Christopher Miller, in which Pence demanded, "Clear the Capitol."

Red states on U.S. electoral map lagging on vaccinations

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

SAVANNAH, Georgia (AP) — With coronavirus shots now in the arms of nearly half of American adults, the parts of the U.S. that are excelling and those that are struggling with vaccinations are starting to look like the nation's political map: deeply divided between red and blue states.

Out in front is New Hampshire, where 65% of the population age 18 and older has received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Following close behind are New Mexico, Connecticut, Maine and Massachusetts at 55% or greater. All have a history of voting Democratic and supported President Joe Biden in the 2020 election.

Meanwhile, at the bottom are five states where fewer than 40% have rolled up their sleeves for a shot. Four of them — Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana and Tennessee — lean Republican and voted for Donald Trump last fall. The fifth is Georgia, which has a Republican governor and supported GOP presidential candidates for nearly three decades before narrowly backing Biden.

The emerging pattern: Americans in blue states that lean Democratic appear to be getting vaccinated at more robust rates, while those in red Republican states seem to be more hesitant.

"We can draw a conclusion that red states and voters that voted for Trump are going to be more difficult to vaccinate because we have real good survey data to support that," said Dr. Howard Forman, a professor of public health and management at the Yale School of Medicine.

A poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research in late March found that 36% of Republicans said they will probably or definitely not get vaccinated, compared with 12% of Democrats. Similarly, a third of rural Americans said they were leaning against getting shots, while fewer than a fourth of people living in cities and suburbs shared that hesitancy.

Forman cautioned that in most U.S. states, which receive vaccine shipments based on population, demand for the shot still exceeds supply. So it's hard to know how many people are resisting until everyone wanting the shots gets them. But if states soon start seeing significant numbers of unfilled appointments with many people still unvaccinated, he said consequences could be serious.

"We could see substantial outbreaks for a long time," Forman said. "It will determine whether we go back to normal in some cases."

Past AP-NORC polls have shown more Republicans than Democrats say the government has exaggerated the threat posed by the virus. Republicans have also been more opposed to restrictions and mask-wearing.

The CDC reports that nearly 121 million American adults — or 47% of the U.S. adult population — have received at least one coronavirus shot. California, the nation's largest blue state, is slightly ahead of that pace, at 50%. The biggest red state, Texas, lags at less than 44%.

How swiftly states are vaccinating doesn't always correlate with how they vote.

Deeply red South Dakota ranks among the most successful states, with 54% of its population getting injections. Among blue states, Nevada lags furthest behind the U.S. at less than 44%, followed by Oregon and Michigan at 45% each.

New Hampshire, which leads the nation in adult vaccinations, has a Republican governor and a GOP-controlled Legislature. However, Democrats hold all of its seats in Congress and the state has consistently Democratic in every presidential election since 2008.

West Virginia, where Trump carried 66% of the vote last year, became an early success story in the vaccine rollout as the first U.S. state to cover all nursing homes. But while Republican Gov. Jim Justice has remained a vaccine cheerleader, West Virginia now lags the U.S. overall with less than 42% of its population receiving at least one dose.

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Among those who say they won't get vaccinated is 58-year-old Martha Brown. Sitting outside her apartment complex in Charleston, West Virginia, Brown said she's afraid of having a bad reaction after a flu shot last year left her with cold symptoms.

"I'm OK without it," Brown said. "I wear my mask all the time."

Experts said it's too soon to tell whether pausing shots of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine will increase reluctance to get vaccinated. Government scientists are investigating reports of unusual blood clots in six women who received the vaccine.

If the issue gets resolved quickly and it's deemed safe to resume Johnson & Johnson shots, there should be little impact on public confidence, said Claire Hannan, executive director of the Association of Immunization Managers. She hopes the response itself assures people "the system is working."

"It's really important to understand that's how closely we monitor everyone getting the vaccine" for potential problems, Hannan said. "We have systems in place to connect the dots."

In a suburb outside Chicago, Jennifer Rockwood was getting ready to get her Johnson & Johnson shot Tuesday morning when she heard about the recommended pause. She cancelled her appointment after waiting months to get the vaccine.

"Did it give me hesitancy? Yes it did," said Rockwood, 49. "But I was immediately back at my kitchen counter flipping the laptop open again and seeing what I could do to schedule another one."

She booked an appointment to get the Pfizer vaccine Wednesday.

Trump has publicly urged Americans to get vaccinated but also received his own injections secretly, disclosing them only after he left office. As president, he spent much of the pandemic minimizing the dangers of the virus, even after being hospitalized with COVID-19.

Some Republican governors have likewise kept their own vaccinations quiet.

In Florida, where about 44% of the population has gotten at least one shot, it wasn't disclosed that GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis got the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine until a reporter asked the governor's spokeswoman days later. Many other U.S. governors have gotten their shots on camera or held news conferences around them in an effort to assure people the vaccines are safe.

The Democratic governor of Kentucky, a Trump-voting state, is trying to persuade more people to get jabbed by promising to lift pandemic restrictions when vaccination rates improve. About 1.6 million people in Kentucky have gotten at least one dose, a rate equal to the U.S. overall.

Gov. Andy Beshear said Monday he'll lift capacity restrictions on restaurants, retail stores, concert halls and other businesses once Kentucky reaches 2.5 million people who have had shots.

"Every single individual's choices can get us closer to that normalcy we've been looking for," Beshear said.

Coinbase soars in market debut, valued near \$86 billion

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN and ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writers

Coinbase made a rousing debut on Wall Street Wednesday, with shares of the digital currency exchange rising as high as \$429, briefly giving it a market value over \$100 billion.

Coinbase Global Inc.'s initial public offering happened with cryptocurrency chatter seemingly everywhere, even at the U.S. Federal Reserve. Digital currencies are being incorporated into business plans and accepted for payment by major corporations like Tesla, PayPal and Visa.

The San Francisco-based company's listing on a public stock exchange is seen by some as an inflection point for digital currencies, as Coinbase's fortunes are closely tied to Bitcoin, the most popular cryptocurrency. Bitcoin's price topped \$64,000 on Wednesday, up from \$29,000 at the start of the year, and Coinbase said recently that first-quarter revenue should total around \$1.8 billion, exceeding its revenue for all of 2020.

Shares of Coinbase are listed on the Nasdaq under the ticker "COIN," and closed at \$328.28, up 31% from the \$250 reference price set by Nasdaq ahead of the first trade. That puts Coinbase's market value at \$85.78 billion.

That market value makes Coinbase one of the biggest publicly traded U.S. companies — just 93 companies in the S&P 500 index have a higher market value. Coinbase's value is close to the combined market

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value of Nasdaq Inc., which runs the Nasdaq Stock Market, and Intercontinental Exchange, which owns the New York Stock Exchange.

Founded in 2012, Coinbase became popular among cryptocurrency fans by providing them with an easier way to exchange shares of Bitcoin and other digital currencies. Unlike many newly public companies Coinbase is profitable — the company estimates it had net income of between \$730 million and \$800 million in the first quarter.

Dan Ives, analyst at Wedbush Securities, said in a note Wednesday that "Coinbase is a foundational piece of the crypto ecosystem and is a barometer for the growing mainstream adoption of Bitcoin and crypto for the coming years."

Still, even as more companies warm up to digital currencies, there are many doubters. Until recently the major financial institutions avoided cryptocurrencies, and Bitcoin is still viewed more as a store of value than as a method of payment.

Even as Coinbase made its trading debut, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell described cryptocurrencies as "vehicles for speculation" in comments to the Economic Club of Washington. "No one is using them for payments, for example, like the dollar."

And not all investors are buying into the Coinbase hype. David Trainer, CEO of investment research firm New Constructs, said Coinbase has "little-to-no-chance of meeting the future profit expectations that are baked into its ridiculously high valuation."

Trainer last week put a valuation on Coinbase closer to \$18.9 billion, arguing it will face more competition as the cryptocurrency market matures.

Coinbase said it had 56 million verified users as of March 31, with 6.1 million making transactions monthly. Trading volume in the first quarter was \$335 million.

Coinbase earns 0.5% of the value of every transaction that goes through its system. So if someone buys \$100 in Bitcoin, Coinbase earns 50 cents. If Bitcoin or Ethereum prices drop, the commissions Coinbase earns drop as well, giving it some exposure to the digital currencies' rise and fall.

Instead of using a traditional IPO, Coinbase went public through a public listing. That means it avoided the typical agreements with big banks that would buy thousands of shares and promote them. A direct listing allows insiders and early investors to convert their stakes in the company into publicly traded stock.

Other recent direct listings include the music streaming service Spotify in 2018, the messaging service Slack in 2019 and the data-mining company Palantir Technologies in 2020.

Shares of Coinbase should attract investors who want to get into the cryptocurrency space in addition to, or without buying any coins at all, said Lule Demmissie, president of Ally Invest.

"It could also be a less volatile security than the coins themselves," Demmissie says.

The disabled hope their Oscar moment can become a movement

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Right down to its production design, the Oscars have not always felt like the most welcoming place for the disabled.

"I've always seen that stage with its stairs as a symbol that they don't expect people who had mobility issues to be nominated or to win an award," said Jim LeBrecht, the co-director and co-star of the Oscar-nominated documentary "Crip Camp." "It's always been this kind of negative tacit statement."

This year shows signs of change. LeBrecht, who has spina bifida and uses a wheelchair, will attend the April 25 ceremony. So will Robert Tarango, the deaf-blind star of the nominated short, "Feeling Through."

The victors' podium will be accessible for both. And LeBrecht hopes that will become a permanent change, both literally and figuratively.

The two films, along with "Sound of Metal," nominated for six awards including best picture, have the people behind them hoping their Oscar moment can become a catalyst for Hollywood to stop using the disabled as sources of inspiration, objects of pity, or twisted villains.

"I think that the goal is to alleviate the fear," Tarango said through a translator, "to open the doors so

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that executives don't look at our ability to hear or not to hear and to see that somebody who is blind, deaf-blind, who has any kind of disability is just part of the world and can be part of these films."

The academy, under pressure, has pushed for greater race and gender inclusion in recent years. The disabled can too often be forgotten in that discussion.

"It's time that people need to recognize that diversity should include the disabled, the deaf-blind and the deaf community," Marlee Matlin, an executive producer on "Feeling Through" and the only deaf actor to win an Oscar, said through a translator. "I hope that it's not just the flavor of the year, that it goes beyond, and that this is a trend that will continue."

Traditionally in Academy Award-nominated movies, disabled people appear only when an actor seeking an Oscar-worthy role plays one on screen.

That has led some disabled people to feel like "they're stealing our stories," said LeBrecht, a sound designer whose friend, documentary director Nicole Newnham, asked that he direct "Crip Camp" with her. She wanted a disability-led perspective after he suggested she make a documentary about his summer camp and its essential role in the birth of the disability rights movement.

"If we just realize that the stories around disabilities aren't just about overcoming adversity or tragedy," he said, "then I think we could see kind of the beginning of a golden age where finally people with disabilities show their true lives, their real life experiences."

The disabled have long been among the least represented groups in film and television. Last year, USC Annenberg's annual inequality report found that, only 2.3% of all speaking characters across the 100 top-grossing films of 2019 were even depicted with a disability, much less played by a disabled actor.

"Feeling Through" director Doug Roland called stats like that "abysmal," but said his determination to cast a deaf-blind actor in the film based on a real chance encounter he had on the street, was not made from any sense of inclusion.

"I wasn't even thinking from what I now know is the conversation around authentic representation, which I've had like a real master class in over the last three years," Roland said. "I was just thinking, you know, I think this would just be a lot more impactful if we have someone from the community be a part of this."

His search led him to the Helen Keller National Center, which helped him find Tarango, who was working in their kitchen. The center then helped him extensively through every step of the process.

"We bring a culture to this," Tarango said. "We bring our independence that people don't often see. I was excited, excited and grateful honestly to Doug for picking someone who was deaf-blind, because I think that has helped in the success of the film."

When Matlin won her 1987 Oscar for "Children of a Lesser God," it felt like a major breakthrough. But a flood of roles and nominations didn't follow for deaf or other disabled actors.

"I thought, 'OK, it will break barriers,'" Matlin said. "But then, the focus moved away."

She said the lack of social media at the time made it very difficult to apply pressure and build momentum for a cause the way the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag did for Black actors.

Now, she says disabled people and their advocates are "able to speak out from wherever they are. They are able to lend their voice, their opinions, their views, their visions, their imaginations."

"Sound of Metal" has been praised for its authentic examination of the world of the deaf, and its use of deaf actors in supporting roles. It has also received some deaf-community criticism for casting a hearing actor, Riz Ahmed, in the lead role of a drummer who must reckon with losing his hearing.

Paul Raci, a child of deaf parents who is nominated for best supporting actor for his role as a leader of a sober house for the deaf, understands the criticism, but said "for the most part, deaf people have accepted this movie with open arms."

"It shows a deaf sober house, deaf people as addicts, which is a totally new idea to show deaf people as people that have the same foibles you and I have, the same challenges, the same journeys," Raci said.

And he believes the larger conversation the movie has helped open will mean even more.

"You're going to see more inclusion in casting in this town, in Hollywood," he said. "You're going to see a lot more differently abled people, people that use wheelchairs, blind, deaf, there's going to be a lot more of those kind of protagonists. And you're going to watch those journeys unfold on the screen."

More COVID state shutdowns unlikely, despite CDC suggestion

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

When one of the nation's top health officials this week suggested states dealing with a spring spike of coronavirus cases should "shut things down," the remark landed with a thud.

Even Democratic governors and lawmakers who supported tough stay-at-home orders and business closures to stem previous COVID-19 outbreaks say they're done with that approach. It's a remarkable turnaround for governors who have said from the beginning of the pandemic that they will follow the science in their decision-making, but it's also a nod to reality: Another round of lockdown orders would likely just be ignored by a pandemic-weary public.

The political dynamics have changed markedly in recent weeks as vaccination rates have grown, warmer weather has returned, and the public and business owners have become increasingly vocal about reopening schools and loosening restrictions around social gatherings.

"I think we have a real compliance issue if we try to go back to the sort of restrictions that were in place in March and April of last year," said Pennsylvania state Rep. Mike Zabel, a Democrat who had supported previous shutdown orders by Gov. Tom Wolf, a fellow Democrat. "I don't think there's any appetite for that in Pennsylvania at all."

COVID-19 cases have been increasing in Pennsylvania, and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data shows it has one of the highest per capita case counts in the nation over the past week. Even so, Wolf's administration said it "has no plans at this time to reinstitute any shutdown orders." It instead noted that mask-wearing, gathering limits and social distancing remain required as the state gradually reopens.

Other governors also are staying on course to reopen society as they simultaneously expand vaccine eligibility, potentially complicating President Joe Biden's efforts to conquer the pandemic.

Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, a Democrat, has pleaded unsuccessfully with the Biden administration to redirect more vaccine doses to her state as it struggles with the nation's highest COVID-19 case rate. But the CDC director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said Monday that vaccines wouldn't immediately quell a surge because they take up to six weeks to take full effect.

"The answer to that is to really close things down, to go back to our basics, to go back to where we were last spring, last summer and to shut things down, to flatten the curve, to decrease contact with one another, to test," Walensky said.

That didn't seem to sway Whitmer, who kept tough restrictions in place for months when COVID-19 cases surged last spring and fall but has been reluctant this time to go beyond the mask mandate and capacity limits. She has instead urged a voluntary two-week suspension of indoor restaurant dining, in-person high school classes and youth sports.

"When we can't take action to protect ourselves, the government must step in. That's where we were a year ago. That's where we were four months ago," Whitmer said. "We're in a different moment. Every one of us has the ability and knowledge to do what it takes."

She primarily blamed lack of compliance and the new coronavirus variants for the recent spike in cases. Adopting language used by Republican governors earlier in the pandemic, Whitmer and some other Democratic governors are urging people to take personal responsibility for behaviors that will help limit the spread of the virus.

Since the start of this year, the number of people going to restaurants and bars has noticeably increased while public support has declined for shutting down businesses and limiting travel, according to the COVID States Project, which has surveyed public attitudes and behaviors since the pandemic began.

That means governors must weigh what the public would be willing to do as they consider how to respond to a resurgence of cases fueled by the new variants, said James Druckman, a political science professor at Northwestern University in Illinois who is part of the survey consortium.

"It's unrealistic to engage in complete shutdowns or closing of public spaces at this point," he said. "I think you'd see a lot of people, including business owners, not following those types of things."

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo and other top Democratic and Republican leaders have not expressed any

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support for putting restrictions back in place, even though Cuomo has acknowledged the state is facing increased detection of potentially more contagious variants.

The Democratic governor has said people want their children in classrooms and that the struggling hospitality and restaurant industries need help. He blamed any uptick in COVID-19 cases on "human behavior."

"It is a matter of personal responsibility," Cuomo said at a Tuesday event that he barred reporters from attending. "You tell me how you act, I'll tell you your likelihood of getting COVID."

New York Assembly Minority Leader Will Barclay, a Republican, said he would be against re-imposing a lockdown: "Taking any steps backward would have serious social and economic consequences," he said.

In Colorado, a statewide mask mandate remains in effect until May 6. But Democratic Gov. Jared Polis plans to transfer decisions about other public health orders to county governments on Friday. That will put Colorado in line with some Republican-led states such as Missouri, which has left decisions about business shutdowns in the hands of local officials since last summer.

Although Colorado has seen COVID-19 cases and deaths rise over the past two weeks, Polis said the lack of hospitalizations among older adults shows vaccines are working. The governor said he doesn't think closures are necessary, but "people should honor that at the local level" if imposed.

A spokesperson said Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat, is concerned about a recent increase in COVID-19 cases but noted that hospitals have capacity and added that there is no need to repeat the earlier shutdowns. In Delaware, where cases have been high, Democratic Gov. John Carney said he hopes to avoid tightening restrictions that he has gradually eased over recent months.

Reinstating shutdowns not only would lead to political backlash but also would be psychologically difficult for some people, who just recently have begun to experience renewed freedoms after a year of restrictions.

"From a social science perspective, the decision from the governor to not go towards a lockdown I think is a sensible one," said Dominique Brossard, chair of the Department of Life Sciences Communication at the University of Wisconsin. "You need to work with what you have as far as people's psychological state."

Humanitarian crisis feared in St. Vincent amid eruptions

By DÁNICA COTO and EDITH M. LEDERER Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico (AP) — Ongoing volcanic eruptions have displaced about 20% of people in the eastern Caribbean island of St. Vincent as a U.N. official on Wednesday warned of a growing humanitarian crisis.

Between 16,000 to 20,000 people were evacuated under government orders before La Soufriere volcano first erupted on Friday, covering the lush green island with ash that continues to blanket communities in St. Vincent as well as Barbados and other nearby islands.

About 6,000 of those evacuees are considered most vulnerable, said Didier Trebucq, United Nations resident coordinator for Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean.

"So we are facing a situation with a great deal of uncertainty, and also a humanitarian crisis that is growing and may continue for weeks and months," he said.

Trebucq said that based on certain information and preliminary estimations, 20,000 people are "estimated at risk of food insecurity, given the loss of the assets in terms of livelihood like fisheries, or agriculture."

Some 4,000 people are temporarily living in 87 government shelters, while others have relocated to hotels or the homes of friends and family, officials said. Trebucq noted that many shelters are lacking basic services including drinking water.

He said priority number one is water, which is being transported from nearby Caribbean nations and other contributors since water systems shut down in many parts of the island.

He said priority number two is meeting the needs of the 4,000 people in shelters, including cots and basic supplies, sanitation, hygiene and emergency latrines.

"We are dealing with a crisis within the COVID crisis," Trebucq told reporters at U.N. headquarters in New York in a video briefing. "Many health facilities have been affected by the ashes."

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Prime Minister Ralph Gonsalves said Wednesday during a press conference broadcast by local station NBC radio that people need to strictly adhere to COVID-19 measures to avoid outbreaks.

"We cannot have that at any time, and most of all, at this time," he said.

He also said a big issue is trying to determine the needs of those staying in hundreds of private homes across the island, adding that registration of those evacuees is ongoing.

Officials also urged those remaining in communities closest to the volcano to evacuate as soon as possible, noting that the explosions are ongoing and causing new pyroclastic flows.

"I don't want them to die like that," said Richard Robertson with the University of the West Indies' Seismic Research Center. "It's not a nice way to go."

Friday's explosion produced only ash, but pyroclastic flows have multiplied as the volcano shifts shape with each new eruption, some of which have been stronger than the one recorded last week. Robertson said volcanic activity is expected to continue for days or even weeks. The volcano had a minor eruption in December after a previous eruption in 1979. An older eruption in 1902 killed some 1,600 people.

Water continues to be of great concern, although Garth Saunders, minister of the island's water and sewer authority, said Wednesday that the situation is improving and that more water supply systems are coming back on. He added that crews are prioritizing bakeries so people can have basic sustenance.

"We are doing our best," he said.

Trebuca said the U.N. will soon be launching an emergency appeal to support the humanitarian response and the early recovery for the next six months.

He said the goal is to ensure people's lives go back to normal as soon as possible, but that he worried about the impact on the island's tourism and agricultural sectors. The U.N. is mobilizing experts through the U.N. Environment Program in collaboration with the European Union to help remove and dispose of the ashes, he said.

"This is a crisis that is going to certainly last more than six months in St. Vincent and other islands," he said.

Biden's gamble: Will pulling troops revive extremist threat?

By ROBERT BURNS AP National Security Writer

BRUSSELS (AP) — At its start, America's war in Afghanistan was about retribution for 9/11. Then it was about shoring up a weak government and its weak army so that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida could never again threaten the United States.

Now it's about over. With bin Laden long since dead and the United States not suffering another major attack, President Joe Biden is promising to end America's longest war and move on to what he believes are bigger, more consequential challenges posed by a resurgent Russia and a rising China.

Even so, by withdrawing the remaining few thousand U.S. troops in Afghanistan by the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks, Biden is taking a calculated risk that extremists in Afghanistan can be countered by U.S. and partner forces elsewhere in the region — and that he won't become the president who underestimated the resilience and reach of extremists who still aim to attack the United States.

CIA Director William Burns told Congress on Wednesday the U.S. unavoidably will lose some intelligence leverage against the extremist threat, although he suggested the losses would be manageable.

"The U.S. government's ability to collect and act on threats will diminish. That's simply a fact," Burns said. "It is also a fact, however, that after withdrawal, whenever that time comes, the CIA and all of our partners in the U.S. government will retain a suite of capabilities, some of it remaining in place, some of them that we will generate, that can help us to anticipate and contest any rebuilding effort."

There were 2,500 to 3,000 U.S. troops in Afghanistan when Biden took office, the smallest number since early in the war. The number peaked at 100,000 during President Barack Obama's first term. As U.S. war casualties have declined, so has the American public's attention. The war was barely mentioned during last year's presidential contest, and pulling the plug may prove politically popular.

Yet worries remain. Stephen Biddle, a Columbia University professor who has advised U.S. commanders in Afghanistan, says it's possible al-Qaida could re-establish its base structure in Afghanistan once

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the Americans and their coalition partners leave. The Taliban in Afghanistan pledged in a February 2020 agreement with the Trump administration that they would not allow al-Qaida or other extremist groups to use Afghan territory to threaten the United States. But that deal may be imperiled by Biden's decision not to complete the withdrawal of forces by May 1, as the Trump administration had promised.

The bigger peril, Biddle said in an email exchange, is that the withdrawal could lead to the collapse of Afghan security forces and multi-sided civil warfare involving Taliban factions and others "in a more-lethal version of the civil war of the 1990s."

"This would be a humanitarian disaster for Afghans — far worse than today's insurgency," he said.

More broadly, the absence of U.S. forces in Afghanistan could lead to further instability in a region with two rival nuclear powers — Pakistan and India, which have insurgencies of their own to contend with.

"This is already a dangerous part of the world; making it worse by allowing the collapse of the Afghan government is the biggest risk here," Biddle said.

At a previously pivotal moment in the war, Obama took a similar view. When he announced a surge of 30,000 U.S. troops to Afghanistan in December 2009, he argued against trying to contain extremist threats in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region only with what the U.S. military calls "over-the-horizon" forces — troops and aircraft positioned beyond Afghan borders.

"To abandon this area now — and to rely only on efforts against al-Qaida from a distance — would significantly hamper our ability to keep the pressure on al-Qaida and create an unacceptable risk of additional attacks on our homeland and our allies," Obama said.

So Obama went ahead with a troop buildup aimed at hitting the Taliban so hard that they would agree to negotiate a peace deal. It didn't work. The Taliban kept fighting. Even after President Donald Trump authorized a more muscular military approach to the Taliban in 2017, the hard-hit militant group did not give up. It agreed to negotiate with the Afghan government, but those talks have stalled.

It's difficult to judge what has been gained in the 12 years since Obama escalated the war. Afghan security forces likely are stronger, although their resilience will be tested in the absence of U.S. support they grew to rely upon. The Afghan government has not strengthened its authority across the country, and the Pentagon argues that its intense focus on countering insurgents there and in the Middle East has been such a drain on resources that the U.S. is losing ground against China and Russia.

The war has cost more than 2,300 U.S. lives and immeasurable suffering among Afghans since the United States invaded in October 2001. Ten years into the war, in May 2011, U.S. forces killed bin Laden in Pakistan, and for a short time it seemed possible that Washington would see an opening for ending the war.

A few weeks after bin Laden's death, a young American soldier at a dusty outpost in eastern Afghanistan asked visiting Defense Secretary Robert Gates what effect the al-Qaida leader's demise would have on the war, suggesting hope that it would hasten its end and allow troops to go home.

"It is too early to tell," Gates replied.

Ten years later, Biden has decided the time has come, although for Afghans the war may be far from over.

In Minnesota, suburban mayor is thrust into policing debate

By KATHLEEN HENNESSEY and MOHAMED IBRAHIM Associated Press

Mike Elliott is among many who celebrated his election as mayor of Brooklyn Center as the beginning of a new era, marking the first time one of Minnesota's most racially diverse places would be led by a person of color. Elliott, a Black man who had emigrated from Liberia as a child, was almost giddy in talking about his plans for multicultural city hall.

"It's incredible, it's really incredible," Elliott said then of Hmong, African, Vietnamese and white residents living side-by-side in the inner-ring Minneapolis suburb's working-class neighborhoods. He called his 2018 election "an opportunity for the great diversity of the city to have a voice at the table."

A little more than two years later the mayor is finding out just how difficult it is to turn the page on the nation's racial history. The shooting of Daunte Wright, a Black man, by a white police officer has set off protests, political upheaval and painful reckoning about racism and representation in his small city. The

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debate echoes one that engulfed neighboring Minneapolis and many larger communities last year after the death of George Floyd. But in Brooklyn Center, it is playing out in a place where some believed they'd made progress — only to be thrust to the front lines of the fight.

"It's been very difficult for myself, for the community, to deal with the pain and the agony that comes from watching a young man be killed before our eyes," Elliott, 37, told reporters Tuesday.

Since the Sunday shooting, the mayor has become the face of this community's struggle, which comes as a former Minneapolis police officer is on trial in the Floyd case.

Elliott has promised transparency and vowed accountability for Wright's death. He's calmly fielded scores of questions from activists pressing for answers and plans. He's expressed empathy for the protesters who've clashed with police, and ventured out in the nighttime protest in protective gear to appeal for peace: "I could feel their pain. I could feel their anger. I could feel their fear," he said of this encounter.

Under pressure to swiftly fire the officer involved, Kim Potter, Elliott and the city council voted to fire the city manager, and give control of the police department to the mayor. On Tuesday, Potter and the police chief resigned. Elliott made clear the city already had been moving toward firing Potter. He said he hoped her departure would "bring some calm to the community."

But the mayor also has acknowledged systemic sources of the distrust between residents and police in his city. Of the roughly 50 sworn officers on the city's force, "very few" are people of color and none live in Brooklyn Center, he said, acknowledging he saw the latter as a clear problem.

"There is a huge importance to having a significant number of your officers living in the community where they serve," he said.

The racial gap is not uncommon in suburban police departments, but is especially stark in Brooklyn Center, one of a nation's many rapidly diversifying suburbs. About 45% of the roughly 31,000 residents are white, according to Census figures. Minneapolis, meanwhile, is 63% white.

The city has long drawn families from Minneapolis' historically Black north side neighborhood. But over the past two decades, Brooklyn Center has become home to thousands of immigrants from Laos, Vietnam and West Africa in search of affordable homes, good schools and community. Nearly a quarter of its residents are foreign born.

"It's the future face of America," said Rep. Samantha Vang, a Hmong-American and Democrat who represents Brooklyn Center in the Minnesota House of Representatives.

Elliott, who fled civil war in Liberia with his grandmother, is part of the migration story. He landed in Brooklyn Center, already a hub for Liberian immigrants, as a middle schooler, according to friend and mentor George Larson, a former principal at Brooklyn Center High School.

Elliott told Larson he wanted to be secretary general of the United Nations. He participated in student government, organized volunteering projects and planned a prom. In 2010, he graduated from Hamline University in St. Paul with a degree in international management and a minor in political science. Elliott started a translation company and tutoring nonprofit before running for office.

"He had the leadership gene from the get go," Larson said.

Elliott lost his first bid, but won the mayor's office in 2018, defeating an incumbent who'd served for a decade. In an interview with Minnesota Public Radio, he set some modest goals for a community that struggled to attract businesses.

At the end of his term, he hoped his city would be celebrating the arrival of a movie theater, a grocery store co-op and "some nice sit-down restaurants," he said. He talked about starting a festival that could celebrate the city's many cultures and spark some connections.

"Really bringing people together, bringing people together to celebrate, but bringing them together to govern, as well," he said.

There are signs of progress. A labor organizer and former Brooklyn Center City Council candidate, Alfreda Daniels Juasemai, ran for office last year after noticing a "disconnect" between Brooklyn Center city officials and the city's residents, she said. Most, if not all, unelected city staff and police officers don't live in the city, and residents only see city council members during Halloween when they pass out campaign literature as they take their children trick-or-treating, she said.

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Daniels Juasemai said Elliott is "trying his best" to change that through efforts like knocking on doors and asking residents how they're doing, or encouraging community members to attend city council meetings.

Having a mayor that looks like many of his constituents fosters an understanding that was absent before Elliott was elected, she said.

"It's easier for people in the city to connect with him, especially people within the Black and brown community, about the issues that are happening whether it's in the city or the country and how we can use that to make Brooklyn Center a better place," she said.

Mohamed Ibrahim 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.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of Daunte Wright at: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

Europe scrambles as J&J vaccine delay deals another blow

By JOSEPH WILSON Associated Press

BARCELONA, Spain (AP) — European countries diverged Wednesday on whether they would push ahead with giving their residents Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine after reports of very rare blood clots in a handful of recipients in the United States.

While some European Union members put the vaccine on hold as recommended by the American company, Poland, France and Hungary said they would go ahead and administer the doses that had arrived as the EU's 27 nations face continuing pressure to speed up their immunization drives.

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine, distributed in Europe by its subsidiary Janssen, is a key part of Europe's vaccination campaign, which has been criticized as sluggish. Of the four vaccines currently approved for use in the EU, J&J's is the only one that requires a single dose to be fully effective. That makes it ideal for hard-to-reach, vulnerable groups, such as those who are homeless or migrant workers.

But the drugmaker decided Tuesday to delay deliveries to Europe after the Food and Drug Administration recommended a pause in the vaccine's use in the U.S. while the rare clot cases are examined. The decision was the latest blow to the vaccine rollout in Europe, which already experienced a similar clot scare with the vaccine developed by British-Swedish company AstraZeneca.

The European Medicines Agency, the EU's regulatory agency for pharmaceutical products, has not advised EU members to put the Johnson & Johnson vaccine on hold. It said Wednesday: "The company (J&J) is in contact with national authorities, recommending to store the doses already received until the PRAC (EMA's safety committee) issues an expedited recommendation."

It's not clear if the exceedingly rare reports in the U.S. — so far, six cases out of about 7 million inoculations — are linked to the Johnson & Johnson vaccine. But European regulators already have declared that the unusual type of clots are possibly linked to the AstraZeneca vaccine, which is made with technology similar to Johnson & Johnson's product.

The AstraZeneca vaccine is in wide use around the globe, though not yet in the U.S. Several countries have imposed age restrictions on its use because of the clot concerns. Denmark, which put the vaccine on hold last month, decided Wednesday not to resume using the shots it had on hand, saying that citizens who had received a first dose would be offered a second dose of a different vaccine.

Still, experts agree COVID-19 poses a much larger risk of death and hospitalization than the potential threat of atypical clots. But the concerns could still undermine public confidence in these vaccines and in the entire vaccination effort.

On Wednesday, advisers to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention are expected to debate how to handle the Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

The EMA, which approved the vaccine last month, said Wednesday that it will make a recommendation likely next week on how to proceed with the vaccine.

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Until then, the regulator said that it “remains of the view that the benefits of the vaccine in preventing COVID-19 outweigh the risks of side effects.”

For Poland, that meant there was no reason to wait.

“In line with these recommendations (by the EMA), we will want to use it in inoculations,” Polish Health Minister Adam Niedzielski said.

France, which received 200,000 doses, said it is also sticking to its plan to start administering the vaccine in the middle of next week to people age 55 and over. Hungary also said it would move ahead with the doses it received. It plans to distribute them using buses that bring vaccines to rural areas.

Other countries, however, decided to hold up.

Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza said his government was waiting for further information from the FDA and the EMA to decide how to proceed with the initial 180,000 doses that arrived in Italy Tuesday.

“But I think this vaccine must be used because it’s an important vaccine, and the U.S. decision was a precautionary one, and the choice of Johnson & Johnson to not immediately put it on the market in Europe was also a precautionary choice,” Speranza said.

“Our hope is that these knots can be resolved as soon as possible so we can use this vaccine, which would be the fourth one and is particularly useful for us,” he said.

The Netherlands also put the 80,000 Johnson & Johnson doses it received into storage, as did Denmark, Croatia and Romania with their batches. South Africa suspended the shot as a “precautionary measure.”

The European Union has for weeks been looking at Britain with envy as the vaccination program of its former member outpaced its own.

The J&J shot was supposed to help it play catch-up.

Under a contract with the European Commission, 200 million doses were supposed to arrive in the second quarter of this year. That deal allowed for the purchase of an additional 200 million doses.

Despite this week’s delay, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said the EU was still on track to vaccinate 70% of adults by the end of the summer. Spain — which received an initial shipment of 146,000 doses that are now on hold — planned to use the shots to target groups that have been missed so far, including homeless people and migrant workers.

Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz also downplayed the impact of the delay that came hours after the first doses were delivered to his country.

“I can only tell you that, with the more than 8 million doses we will have delivered by the summer ... we will be able to offer everyone a first dose. I said at Easter within 100 days, and from today’s point of view I would stick to that,” Kurz said.

The trouble with Johnson & Johnson comes after various delays in shipments of other vaccines to Europe and the concerns with the AstraZeneca-BioNTech vaccine that first led countries to suspend its use and then impose a dizzying array of age restrictions on it.

Spain, for instance, went from using AstraZeneca on young people at first, to now only giving it people ages 60-69.

In a sign of the bloc’s current thinking, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced Wednesday that the bloc will start negotiating to buy 1.8 billion doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine through 2023.

This version has been updated to show that the Pfizer, not AstraZeneca, developed a vaccine with BioNTech.

Associated Press writers from around Europe contributed to this report.

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>

Study finds people want more than watchdogs for journalists

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — A study of the public's attitude toward the press reveals that distrust goes deeper than partisanship and down to how journalists define their very mission.

In short: Americans want more than a watchdog.

The study, released Wednesday by the Media Insight Project, a collaboration between the American Press Institute and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, suggests ways that news organizations can reach people they may be turning off now.

"In some ways, this study suggests that our job is broader and bigger than we've defined it," said Tom Rosenstiel, executive director of the American Press Institute.

The study defines five core principles or beliefs that drive most journalists: keep watch on public officials and the powerful; amplify voices that often go unheard; society works better with information out in the open; the more facts people have the closer they will get to the truth; and it's necessary to spotlight a community's problems to solve them.

Yet the survey, which asked non-journalists a series of questions designed to measure support for each of those ideas, found unqualified majority support for only one of them. Two-thirds of those surveyed fully supported the fact-finding mission.

Half of the public embraced the principle that it's important for the media to give a voice to the less powerful, according to the survey, and slightly less than half fully supported the roles of oversight and promoting transparency.

Less than a third of the respondents agreed completely with the idea that it's important to aggressively point out problems. Only 11% of the public, most of them liberals, offered full support to all five ideas.

"I do believe they should be a watchdog on the government, but I don't think they should lean either way," said Annabell Hawkins, 41, a stay-at-home mother from Lawton, Oklahoma. "When I grew up watching the news it seemed pretty neutral. You'd get either side. But now it doesn't seem like that."

Hawkins said she believed the news media spent far too much time criticizing former President Donald Trump and rarely gave him credit for anything good he did while in office.

"I just want the facts about what happened so I can make up my own mind," said Patrick Gideons, a 64-year-old former petroleum industry supervisor who lives south of Houston. He lacks faith in the news media because he believes it offers too much opinion.

Gideons, though, said he gets most of his news through social media, which is skilled in directing followers toward beliefs they are comfortable with. He said he knows only one person who subscribes to a newspaper anymore — his 91-year-old father.

Polls show how the public's attitude toward the press has soured over the past 50 years and, in this century, how it has become much more partisan. In 2000, a Gallup poll found 53% of Democrats said they trusted the media, compared with 47% of Republicans. In the last full year of the Trump presidency, Gallup found trust went up to 73% among Democrats and plunged to 10% among Republicans.

The survey's findings point to some ways news organizations can combat the negativity.

Half a century ago, when newspapers were flourishing and before the internet and cable television led to an explosion in opinionated news, the public's view of the role of journalists was more compatible to how journalists viewed the job themselves, Rosenstiel said.

"We were the tough guys, we were the cops," he said.

The study indicates now that consumers are interested in news that highlights potential solutions to problems and want to hear about things that are working, he said.

"We tend to think that stories that celebrate the good things in society are soft stories, kind of wimpy," he said. "But they may be more important than we think in providing a full and accurate picture of the world."

People who put greater emphasis on loyalty and authority tend to be more skeptical of the core values that journalists try to uphold, as opposed to those who give greater weight to fairness, the study found. Changes in the way a story is framed can make it more widely appealing to different audiences.

In one example, researchers took a story about a canceled recreation center project in a low-income neighborhood and emphasized the element, less prominent in the original story, that the parks director had diverted funds designated for the project by the city's mayor. The change led to the story being seen as more trusted and appealing by a broader set of the public, especially those who place value in authority.

The nationwide survey was conducted with 2,727 adults in the fall of 2019, with a second set of interviews done last August with 1,155 people who had completed the first survey.

The study found that majorities of Americans believe that the media doesn't care about them and tries to cover up its mistakes. Despite the negativity, Rosenstiel said he believes there's room for both sides to come to a better understanding of each other.

Believe it or not, most journalists are pretty sincere, said Rosenstiel, a former reporter for the Los Angeles Times and Newsweek.

"Regular people should note that when journalists say they are just doing their job, they actually mean that," he said, "because they define their job a certain way. They're not lying. They really don't think of themselves as secret agents of the Democratic Party. They have these set of principles that they think they're upholding."

Loneliness is rampant. A simple call, or hug, may be a cure

By LINDSEY TANNER and MARTHA IRVINE Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — The stranger's call came when Dianne Green needed it most.

Alone in the home where she'd raised four kids, grieving recently deceased relatives, too fearful of COVID-19 to see her grandkids and great-grandbabies, she had never felt lonelier.

Then, one day last spring, her cell phone lit up.

The cheerful voice on the line was Janine Blezien, a nurse from a Chicago hospital's "friendly caller" program, created during the pandemic to help lonely seniors cope with isolation. Blezien, 57, lives with her rescue dogs, Gordy and Kasey, in a suburban brick bungalow, just six miles from Green's two-flat apartment in the city.

"She wasn't scripted. She seemed like she was genuinely caring," said Green, 68, a retired dispatcher for the city's water department. The two women started talking often and became friends without ever setting eyes on each other.

"I called her my angel."

Rampant loneliness existed long before COVID-19, and experts believe it's now worse. Evidence suggests it can damage health and shorten lives as much as obesity and smoking. In addition to psychological distress, some studies suggest loneliness may cause physical changes including inflammation and elevated stress hormones that may tighten blood vessels and increase blood pressure.

Yet loneliness as a public health issue "has kind of been swept under the rug," said Dr. Ada Stewart, president of the American Association of Family Physicians. There's no formal medical diagnosis and no mandate to screen for it.

"Now the pandemic has unveiled it," Stewart said. "This is real."

Just a month before a global pandemic was declared, a National Academies report showed that one-third of U.S. adults aged 45 and up were lonely. Surveys have surprisingly found higher rates in younger adults.

A British online survey in 2018 of more than 55,000 people in 237 countries found that loneliness affected 40% of young adults, compared with 27% in those older than 75. Rates were highest in countries including the United States that prize individual success over collectivism.

The true impact from the pandemic is yet to be seen.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, who has called loneliness a public health crisis, points out that much of the world including the U.S. "was struggling with remarkably high levels of loneliness before COVID-19."

"The pandemic has shed new light on this struggle and reminded us of an unmistakable truth: we need each other," he said in an emailed statement.

Facing troubling loneliness statistics, the United Kingdom in 2018 created a parliament position called

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the minister of loneliness, believed to be the world's first. In February, after a rash of suicides, Japan appointed the second.

The UK's current minister, Baroness Diana Barran, says the pandemic has kept her busier than ever.

"I have quite a wide portfolio of responsibilities, but I think I get probably 8 or 10 times as much correspondence on loneliness as I get on anything else," she said.

Some of the solutions they're trying: Mental health support via texting for young people, "garden gate" visits by volunteers offering social distanced conversation outside older folks' homes, and a campaign encouraging people to wear yellow socks to highlight loneliness in teens and young adults.

Claire Muhlawako Madzura, a 16-year-old from Manchester, helped design the socks program. Madzura is Black and an only child; her family is originally from Zimbabwe. She said growing up in mostly white areas has made it hard for her to embrace her heritage and contributed to her loneliness.

Lockdowns made her realize how much she relied on school for socializing. Using video calls to maintain friendships has been tough.

"Whenever I wear yellow socks now, I wear them proudly, because I know I'm not just representing me, I'm representing a massive group of people who've experienced loneliness," Madzura said.

Some doctors have gone as far as writing prescriptions for loneliness. There's no recommended medicine, so they've gotten creative.

Evelyn Shaw's physician knew the widowed grandmother had been holed up in her New York City apartment, too frightened to venture out. She hadn't seen her close-knit family in person for months.

So the doctor wrote her patient a prescription that said simply: "You are allowed to hug your granddaughter."

The hug "was magical. It was surreal. We just held onto each other and we cried," Shaw said. Her daughter filmed the moment in a video that was posted on Twitter last month and went viral.

"We don't want to live lonely and alone and terrified and afraid," said Shaw, who along with her granddaughter has gotten a COVID-19 vaccine. "We all want to be able to gather with the people we love and our friends. We want to go back to normalcy."

Stewart, of the American Academy of Family Physicians, said loneliness came up recently with a patient during a checkup at her Columbia, South Carolina office.

"While I was talking to her I saw something move in her purse," Stewart said. It was a tiny dog and the patient told her "this new baby has really helped me get through my loneliness right now. He has been a comfort to me."

Stewart offered to buy her a carrier more suitable for pets than a handbag, and to help her get approval to use her dog as a therapy animal.

Loneliness won't vanish even when the pandemic ends, said psychologist Benjamin Miller, a health policy analyst with Well Being Trust. Some people may still fear interaction and Miller said programs to help will be needed more than ever.

In Chicago, the friendly caller program initially targeted seniors but will expand to primary care and pediatric practices, and will continue even when the pandemic subsides, said social worker Eve Escalante, manager of program innovation at Rush University Medical Center.

University of Texas researchers tested a similar friendly caller program with adults involved in a Meals on Wheels program. They found meaningful improvements in loneliness, anxiety and depression after four weeks. Several health centers have contacted the researchers to learn how to launch similar programs.

Even health insurers are paying attention.

Last fall, Humana Inc. posted an online loneliness screening tool for doctors and included links for referrals to programs to help affected patients, some free and others covered by its health plans.

The insurer also created a "Far From Alone" campaign for older adults, with online links to free virtual programs, including exercise classes, cooking lessons and how-to courses on gardening and journaling.

In Chicago, vaccination allowed Dianne Green and Janine Blezien to meet briefly in person recently for the first time.

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Amid hugs, tears and laughter, they seemed like old friends.

They plan to shop and spend time together as soon as it feels safer. Meantime, they talk by phone about everything — cooking, family, personal stuff. Green, a Black woman, remembers one call starting with her crying over the footage of George Floyd's death in Minneapolis. Conversation always seems to come easy with Blezien, who is white.

"Dianne helps me as much as I help her," Blezien said.

Now Green is considering becoming a volunteer for the friendly caller program, an idea that thrills Blezien.

"Dianne," she said, "has so much to offer the world."

Biden faces long odds in push for more state 'red flag' laws

By RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — President Joe Biden faces an uphill battle as he tries to revive a push for more state laws that would allow authorities to temporarily disarm people who are considered a danger to themselves or others.

The political circumstances surrounding this year's effort are drastically different than they were three years ago, when state lawmakers, governors of both parties and former President Donald Trump embraced the extreme-risk protection orders after the 2018 mass shooting that killed 17 people at a high school in Parkland, Florida.

Officials in Florida and several other states quickly adopted so-called red flag laws, hailing the court-ordered removal of guns from people judged to be dangerous as a way to prevent suicides, domestic violence and mass shootings. Trump's commission on school shootings in December 2018 recommended that other states follow suit.

But momentum for the legislation has stalled after intense pushback from gun rights activists, increasing opposition from rank-and-file Republicans and key defeats for Democratic supporters of gun control in the November elections. Critics argue the laws can strip people of their right to bear arms based on unproven accusations, even as evidence mounts that they save lives.

Biden announced last week that his administration would publish model legislation in the next 60 days to encourage more states to pass red flag laws. His administration also is urging Congress to approve legislation giving states incentives to pass them, which could include millions of dollars in grant funding for implementation.

Still, advocates say they do not expect many, if any, of the 31 states without those laws to adopt them this year.

"We are now pushing against somewhat of a wall. The easier targets have been done," said Josh Horwitz, executive director of the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, which has played a key role in modeling the laws after domestic violence restraining orders. "But we're in it for the long haul. I'm confident that in 20 years, this will be almost everywhere."

Horwitz said the laws in many states are still new, and he is working to educate local officials on how to use them. He said a federal grant program to incentivize implementation would be a great step, and he is urging lawmakers not to wait for tragedies to act.

The measures typically allow police and family members to petition courts for civil orders to temporarily strip the gun rights of those who are exhibiting warning signs of violence. Emergency orders that last days can be issued immediately. Judges later determine whether to extend them up to a year, based on evidence presented at a hearing. Respondents can surrender their firearms or have them removed by police, and are barred from purchasing weapons as long as the order remains in effect.

Nineteen states have versions of the laws in place, and research suggests they can reduce suicides and prevent other forms of gun violence. Supporters say they allow people to work through mental health, substance abuse or other crises while unarmed. Thousands of orders have been granted to disarm suicidal, threatening or other unstable people, from California to Connecticut to Florida, although their use has been uneven based on the discretion of local officials.

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Bills have been introduced in at least 14 states this year to adopt red flag laws, but have had no success advancing.

"It's going to be a tougher fight in a lot of the remaining states," said Allison Anderman, senior counsel with the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

On March 31, a Tennessee House subcommittee voted down a bill sponsored by Democratic Rep. Gloria Johnson, who said the orders were "all about keeping people safe." Republican Rep. John Gillespie said he worried the law "could be abused very, very quickly" because it would allow ex-spouses to file petitions. Another Republican said it would be worse than doing nothing because police could be put in harm's way if forced to seize weapons.

Virginia was the last state to adopt the orders a year ago, after Democrats took over the General Assembly.

Biden said states with them have seen drops in suicides and that they can have a "significant effect in protecting women" from violence and disarming would-be mass shooters: "It's time to put these laws on the books and protect even more people," Biden said.

Horwitz said states do not need model legislation because that already exists. A research consortium in October published detailed recommendations for adopting the laws, including key provisions such as who can petition for the orders and how long they should last.

He said he was hopeful that more federal money might win over some state lawmakers. Congress is expected to consider creating a grant program that would help states pay for training court officials and police, collecting data, developing procedures and forms, and raising public awareness about the orders.

In Minnesota, the Republican-controlled Senate narrowly retained its majority in the November election after blocking a red flag proposal approved by the Democratic-controlled House and supported by Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat. So far, the Senate hasn't held a committee hearing on a new bill introduced by Democrats in February.

In New Hampshire, Republican Gov. Chris Sununu vetoed a red flag bill last August, saying it would "weaken the constitutional rights of law-abiding New Hampshire citizens." With Sununu easily winning reelection and Republicans flipping both houses of the Legislature in the 2020 election, the momentum for the policy is dead.

National Rifle Association spokeswoman Amy Hunter said the state-by-state push has stalled due to "significant public opposition." She said the laws can deny due process, allow false and malicious claims and do not provide mental health services for those who need them.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, April 15, the 105th day of 2021. There are 260 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 15, 1947, Jackie Robinson, baseball's first Black major league player, made his official debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on opening day at Ebbets Field. (The Dodgers defeated the Boston Braves, 5-3.)

On this date:

In 1452, artist and inventor Leonardo da Vinci was born in or near the Tuscan town of Vinci.

In 1850, the city of San Francisco was incorporated.

In 1865, President Abraham Lincoln died nine hours after being shot the night before by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theater in Washington; Andrew Johnson became the nation's 17th president.

In 1892, General Electric Co., formed by the merger of the Edison Electric Light Co. and other firms, was incorporated in Schenectady, New York.

In 1912, the British luxury liner RMS Titanic foundered in the North Atlantic off Newfoundland more than 2 1/2 hours after hitting an iceberg; 1,514 people died, while less than half as many survived.

In 1945, during World War II, British and Canadian troops liberated the Nazi concentration camp Bergen-Belsen. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who died on April 12, was buried at the Roosevelt family home

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in Hyde Park, New York.

In 1989, 96 people died in a crush of soccer fans at Hillsborough Stadium in Sheffield, England. Students in Beijing launched a series of pro-democracy protests; the demonstrations culminated in a government crackdown at Tiananmen Square.

In 1990, legendary film star Greta Garbo died in New York at age 84. The comedy sketch show "In Living Color" premiered on Fox TV.

In 1998, Pol Pot, the notorious leader of the Khmer Rouge, died at age 72, evading prosecution for the deaths of two million Cambodians.

In 2009, whipped up by conservative commentators and bloggers, tens of thousands of protesters staged "tea parties" around the country to tap into the collective angst stirred up by a bad economy, government spending and bailouts.

In 2013, two bombs made from pressure cookers exploded at the Boston Marathon finish line, killing two women and an 8-year-old boy and injuring more than 260. Suspected bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev (TAM'-ehr-luhn tsahr-NEYE'-ehv) died in a shootout with police; his brother, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (joh-HAHR' tsahr-NEYE'-ehv), was tried, convicted and sentenced to death.

In 2019, fire swept across the top of the Notre Dame Cathedral as the soaring Paris landmark underwent renovations; the blaze collapsed the cathedral's spire and spread to one of its landmark rectangular towers, but fire officials said the church's structure had been saved.

Ten years ago: The first of three days of tornadoes to strike the central and southern U.S. began; according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, there were an estimated 177 twisters and at least 38 fatalities.

Five years ago: House Republicans departed Washington, having missed a deadline to pass their long-stalled budget in an embarrassment for House Speaker Paul Ryan. A North Korea missile launch meant to celebrate the birthday of the country's founder, Kim Il Sung, apparently ended in failure.

One year ago: The government reported that the nation's industrial output in March registered its biggest decline since the U.S. demobilized at the end of World War II as factories shut down amid the coronavirus epidemic. Best Buy became the latest national chain to announce massive furloughs, saying it would sideline about 51,000 hourly employees. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said residents would be required to wear face coverings any time they came into close contact with people outside their homes. California Gov. Gavin Newsom said the state would give \$500 coronavirus relief payments to immigrants who were in the country illegally. The Treasury Department confirmed that, in an unprecedented move, President Donald Trump's name would appear on the stimulus checks that the IRS would be sending to tens of millions of Americans.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Claudia Cardinale is 83. Author and politician Jeffrey Archer is 81. Rock singer-guitarist Dave Edmunds is 78. Actor Michael Tucci is 75. Actor Lois Chiles is 74. Writer-producer Linda Bloodworth-Thomason is 74. Actor Amy Wright is 71. Columnist Heloise is 70. Actor Sam McMurray is 69. Actor-screenwriter Emma Thompson is 62. Bluegrass musician Jeff Parker is 60. Singer Samantha Fox is 55. Olympic gold, silver and bronze medal swimmer Dara Torres is 54. Rock musician Ed O'Brien (Radiohead) is 53. Actor Flex Alexander is 51. Actor Danny Pino is 47. Actor Douglas Spain is 47. Country singer-songwriter Chris Stapleton is 43. Actor Luke Evans is 42. Rock musician Patrick Carney (The Black Keys) is 41. Rock musician Zach Carothers (Portugal. The Man) is 40. Actor-writer Seth Rogen is 39. Actor Alice Braga is 38. Americana singer-songwriter Margo Price is 38. Rock musician De'Mar Hamilton (Plain White T's) is 37. Actor Samira Wiley is 34. Actor Leonie Elliott is 33. Actor Emma Watson is 31. Actor Maisie Williams is 24.