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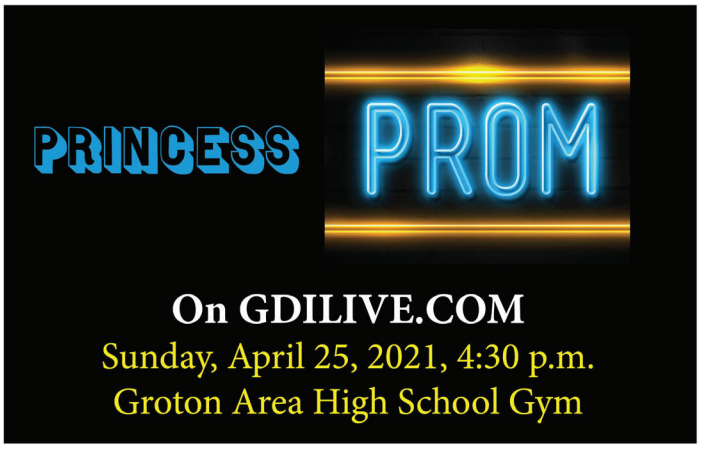

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT #06-6

School Board Meeting

April 26, 2021 – 7:00 PM – Groton Area Elementary Commons

AGENDA:

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

POTENTIAL CONFLICTS DISCLOSURE PURSUANT SDCL 23-3

OLD/CONTINUING BUSINESS:

1. Open Forum for Public Participation…in accordance with Board Policy & Guidelines.
2. Program Overview Presentations
    a. Destination Imagination… J. Groeblinghoff, J. Milbrandt
    b. CTE… D. Donley, A. Franken, L. Tietz
3. Discussion on Groton-Langford Football Coop meeting held on April 13, 2021
4. Administrative Reports: (a) Superintendent's Report; (b) Principal's Reports; (c) Business Manager Report

NEW BUSINESS:

1. Canvass results of school board election held on April 13, 2021.
2. Consider request from Groton Youth Football for use of a school bus on May 17 and May 18 to attend NSU Youth Football Camp.
3. Approve hiring Becky Hubsch, MS/HS Business/Computer Teacher for 2021-2022 school year.
4. Approve staff lane changes for 2021-2022 according to GTA Negotiated Agreement
    a. Jodi Schwan, BS to BS+15
    b. Travis Kurth, BS+15 to BS+30
5. Approve 2021-2022 GTA Negotiated Agreement.
6. Issue 2021-2022 Teaching Contracts with return date of Friday, May 7, 2021.
7. Issue 2021-2022 Off-Staff Extra-Curricular Agreements with return date of Friday, May 7, 2021.

ADJOURN

Deadwood Gaming Explodes in March

Media: Click HERE for complete Deadwood gaming numbers

DEADWOOD, S.D. (04/22/21) - According to statistics released today by the South Dakota Commission on Gaming, the March 2021 gaming handle showed a 102.32 percent increase over March 2020, which was impacted by seven days of closure due to the COVID pandemic and a 61.56 percent increase over March 2019, with slot machine handle increasing by 101.70 percent when compared to March 2020 and 65.06 percent when compared to 2019. The table game handle increased by 113.51 percent when compared to 2020 March's table game numbers and 18.76 percent over 2019's table game handle. Deadwood gaming operators rewarded players with $1,482,349 in "free-play" for the month of March, leaving taxable adjusted gross revenues of $12,628,138 for March of 2021.

"As the country continues to move toward a total reopening from the pandemic and people resume their travel and entertainment schedules, Deadwood is reaping the benefit," said Mike Rodman, executive director of the Deadwood Gaming Association. "Deadwood and the South Dakota Department of Tourism have focused their marketing efforts on visitation to our area as travelers felt safe and ready to return."

Deadwood is currently developing its busiest concerts and events schedule ever for 2021.

Unemployment Claims Filed for Week Ending April 17

PIERRE, S.D. – During the week of April 11-17, a total of 268 initial weekly claims for state unemployment benefits were processed by the Department of Labor and Regulation. This is a decrease of 22 claims from the prior week's total of 290.

The latest number of continued state claims is 3,064 for the week ending April 10, a decrease of 74 from the prior week's total of 3,138. This indicates the number of unemployed workers eligible for and receiving benefits after their initial claim.

For week ending April 17, a total of $723,000 was paid out in state benefits, in addition to $1.1 million in Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC), $137,000 in Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) and $300,000 in Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) benefits.

The Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund balance was $151.0 million on April 18.

Benefits paid since March 16, 2020:

- Regular State = $111.5 million
- FPUC = $230.7 million
- PUA = $20.1 million
- PEUC = $8.4 million

Total = Approximately $370.8 million

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Happy April, Tourism Friends!

by Jim Hagen, Secretary of SD Tourism

I hope this edition of The Mile Marker finds you well, enjoying spring, and busily preparing for what is shaping up to be a very promising season of summer travel. Our peak marketing message is running at full-strength in our target markets, website visits and inquiries to TravelSouthDakota.com are at record levels, and many partners are reporting strong bookings and reservations for the months ahead. With consumer optimism at high levels and travelers looking to hit the road, our Great Faces and Great Places (and wide open spaces) are ready to safely host travelers from around the country.

As with every Mile Marker, we have a lot to share with you. Here are some highlights:

National Travel & Tourism Week is coming up fast! During May 2-8, we will be celebrating the POWER OF TRAVEL and the dynamic impacts that travel and tourism have on our economies and lives. To learn more about the activities the department has planned for the week, as well as NTTW events being hosted by several communities throughout the state, check out SDVisit.com.

To kick off National Travel & Tourism Week, Governor Noem and I will be conducting two press conferences on Monday, May 3. The first press conference will be at Mount Rushmore National Memorial at 9:30 a.m. (Mountain Time). The second press conference will be at 3:00 p.m. (Central Time) at Falls Park in Sioux Falls. All industry partners, friends, elected officials, and the general public are welcome to attend.

As part of NTTW, the department will be hosting free Spring Hospitality Training Seminars in six communities throughout the state. We'd love for you to attend one of the trainings or watch the seminar online. Learn more about the training seminars here.

We hope you were able to join us for our Spring Industry Update webinar earlier this week. If not, you can access the webinar at this page.

We also recently conducted a webinar with the Department of Revenue to discuss short-term/shared economy rentals (Airbnb, VRBO, etc.) in South Dakota. You can view that webinar here.

The South Dakota Small Business Administration Office released some major news over the weekend about the Restaurant Revitalization Fund (RRF), a relief program directly aimed at restaurants, food stands, food trucks, caterers, bars, saloons, bakeries, brewpubs, taprooms, wineries and distilleries, etc. The funds can be used for payroll costs, mortgages, rent payments, utility payments, and business supplies, to name a few. To check out more details on the RRF program, please visit www.sba.gov/restaurants.

We will soon be adding a brand new lesson to our free Online Hospitality Training Program. Lesson 10, Knowing Your State and Community, covers the basics about how to promote the South Dakota visitor experience while providing an abundance of South Dakota trivia to help our tourism workers better understand the tourism offerings across the state. South Dakota has far too many Great Places to put into one lesson, but Lesson 10 provides an overview to get your team started. If you haven't yet taken advantage of the free Online Hospitality Training Program, we highly encourage you to do so.

Finally, some positive news from Senator John Thune's office regarding the H-2B visa worker program. Senator Thune recently shared that 22,000 additional H-2B visas will be added to the program, thus making more temporary foreign workers available to sectors in our country that are in high demand of labor (like the tourism industry). We don't have any additional details about this new allocation of H-2B visas, but we do encourage our industry partners who utilize this program to reach out to their contacts about this news. More information about the H-2B program can be found here.

We do hope to see many of you during National Travel & Tourism Week. Please don't hesitate to reach out to us if you have any questions about the events that will be occurring the first week in May. Stay well, friends, and let us know whenever we can be of any assistance to you.

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Johnson: I Am Opposed to D.C. Statehood, But Not Suffrage

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Representative Dusty Johnson (R-SD) spoke on the U.S. House floor today in support of his bill, the D.C.-Maryland Reunion Act, a proposal that would merge the residential portions of the district with Maryland. Johnson opposed H.R. 51, legislation Democrats passed today to provide D.C. with statehood and full voting representation in Congress.

Remarks as prepared for delivery:

"Mr. Speaker, I am opposed to D.C. statehood, but I am not opposed to suffrage.

"If your goal is truly suffrage rather than increasing Democratic control of the Senate, boy, do I have a plan for you.

"My bill would reunite the residential areas of the District with Maryland, as was done with Virginia in 1847.

"This plan would give full voting rights that we have heard so much about this morning without ignoring the Constitution or the practical realities of what constitutes a state.

"And so, I say to my colleagues on the other side of the aisle, if your goal is truly suffrage, then let's do this together.

"Let's set aside the divisive rhetoric we have heard and work together to craft an appropriate and bi-partisan solution to give representation to the people of D.C."

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Rounds, Blackburn Introduce Legislation Preventing Unilateral Deal with Iranian Regime

WASHINGTON – U.S. Senators Mike Rounds (R-S.D.) and Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn) introduced legislation to curb President Biden's ability to renegotiate the failed Iran Nuclear Deal. Sens. Steve Daines (R-Mont.), Thom Tillis (R-N.C.), Kevin Cramer (R-N.D.), Joni Ernst (R-Iowa), Ted Cruz (R-Texas), Mike Lee (R-Utah), and Rick Scott (R-Fla.) are original cosponsors. The legislation was led by Representative Andy Barr (R-Ky.) in the House of Representatives.

"The Iran nuclear deal remains an incredibly bad deal for the U.S. and our allies," said Senator Rounds. "Not only do we need a stronger deal that prevents Iran from ever obtaining nuclear weapons, but we need a deal that includes the Advice and Consent of the Senate. Our legislation will make certain that no federal funds go toward rejoining the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action."

"The Obama-Biden administration bent over backwards to appease Iran and even sent a jumbo-jet filled with $400 million in pallets of cash to the murderous regime," said Senator Blackburn. "It's time for Biden to wake up and realize that the U.S. cannot negotiate an honest agreement with Iran because they are a fanatical, anti-American regime. No amount of negotiating or 'indirect discussions' can change that. My legislation will prevent Biden from circumventing the U.S. Senate to salvage the failed deal or forge a new, just as disastrous one."

"Iran is the world's leading sponsor of terrorism and simply must never be allowed to pursue its nuclear ambitions," said former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Kelly Craft. "Time and again, the Iranian regime has fueled conflict and human suffering throughout the Middle East and poses a particular threat to Israel, America's most critical ally in the region. How can we trust the Iranian regime with the world's safety and security?"

BACKGROUND

The proposed legislation, S.1205 the Iran Nuclear Deal Advice and Consent Act, would prevent federal funds from being obligated or expended in the furtherance of rejoining the JCPOA and would require current and future presidential administrations to submit in writing to the House and Senate a JCPOA successor agreement as a treaty versus an international agreement.

As agreed to in the Obama administration, the JCPOA is neither a treaty nor a signed executive agreement – but simply a politically negotiated agreement, with only a few included terms regarded as binding by international law. By submitting a JCPOA successor or any similar deal as an official treaty, it would allow for essential congressional oversight and implementation of international law through the entirety of the agreement.

Companion legislation, H.R. 1479, was introduced in the House of Representatives by Representative Barr in March 2021.

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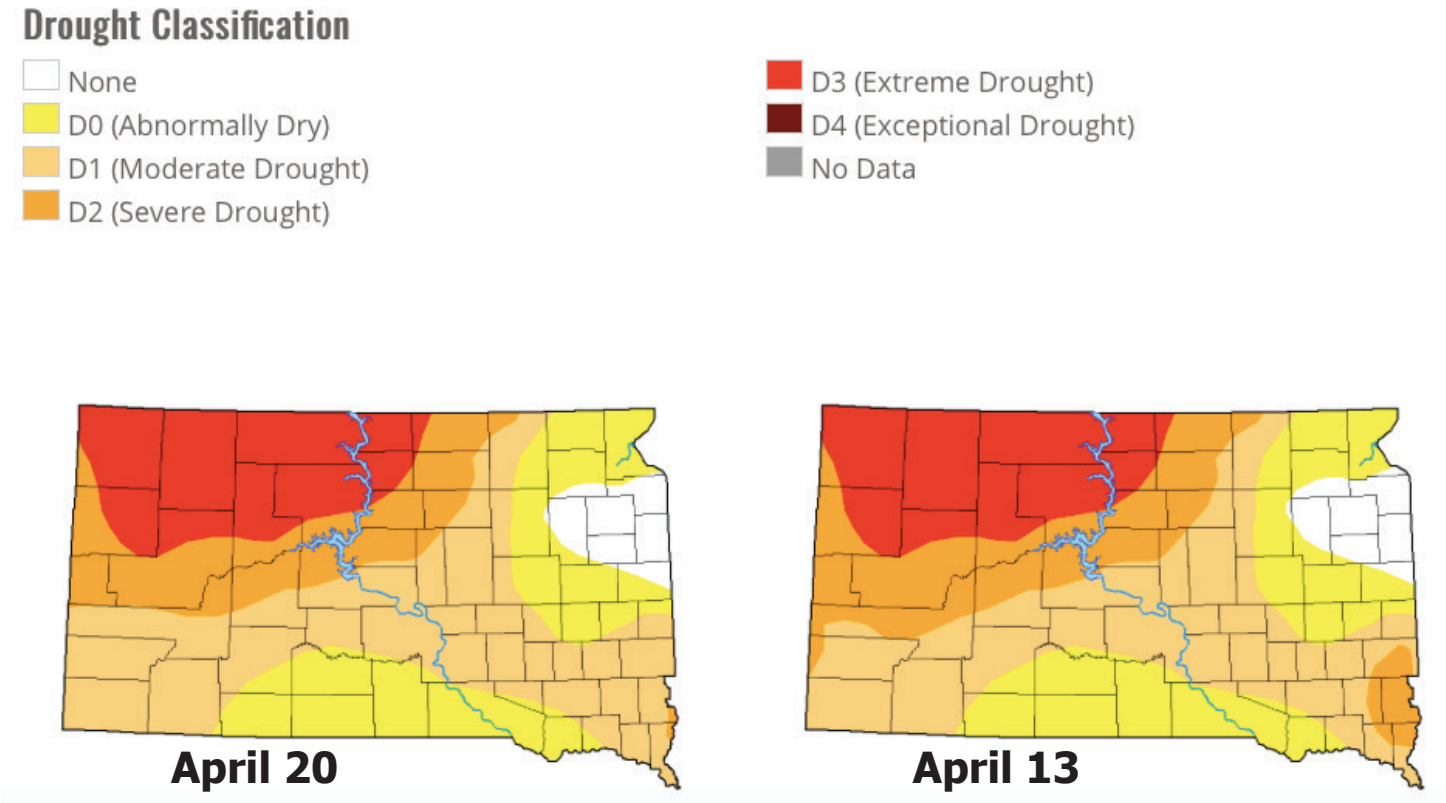
Kiwanis/Pork Chop Relays @ Cardinal Field in Clear Lake

Groton Area's Track teams finally got to see some real action as the team traveled to Clear Lake on Thursday. Top finishers for the girls were Keznie McInerney with a second place finish in the long jump and taking third were Faith Traphagen in the 800m run and the 800m Relay. For the boys, Andrew Marzahn took third in the 200m dashand Jackson Cogley took third in the high jump.

Girls 100m Dash: 8, Karsyn Jangula, 14.05; 11, Jayla Jones, 14:34; 18, Camryn Kurtz, 14:87.
Girls 200m Dash: 13, Jayla Jones, 31.9; 18, Camryn Kurtz, 32.7.
Girls 400m Dash: 6, Faith Traphagen, 1:10.3; 23, Camryn Kurtz, 1:20.3.
Girls 800m Run: 3, Faith Traphagen, 2:38.28.
Girls 1600m Run: 8, Rylee Dunker, 6:43.09.
Girls 300m Hurdles: 14, Jayla Jones, 1:06.30.
Girls 4x100m Relay: 4, Groton Area (Jerica Locke, Aspen Johnson, Karsyn Jangula, Laila Roberts), 56.82.
Girls 4x200m Relay: 3, Groton Area (Jerica Locke, Aspen Johnson, Jayla Jones, Laila Roberts), 2:01.26.
Girls 4x400m Relay: 4, Groton Area (Jerica Locke, Rylee Dunker, Laila Roberts, Faith Traphagen, 4:48.67.
Girls 1600 Sprint Medley: 5, Groton Area (Emilie Thurston, Trista Keith, Karsyn Jangula, Rylee Dunker), 5:20.
Girls High Jump: 5, Kenzie McInerney, 4-04.
Girls Long Jump: 2, Kenzie McInerney, 15-08; 5, Aspen Johnson, 14-94.25p 18, Emilie Thurston, 12-01.
Girls Triple Jump: 10, Aspen Johnson, 28-08.50; 12, Kenzie McInerney, 28-95.50; 16, Trista Keith, 24-06.50.
Girls Shot Put: 5, Maddie Bjerke, 31-11; 8, Chloe Daly, 29-2; 16, Faith Fliehs, 25-0.
Girls Discus: 11, Maddie Bjerke, 73-11; 18, Faith Fliehs, 65-11; 20, Chloe Daly, 65-.05.
Boys 100m Dash: 4, Andrew Marzahn, 11.56.
Boys 200m Dash: 3, Andrew Marzahn, 24.5; 20, Tate Larson, 27.6.
Boys 400m Dash: 10, Cole Simon, 1:00.4; 15, Tate Larson, 1:03.3; 30, Douglas Heminger, 1:16.1.
Boys 800m Run: 8, Jacob Lewandowski, 2:30.05; 18, Douglas Heminger, 2:50.91.
Boys 1600m Run: 11, Isaac Smith, 5:34.57; 12, Jacob Lewandowski, 5:38.22.
Boys 3200m Run: 4, Isaac Smith, 11:51.08.
Boys 4x100m Relay: 4, Groton Area (Andrew Marzahn, Colby Dunker, Ethan Gengerke, Taylor Diegel), 49.42.
Boys 4x200m Relay: 5, Groton Area (Andrew Marzahn, Colby Dunker, Ethan Gengerke, Teylor Diegel), 1:41.93.
Boys 4x400m Relay: 6, Groton Area (Ethan Gengerke, Colby Dunker, Cole Simon, Teylor Diegel), 4:02.48.
Boys 4x800m Relay: 4, Groton Area (Isaac Smith, Cole Simon, Tate Larson, Jacob Lewandowski), 9:20.71.
Boys High Jump: 3, Jackson Cogley, 5-04; 5, Paxton Bonn, 5-00.
Boys Long Jump: 17, Jackson Cogley, 16-04; 25, Paxton Bonn, 14-03; 26, Tate Larson, 14-02.75;
Boys Triple Jump: 11, Jackson Cogley, 32-04.50; 14, Paxton Bonn, 31-08.
Boys Shot Put: 12, Caleb Furney, 37-00.5; 26, Holden Sippel, 39-05.50; 31, Seth Johnson, 28-02.
Boys Discus: 12, Caleb Furney, 107-10; 33, Holden Sippel, 72-02; 35, Seth Johnson, 69-07.

Drought Monitor



High Plains

Cooler temperatures and snow spread across parts of the northern Plains this week. Western and southern parts of the High Plains region received 0.5-1.5 inches of precipitation this week, while the Dakotas were mostly dry with less than 0.25 inch. Precipitation in Wyoming in recent weeks has improved several drought indicators, especially the Standardized Precipitation Index (SPI), resulting in significant contraction of the D3 area in the central part of the state. D0-D2 shrank in other parts, but D1-D2 expanded in western Wyoming. Colorado saw contraction of D1-D2 in the north. Half an inch to over an inch of precipitation in southwest South Dakota shrank D2, while D2 was removed from southeast South Dakota due to improving indicators. Even though much of Montana received welcome snow this week, in most areas it amounted to below-normal precipitation, so D1-D3 expanded. Abnormal dryness contracted in south central Montana where precipitation has been above normal. In North Dakota, the snow was enough to prevent further deterioration but not enough to reduce deficits. Parts of the state remain in a burn ban and are experiencing dry soils, poor pasture conditions, and drying ponds and dugouts, some of which were testing high in TDS and sulfates. Producers are selling or making plans to cull more livestock. Dust storms have been reported recently in North Dakota and Montana. USDA reports show 78% of North Dakota, 61% of Montana, 58% of South Dakota, 56% of Wyoming, and 49% of Colorado with topsoil moisture short or very short.

#424 in a series
Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Still not much change; things are not getting appreciably worse, but they are also not getting appreciably better. We're up to 31,885,049 cases, 0.2% more than yesterday. There were 63,094 cases reported today. The 14-day average number hospitalized is pretty much the same at 45,565. And there were 831 deaths reported today. We have now lost 568,962 Americans to this virus.

On April 22, 2020, one year ago today, we had 832,325 cases and 42,353 deaths in the US. Our confidence was growing; we were thinking we had this licked, and plans to relax restrictions were continuing apace across the country despite worrying signs there could be another, maybe bigger wave of infection if we were incautious. The people who know things warned us about this rush to reopen: Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, spoke at a White House coronavirus task force briefing, saying, "I plead with the American people, with the governors, with the mayors . . . Do it in a measured way. The problem is if we don't do that, there is a likelihood that we'll have a rebound. And the one way not to reopen the economy is to have a rebound that we can't take care of." Like the one we had last summer. Or the one over the winter. Or maybe the one we're trying to emerge from today. I'm getting tired of hearing how he got so much wrong. From where I sit, he called every one of these surges, he told us how to avoid them, we refused to do those things, and then we lost more people and hurt the economy further. You know who's been wrong all the damned time? The folks pretending science isn't real, that's who.

We were getting our first information showing that, not only did hydroxychloroquine fail to provide any benefit for Covid-19 patients, it was also showing toxicity effects in those folks. There were other studies underway, but this was one of the early nails in that particular coffin. We were also discovering some atypical presentations for the pneumonias in patients. I actually wrote this up on April 21, but for those who weren't hanging around with us a year ago and are curious, I'll link that post here. It's Update #58, and you can find it at https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3528630100486704. We were also noting sudden strokes in young people—in their 30s and 40s—who were presenting as not otherwise very sick. Medical experts were putting this together with all of the other evidence of abnormal blood clotting in Covid-19 patients, and the picture wasn't great—hasn't really improved since, although we have learned a whole lot about treating them. We were still estimating a vaccine was 12 months off. There's a prediction we can all agree we're glad was wrong—not just wrong, but way wrong.

We were over 2.5 million cases worldwide with 177,000 deaths. We were suitably horrified by these numbers. Mostly because we had no idea what was coming. In fact, if you'd have predicted today back then, we would have run you out of town as a crazy person.

In that nursing home outbreak we discussed last night—the one where an unvaccinated worker infected dozens of others, including three residents who didn't sign up for this virus, but eventually died of it anyhow—we should note that the virus that infected these people was a variant that contained the E484K, the so-called "eek"—mutation This is the mutation that we think makes B.1.351, first identified in South Africa, and P.1, first identified in Brazil, more able to evade our immune responses. People with prior infections have not been very well protected against it; they are becoming reinfected at a pretty good clip. Vaccine-induced immunity has held much better because that response is so overwhelming that it overcomes the virus despite the mutation. That was different for some of the people in this nursing home. What we appear to have here is folks with a somewhat less robust immune response to vaccination showing vulnerability to this worrisome mutation, which was pretty predictable once we knew it takes a brisk response to overcome it. This is the sort of thing I'm been hollering about—that if you allow transmission to proceed unchecked, sooner or later you're going to get variants that endanger at least some of us. Now, given the overall outcome of this particular outbreak—the vaccine held in the majority of vaccinated persons, only failing in a small percentage—we're not in deep trouble yet; but we simply cannot afford to have unvaccinated people swanning around giving mutations free rein in a dangerous world. I am rapidly running out of patience with people who think their freedom to choose trumps everyone else's freedom

to live. In fact, I might be fresh out.

Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, epidemiologist and health economist at Harvard and Johns Hopkins, tweeted, "to be clear, the vaccine has saved MANY, MANY lives. But we need to **BREAK THE CHAINS OF TRANSMISSION** and reduce transmission. And to do that, we need more people vaccinated. Plain and simple." I concur.

A pair of new variants were identified in late summer and fall in California; they are believed to have actually emerged last spring or summer and now account for more than half of cases in 44 counties in the state, especially in southern California which had scary-high case numbers through the winter. They are B.1.427 and B.1.429, and are sometimes collectively called CAL.20C. As with all variants of interest or concern, they've been the subject of a fair amount of study as we try to get a handle on just what's circulating. We've been thinking this variant is going to be more transmissible. The rapid increase in incidence could support this thinking, but sometimes a variant becomes more frequent in a population more by happenstance than because of any particular characteristic of the variant. That means we need to explore mechanisms that might confer transmissibility. These variants share a mutation called L452R which we know facilitates binding to those ACE2 receptors that are viral entry points to our cells and also seem to replicate better in the respiratory tract, yielding twice as much virus in samples; because of this, we are concluding they are likely more transmissible. They do not appear to be as transmissible as B.1.1.7, the variant first identified in the UK, so in a head-to-head competition, B.1.1.7 probably wins although where B.1.427 and B.1.429 are already entrenched, as they are in California, it might take a while for B.1.1.7 to make much headway.

The second issue is whether these variants can be controlled by our existing immune responses if we've either recovered from infection or been vaccinated. There have now been some laboratory tests done using blood from previously-infected people and vaccinated people regarding the variants' ability to evade our immune responses. It appears there is some reduction in immunological effectiveness, particularly in recovered individuals, 90 percent of whom showed reduced antibody effectiveness. Only 50 percent of vaccinated individuals had reduced effectiveness, so I'm going to guess that overwhelming response we seem to be having to vaccine may once again be enough. Still, this stuff is worrisome.

There is another variant which emerged in New York called B.1.526. It has torn through New York City in the past four or five months and currently accounts for almost half of cases in the area. Between this one and B.1.1.7, almost 70 percent of cases are represented. This one has the E484K (Eek) mutation which has been shown to reduce the effectiveness of current antibodies against it. It may also be more transmissible than earlier variants. Recent laboratory tests run against antibodies from people vaccinated with the two mRNA vaccines, the Moderna and the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines, show the resulting antibodies are only slightly less effective at controlling this variant than D614G, the earlier-prevalent variant. We now have a couple of studies with similar findings to this effect; they are small and not yet peer-reviewed, but this looks good.

So far, these two vaccines appear to be just fine against all of the variants we've identified thus far. The numbers of types of antibodies and immune cells we produce in response to the vaccines is simply remarkable and so far seems to be more than adequate to the challenge. The antibodies produced seem to be distributed across such a broad range of parts of the virus that no one mutation can really accomplish evasion of the response. I don't know how long our luck will hold, but I know it will hold longer the more of us who get vaccinated. Eek is still the mutation to watch; any enhancement of a variant's capabilities beyond this one mutation could be really concerning. More vaccination is better: The one way to shut some of this down is to get a lot of people protected fast. I do question our will to do that, but I will remain hopeful because the alternative isn't something I want to contemplate.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices is scheduled to meet tomorrow about the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine pause. Since that was called a little over a week ago, very few additional cases of abnormal blood clotting have been discovered, which means the incidence is hanging in that one in a million territory. Given that, it seems to me likely that the committee will recommend

proceeding with vaccinations with a warning to watch for these rare blood clotting event and not to treat them with heparin. The concern at the time the pause was called was that more cases would come out of the woodwork, but that really hasn't happened. Among identified cases, there have been one death and two individuals in intensive care after vaccination. European regulators have already given the go-ahead to administration of the vaccine, and I'm going to guess we'll be back in business by the weekend as well.

A professor of medical ethics and health policy at the University of Pennsylvania, Dr. Ezekiel J. Emanuel, told the New York Times, "It's just very hard for me to see, even if you multiply the number of cases by five or by 10, that you come to the conclusion that this is not a good thing to do, giving you the vaccine." We want to remember in this context that we're still diagnosing upwards of 60,000 cases per day and losing close to 1000 lives every day as well. I suspect that's how the committee will be thinking tomorrow. We'll know soon.

We have now administered 218,947,643 doses of vaccine out of 282,183,915 doses delivered. Just about 136 million people, 41 percent of the population have received at least one dose; and over 89 million, 27 percent of us are fully vaccinated. It may be a concern that our average has now dipped below three million for the first time in over two weeks. We cannot afford to let up now. I worry that we're bumping up against vaccine hesitance already, and that would be a very bad thing. Once again, I guess only time will tell.

Take care. I'll be back tomorrow.

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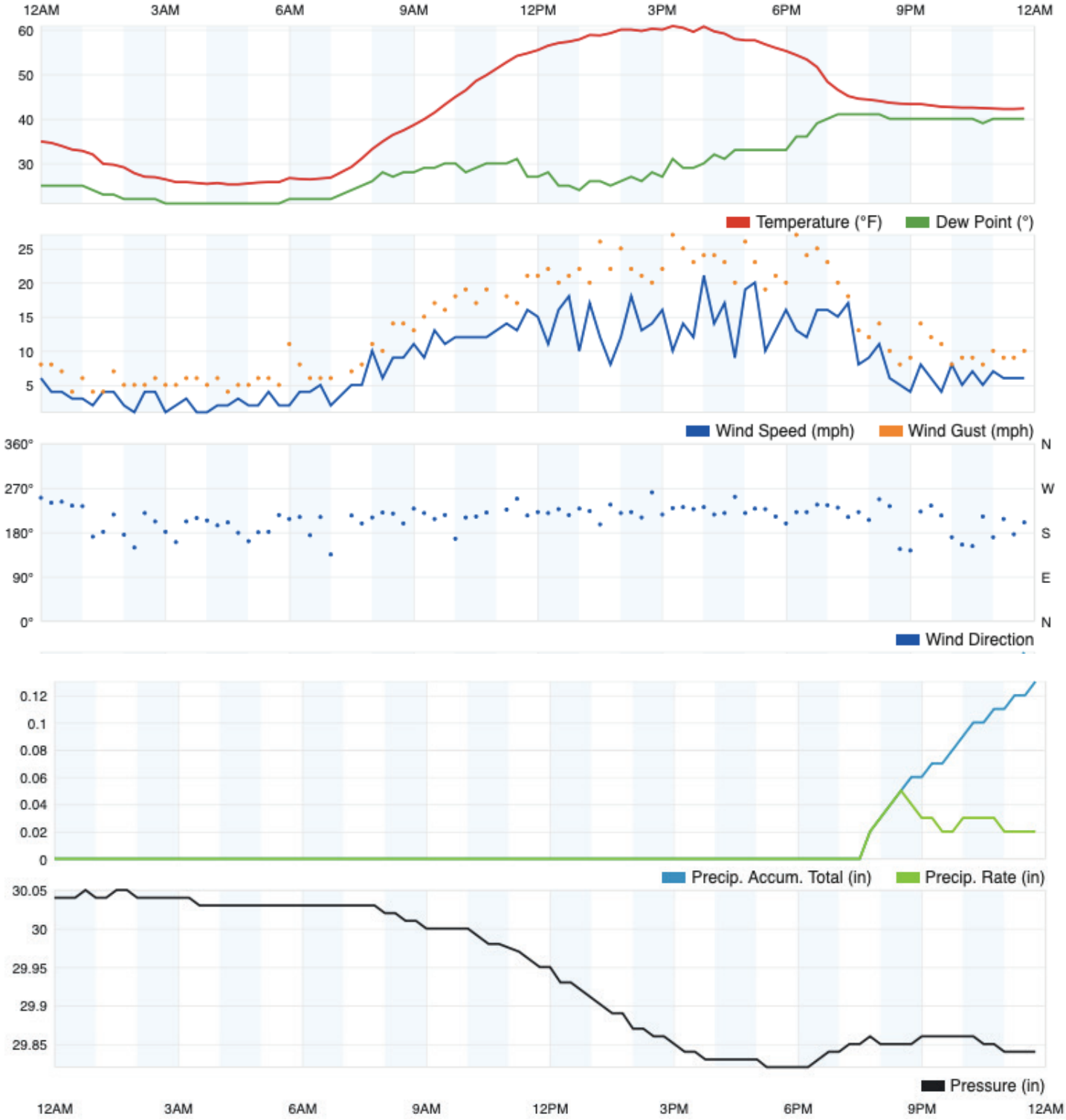
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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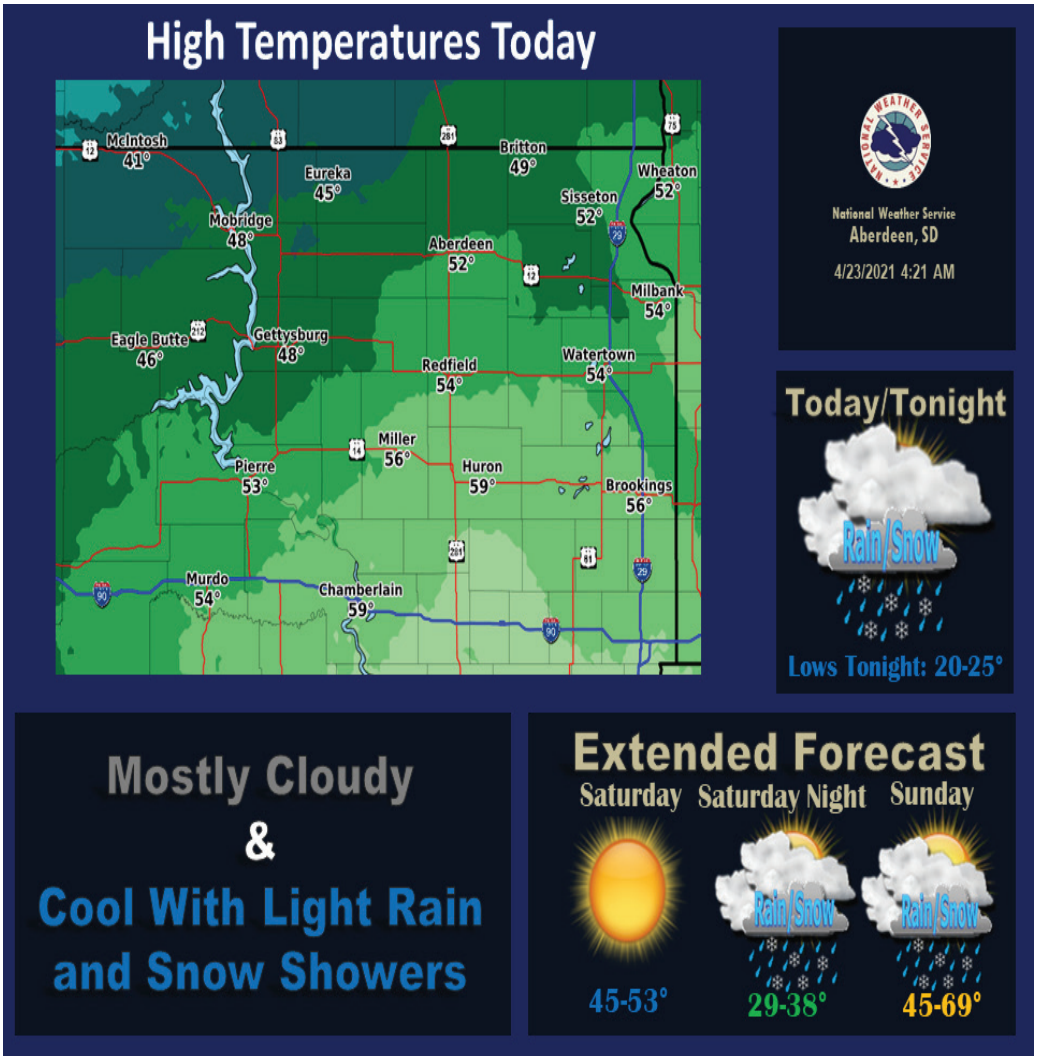
Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Cloudy	Slight Chance Rain/Snow then Slight Chance Snow Showers	Sunny	Partly Cloudy then Chance Rain/Snow	Breezy. Chance Rain/Snow then Chance Rain
High: 50 °F	Low: 21 °F	High: 49 °F	Low: 30 °F	High: 51 °F



Light rain will fall over much of the area today, although most areas will see a quarter inch of precipitation or less. Winds will be breezy this afternoon out of the south at 25 to 35 mph.

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Today in Weather History

April 23, 2002: High winds of 35 to 50 mph gusting to over 70 mph occurred across much of central and northeast South Dakota. The high winds caused some spotty damage to property and trees. With the dry conditions, dust was stirred up by the winds and caused reduced visibilities at many locations. The highest wind gust was 72 mph at Onida.

1948: A three block long section was devastated at the edge of Ionia, Iowa in Chickasaw County by an estimated F4 tornado. Six homes and a church were leveled, and nine other homes were severely damaged. Two deaths occurred in the collapse of the Huffman Implement Store. Overall, the tornado killed five people, injured 25, and caused $250,000 in damages. An F2 tornado touched down initially 5 miles northeast of Rochester. Barns, silos, windmills, and machinery were destroyed on four farms as this tornado tracked north.

1961: Severe weather struck the south suburbs of Chicago, IL. Joliet, IL reported an inch of hail with some hailstones the size of golf balls. Heavy rain from these storms also resulted in some flooding. A tornado struck the town of Peotone resulting in damage to nearly every building with damage also reported in Lorenzo and Wilton Center, IL. Estimated damage was $9 million with about 30,000 structures affected.

1989: Salina Kansas was the hot spot in the nation with a high of 105 degrees. The high of 105 degrees established an April record for the state of Kansas.

1999: On Friday, April 23, 1999, a horrific hailstorm moved southeast from Pennsylvania across Garrett County, Maryland and into the Eastern Panhandle of West Virginia. It had weakened some as it crossed Garrett County and the Allegany Front, but as it passed east of Keyser, West Virginia, hail began to increase in size once again. By the time it reached Capon Bridge in eastern Hampshire County, West Virginia, the size of the hail had grown from golf balls to baseballs. As it moved into Frederick County, VA, the hail storm continued to grow dropping golf ball size hail in a swath now reaching from the north of Winchester, south to Stephen City (about 10 miles). Hailstones grew to the size of Grapefruit (4 inches in diameter) east of Winchester. The storm continued east through Clarke County, southern Loudoun, and northern Fauquier doing considerable damage to Middleburg, then across Fairfax County hitting Centreville, Chantilly, Fairfax, Burke, Springfield, and Lorton with golf ball size to baseball size hail. It crossed the Potomac River and weakened slightly. It moved across northern Charles, clipped southern Prince Georges and then into Calvert County with 1 inch to 1.5-inch diameter hail and onto the Chesapeake Bay continuing southeast to the ocean. The damage left behind was incredible. In Northern Virginia alone, it amounted to over $50 million in losses to public and private properties. Some communities saw a third of the homes with siding and roof damage. Some required total replacement. Windows were broken, cars dented, and windshields smashed. Piles of shredded plant debris were left on the ground in the storm path. In about 6 hours of time, this one thunderstorm, moving at about 50 mph, did $75 million in damage. There have been other severe hail storms to hit this area before, but none to cause this much damage to property.

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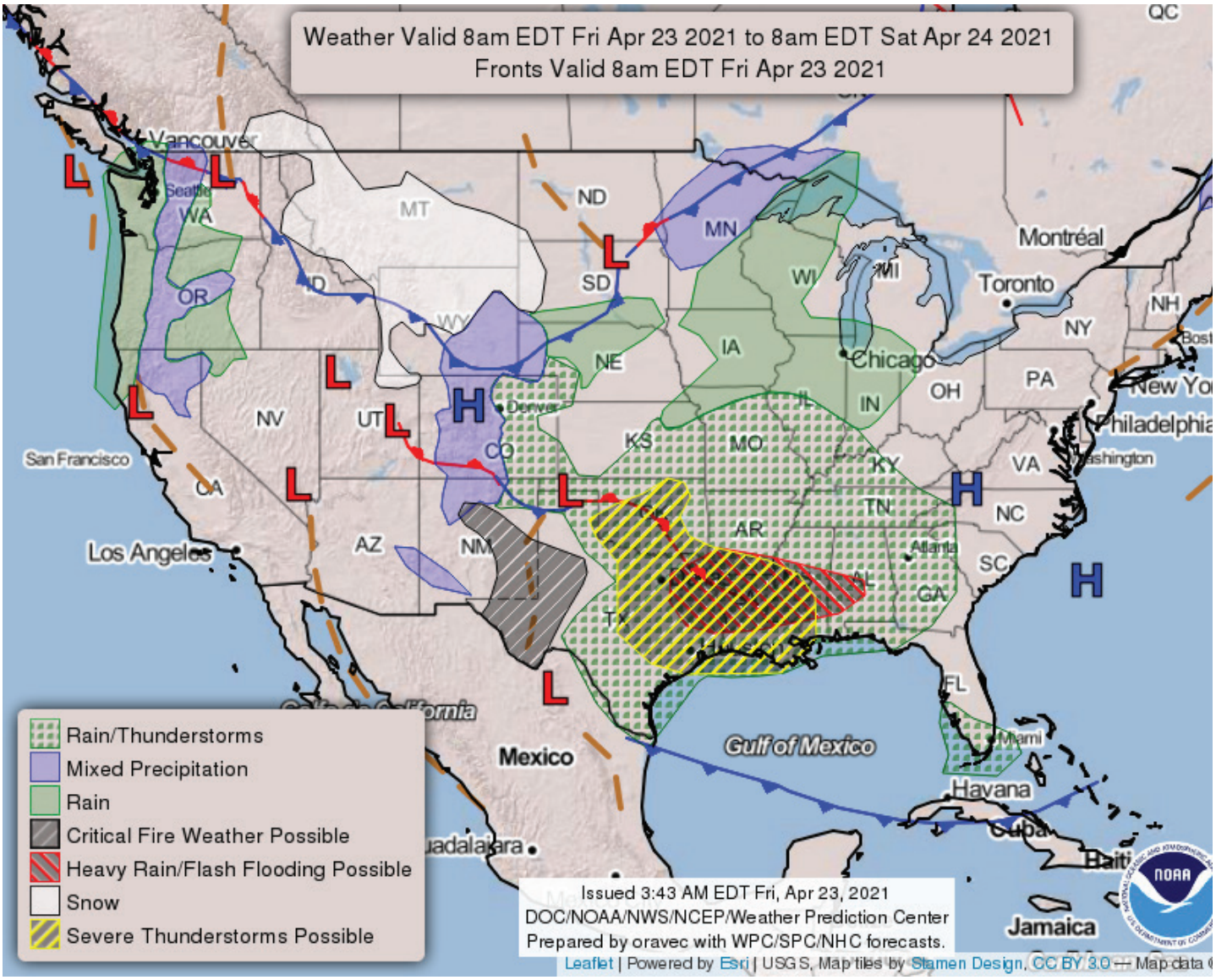
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 61 °F at 3:59 PM
Low Temp: 25 °F at 4:28 AM
Wind: 28 mph at 6:48 PM
Precip: 0.12

Today's Info

Record High: 90°in 2009
Record Low: 14° in 1956
Average High: 61°F
Average Low: 35°F
Average Precip in Apr.: 1.18
Precip to date in Apr.: 2.45
Average Precip to date: 3.36
Precip Year to Date: 2.63
Sunset Tonight: 8:31 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:32 a.m.



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WHO GOD BLESSES

What do we need to do to receive blessings from God?

Are they automatic? Do we have to be in the right place at the right time? Sit quietly and meditate? Think positive thoughts and pray for wealth without working? Do we claim a promise, then forget it until we get it? Is there something we ought to be doing?

We would all have to agree that God's blessings are not equally distributed nor given automatically as some would expect. We are reminded of this in Psalm 41. It begins with an insightful statement: "Blessed is the person who has compassion for the poor or weak and does something about it." God cares for the weak and the poor and the oppressed and is delighted when we do something on their behalf. To emphasize this fact, David says that those who show God's compassion will be delivered when they are experiencing the difficulties of life. But there is more.

The first Psalm begins with a statement about the person who God will bless: "...the man who avoids contact with those who have evil intentions and instead finds pleasure in the teachings of the law of the Lord." As we "hide" God's Word – His law – in our hearts, it will give us light for our lives, guidance for our journey, and directions to our destiny – eternal life with Him. But there is still more!

God's Word is clear: If we want His blessings then we must follow His instructions. First, when we accept God's salvation, we will enjoy the blessing of forgiveness and the removal of guilt and fear. Secondly, we will be blest if we avoid the influence of those who are evil and disobey His law. Finally, we will be blest if we do His work in His world by caring for those in need of His love, mercy, grace, salvation, and hope.

Prayer: We all look for Your blessings, Father. May we follow Your Word and walk in Your ways and then as You promised, be blest now and forever. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. Psalm 41:1

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

The Latest: Las Vegas strip clubs given OK to reopen May 1

By The Associated Press undefined

LAS VEGAS — Topless dancers can shed coronavirus restrictions beginning next weekend in Las Vegas and get face-to-face with patrons again.

But masks still will be required for adult entertainment employees and recommended for customers under rules accepted Thursday by a state pandemic task force.

Sin City strip clubs that went dark when Gov. Steve Sisolak ordered casinos, clubs and nonessential businesses closed more than a year ago can reopen May 1 at 80% of under strict social distancing guidelines.

The rules will allow strip club entertainers to get closer than 3 feet to patrons if the entertainer has received at least a first dose of a coronavirus vaccine at least 14 days earlier or if the dancer tests negative in a weekly virus test.

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THE VIRUS OUTBREAK:
— COVID-19 hospitalizations tumble among US senior citizens
— AP explains why India is shattering global infection records
— German 'emergency brake' plan on virus clears last hurdle
— Viral questions: How long does protection from vaccines last?

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Follow all of AP's pandemic coverage at https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic and https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-vaccine

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HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas health officials say the U.S. government has reported that a Texas woman is hospitalized with possible blood clots associated with Johnson and Johnson's coronavirus vaccine.

The announcement by Texas quotes the FDA and CDC as saying the adult woman has "symptoms that appear to be consistent with those few other reported cases" of a rare blood clotting disorder developed after receiving the J&J vaccine. No other information is being released, because of patient privacy and confidentiality.

Federal and state agencies have paused the J&J vaccine rollout due to concerns about blood clots. Federal officials already were examining six reports of the unusual clots, including a death, out of more than 6.8 million Americans given the one-dose vaccination so far.

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HARTFORD, Conn. — Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont says the state is seeing a slowdown in demand for coronavirus vaccinations, prompting officials to look for new ways to encourage people to get the shots and move closer toward herd immunity in the state.

Among the ideas is reaching out to major state employers such as submarine-maker Electric Boat Shipyard to hold clinics for workers. Requests for vaccine doses are now being accommodated for individual work sites that can put together a critical mass of people.

About 60% of the adults in Connecticut have received at least one dose.

Lamont said Thursday that he would ultimately like at least 70% to be vaccinated in Connecticut, noting that 89% of residents age 65 and older have received at least one dose.

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DENVER — Colorado Gov. Jared Polis says the state has administered first doses of coronavirus vaccines to at least half of the eligible population and now needs to target people who have been hesitant to get a shot or have just procrastinated.

He says the state will look to make vaccine access easy, convenient and quick. The governor says three

of Colorado's mass vaccination sites will start offering walk-in and drive-in vaccination in addition to the same-day vaccine appointments that are already available.

Polis says that "the number of people who don't want the vaccine is small."

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TORONTO — Canada is banning all flights from India and Pakistan for 30 days due to the growing wave of COVID-19 cases in that region.

The announcement came Thursday, hours after India reported a global record of more than 314,000 new infections in the previous 24-hours.

Canada's health minister says half the people who are testing positive for the coronavirus after arriving in Canada by airplane came from India. Flights from India account for about one fifth of the country's air traffic.

There are than 1 million people who live in Canada who have Indian descent. There are 100,000 Canadians who have Pakistani ancestry.

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JUNEAU, Alaska — Organizers say a four-day dance and cultural event billed as the largest gathering of Alaska Natives in the southeast region of the largest state will return next year as an in-person event after widespread immunizations.

The Sealaska Heritage Institute says the Celebration event celebrating Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian cultures will be held in Juneau from June 8-11, 2022. It was held virtually in 2020, and another event planned for this past January was scrapped.

Institute president Rosita Worl says the cancellation was necessary "to protect our people" and officials look forward to celebrating in 2022.

Worl said in a Thursday statement: "We survived this pandemic. We are still here."

The event first held in 1982 draws thousands of people to Alaska's capital.

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PARIS — France's prime minister is offering some good news to a nation living under numerous pandemic restrictions, saying the country's third wave appears to have crested and outdoor café terraces, some shops and sporting and cultural activities may be able to open around mid-May.

Jean Castex said at a news conference that there has been a "real lowering of the viral circulation" in recent days in 80 percent of French territory.

Cafes — a major part of social life in France — have been closed since the fall.

Castex says a nightly curfew from 7 p.m. will remain in place for now. But travel restrictions will be lifted May 3.

Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer says some schools will open as of Monday, with middle and high schoolers sticking with distance learning until they too go back to class May 3.

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SALT LAKE CITY — Utah Gov. Spencer Cox says the state's vaccine supply is beginning to outpace demand in some counties, and he's urging everyone who may be hesitant to get their shots.

Cox said during his weekly coronavirus news conference that Utah has prioritized putting as many needles into arms as possible at mass vaccination sites and will start transitioning to focus on more regional and community-oriented sites.

Cox added that authorities are starting to move some doses to Salt Lake County, Utah's most populated, where demand remains high.

State epidemiologist Dr. Angela Dunn urged vaccine-reluctant people to speak with their doctor or pharmacist about the vaccine's safety and efficacy.

She said it is "not totally unexpected" that demand for vaccines is softening, and "now we're starting to work into those populations who might have some hesitancy or are just taking their time to get vaccinated."

More than 840,000 people in Utah have been fully vaccinated, or 51.8% of residents aged 16 and over.

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ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's health minister says the spread of COVID-19 infections in the country has

slowed, despite a 16th consecutive day of more than 50,000 cases.

Fahrettin Koca says the country will soon start administering Russia's Sputnik V vaccine, in addition to vaccines developed by China's Sinovac company and Pfizer.

Daily infections and deaths skyrocketed after the country eased some COVID-19 restrictions in March, making Turkey among the worst-hit countries. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan re-imposed a partial closure April 13, saying the government would consider stricter measures if needed.

On Thursday the country reported 54,791 new confirmed infections and 354 deaths in the last 24 hours.

The government extended an upcoming weekend lockdown to include a public holiday on Friday.

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DES MOINES, Iowa — Vaccinations have been halted at a Fort Madison prison after nursing staff incorrectly gave 77 inmates too much of the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine.

Department of Corrections spokesman Cord Overton tells the Des Moines Register that when the error was discovered, staff immediately sought guidance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and from Pfizer.

Overton says the inmates involved were notified of the overdose and are being closely monitored. So far they have shown only the commonly associated side effects, including soreness at the injection site, aches, fatigue and fever.

Kimberly Koehlhoeffer, the mother of one of the inmates, says doctors told her son they had received six times the recommended dose.

The Pfizer vaccine is packaged as a concentrate that must be diluted with saline solution.

Two nursing staff members have been placed on leave pending an investigation.

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PHOENIX — Arizona officials say more than 2 million residents are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, or 28% of the state's population.

The state also reported 647 new confirmed COVID-19 cases on Thursday and 22 more deaths.

Also Thursday, a state-run vaccination site opened at an event center in Scottsdale. Other sites are in Flagstaff, Tucson and Yuma.

Arizona has registered 856,451 confirmed cases and 17,221 confirmed deaths.

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TORONTO — Ontario Premier Doug Ford has apologized after his government reversed measures banning the use of playgrounds and letting police stop and question people who weren't in their homes.

The restrictions had been met with a backlash from the public, police, health officials and opposition politicians.

Restaurants, gyms and classrooms across the province already are closed, and most nonessential workers are working from home.

Ford suggested his government will offer province-paid sick leave for COVID-19 patients but announced no details. He said he won't resign.

Ford is quarantining after a staff member tested positive.

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A multi-country study suggests pregnant women who get COVID-19 have higher risks for death, intensive-care stays, preterm birth and other complications.

Pregnancy causes various changes in the body that may make women vulnerable to harm from the coronavirus. Pregnant women can gain some protection by getting vaccinated; recent evidence suggests the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines are safe to use in pregnancy.

The results were published Thursday in the Journal of the American Medical Association Pediatrics, echoing smaller studies. The research involved hundreds of pregnant women in 18 countries around the planet. It was sponsored by a research fund at the University of Oxford, where the lead authors work.

On Wednesday, the preliminary results of a report of 35,000 U.S. women who received either the Moderna or Pfizer shots while pregnant showed their rates of miscarriage, premature births and other complica-

tions were comparable to those observed in published reports on pregnant women before the pandemic.

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VATICAN CITY — The Vatican will give the second dose of coronavirus vaccines to some of the 1,400 homeless people, migrants and poor who got their first shot a few weeks ago in the walled city state.

The inoculation session Friday in the Vatican auditorium comes as Pope Francis celebrates a feast day honoring the saint of his birth name — Giorgio, or Jorge. The Vatican says the 600 people who will get their second doses of Pfizer will join Francis in a party.

They received their first doses during Holy Week.

The Vatican City State purchased its own vaccines to inoculate Holy See citizens and staff. It has been giving its extra doses to the neediest around Rome. In addition, the pope has been making regular donations of ventilators and other medical equipment to poor countries.

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CAIRO — Developers of the Russian COVID-19 vaccine say they signed a deal with a leading Egyptian pharmaceutical company to manufacture more than 40 million doses annually in Cairo.

The Russian Direct Investment Fund, along with Egypt's Minapharm and its Berlin-based subsidiary, issued a joint statement saying the technology transfer will begin immediately. It expects the roll out of the Sputnik V vaccine in the third quarter of 2021.

Production will take place in Minapharm's biotech facility in Cairo for global distribution.

Russia has been marketing Sputnik V abroad despite the comparatively slow rollout at home and limited production capacities.

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DAMASCUS, Syria — Syria's health minister says the government has received a batch of 203,000 COVID-19 vaccines as part of a push to speed up inoculations in the war-torn country.

The arrival of the United Nations-secured shots on Thursday comes as a new wave of infections overwhelms medical centers around Syria. The AstraZeneca vaccines are part of a campaign aiming to vaccinate 20% of the country's population before the end of the year.

Syria's government controls two-thirds of the country, with the rest held by rebels and Kurdish factions. Millions have fled the country or been displaced internally, and the war has killed half a million people.

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LONDON — Organizers say 4,000 people will be able to attend the ceremony for Britain's leading music prize next month as part of the government's easing of coronavirus restrictions.

The Brit Awards said Thursday in a statement that audience members attending the indoor ceremony at London's O2 Arena on May 11 will not have to socially distance or even wear face coverings once seated. It will be the first major indoor music event in the country with a live audience in more than a year.

Attendees must show proof of a negative coronavirus test to enter and follow travel guidance for getting to and from the venue.

Organizers are giving 2,500 tickets to essential workers in greater London to honor their work through "difficult times."

The U.K. is slowly easing restrictions following a sharp fall in new coronavirus cases.

Petrino named Missouri Valley Conference's top coach

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (AP) — Missouri State coach Bobby Petrino, whose return to the sidelines was delayed until the spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, was named Missouri Valley Football Conference coach of the year on Thursday.

Petrino led the Bears to a 5-1 record, and they were co-champions in the spring conference. Missouri State, winners of just one game the previous season, had been picked to tie for ninth in a preseason poll but will open the FCS playoffs on Saturday against North Dakota.

Petrino edged out South Dakota State's John Stiegelmeier to become the first Missouri State coach to win the honor since Jesse Branch won it in both 1989 and 1990.

The university hired Petrino in January 2020 to replace Dave Steckel. Petrino came to Missouri State with a 119-56 record in 14 seasons at Louisville, Arkansas, Western Kentucky and again at Louisville. He also coached the NFL's Atlanta Falcons for 13 games in 2007.

His biggest success as a college coach came at Arkansas, where he was 34-17, leading the school a No. 5 final ranking and 11 wins in 2011. Petrino was injured in a motorcycle accident that exposed an extra-marital affair with an athletic department employee, and was fired.

He coached Western Kentucky in 2013 before being rehired at Louisville for the 2014 season. He was fired at in 2018 after a 2-8 start.

Firefighter land owner has theory about large wildfire cause

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A former wildland firefighter who owns the land where a burn pile ignited a large wildfire near Rapid City says he believe the blaze was intentionally set.

In a 60-page report, the landowner told investigators he was "100% sure the burn pile fire was completely out." The landowner says he's experienced two suspicious fires since buying the property in 2018.

The Schroeder Fire broke out the morning of March 29 and burned about 3.5 square miles (9 square kilometers).

At least one home and two outbuildings were destroyed in the fire. More than 150 personnel responded to the fire that caused more than 400 people to evacuate their homes near Rapid City and closed Mount Rushmore.

Investigator Todd Hedglin says all evidence points to the fire caused by the debris pile that wasn't completely put out with strong winds fueling the blaze, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The 48-acre property where the fire began has been owned by the SR Living Trust since 2018, according to the Pennington County Equalization Office. The actual owner's name is not mentioned in the investigative report.

Hedglin wrote that the property owner's theory about arson was referred to the Pennington County Sheriff's Office and not something he investigated.

"After speaking with the law enforcement officials, it was determined any third-party involvement with the fire's ignition could be eliminated as a cause of the fire," he wrote.

Noem asks athletic commission to rescind vaccine requirement

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Gov. Kristi Noem is asking the South Dakota Athletic Commission to immediately rescind its requirement that sports participants provide proof they are vaccinated for COVID-19.

In a letter to commission chairman Michael Kilmer, Noem wrote that requiring proof of a vaccination would eliminate South Dakotans' ability to "make reasonable decisions on their own health while they participate in activities in our communities."

The South Dakota Athletic Commission oversees mixed martial arts, boxing and kickboxing within the state.

"While I understand the commission's intent to protect participants at events under its purview, the commission's decision to pass this motion does not reflect South Dakota's relationship to the public regarding COVID-19," Noem wrote.

Noem said her request is under the authority of her latest executive order banning government-instituted vaccine passports, the Argus Leader reported.

The so-called passports are documents that could be used to verify coronavirus immunization status and allow vaccinated people to more freely travel, shop and dine.

Noem's executive order does not apply to private businesses, with the exception of nursing homes and long-term care facilities. It also prohibits local governments from requiring private businesses to show proof of vaccines in order to do business with local government.

South Dakota has resisted government mandates regarding the coronavirus and while Noem said she

encourages vaccinations, she said the state will not require them.

The commission did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday.

'Look after my babies': In Ethiopia, a Tigray family's quest

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

Gunfire crackled near the straw-woven home of Abraha Kinfe Gebremariam. He hoped it drowned out the cries of his wife, curled up in pain, and the newborn twin daughters wailing beside her.

The violence had broken out in northern Ethiopia's Tigray region at the worst possible time for Abraha and his family. Their village of Mai Kadra was caught in the first known massacre of a grinding war that has killed thousands of ethnic Tigrayans like them.

Abraha pleaded with his wife, writhing from post-childbirth complications, to be silent, as any noise could bring gunmen to his door. His two young sons watched in fear.

"I prayed and prayed," Abraha said. "God didn't help me."

He was terrified his family would not survive.

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This story was funded by the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting.

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Five months after it began, the armed conflict in Ethiopia has turned into what witnesses describe as a campaign to destroy the Tigrayan minority. Thousands of families have been shattered, fleeing their homes, starved, murdered or still searching for each other across a region of some 6 million people.

Amid the heartbreak, the sight of a tall, silent man carrying a grimy pink bassinet slung around his neck with tiny twin girls would still bring out the kindness of strangers, even from the ethnicity targeting them.

The bloodshed in Mai Kadra began in November as Abraha's wife, Letay, was enjoying the final stretch of a seemingly normal pregnancy. She was four days late but untroubled. The number of the ambulance for the health clinic was in hand, ready to call.

But then the sounds of fighting grew closer. The shooting and screams sent Letay, her husband and their sons, 5-year-old Micheale and 11-year-old Daniel, into hiding in the tall, parched grass near their home.

They lay for hours under the hot sun. There was nothing to eat or drink. Letay rested on her side.

"Don't worry, I'm OK," she told her worried husband. That night, they crept indoors to sleep.

The next day, Letay went into labor.

The gunfire continued in Mai Kadra, and most of the neighbors had fled. Frightened and feeling alone, Abraha and his wife decided not to risk going to the clinic. They would deliver their baby at home.

An elderly neighbor from the ethnic group fighting the Tigrayans, the Amhara, had not left. She agreed to help.

Abraha had never seen childbirth. Like most men across Tigray, he hovered outside the door, praying. The delivery was quiet and fast, just three hours long. Finally, he peeked inside.

He had longed for a daughter. Now, nestled beside his wife, he saw two. His joy was tempered by anxiety.

"Here something awful was happening in our village," he said. "I wondered, 'How can I do this?'"

But in the hours ahead, he forgot about the babies. Something was badly wrong with his wife. Her afterbirth wasn't coming out.

Letay's pain grew. She tried to breastfeed the twins, but couldn't. As she lost herself in agony, the babies began to cry.

The family tried to comfort them, in vain. They kept the exhausted Letay awake because of their belief that otherwise the afterbirth would fall back into her.

"I don't know what wrong I did to my God for these troubles," Abraha said, starting to cry.

Four days after Letay delivered, her afterbirth was expelled. But she wept day and night in pain.

Abraha despaired. By now, from neighbors' accounts, the family understood they were trapped in a massacre. Ethnicity had become deadly, with reports of both Amhara and Tigrayans being shot or slaughtered.

"If I took my wife to the clinic, they might kill me," Abraha said. "It was very difficult to decide."

He waited until he could bear it no longer. A week after Letay gave birth, he asked the Amhara neighbor to take her for help.

But the clinic could not, or did not, help her. Abraha doesn't know whether ethnic tensions played a role.

On the ninth day after giving birth, Letay beckoned Abraha closer.

"Look after my babies," she said. "I'm going to die. I don't have hope. I'm very sorry."

She was gone the next day.

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In Tigray culture, the community gathers when someone dies. Even strangers take part, throwing a little dirt on the grave.

But as Abraha emerged from his home for the first time since the war began, only a handful of people stepped forward to help carry his wife's body to the church. Fewer than a dozen neighbors were there.

It was daylight. The burial was short. There were no speeches. The churchyard likely was full of fresh graves from the hundreds killed in Mai Kadra, but Abraha didn't notice his surroundings.

He returned home, where the babies he had almost forgotten about were waiting. Wrapped up in his wife's final days, he had little idea how the girls were fed or even survived.

Abraha found himself struggling. Washing the tiny, wriggling girls terrified him. Without diapers, he rinsed and reused pieces of cloth. And with two babies instead of one, everything seemed to run short.

He wondered if he was failing. The twins cried most of the time. Trapped in a home just a few paces in size, Abraha got little sleep.

When he broke down and cried, his sons comforted him.

"We need you, be strong," they said.

Abraha didn't leave the house. His son Daniel tried to visit the market one day and saw some 10 bodies piled onto a vehicle, with another four in the dirt. He never went to the market again.

The Amhara neighbor went out for the family's food and helped with the children. For another measure of safety, an acquaintance from a different ethnic group, the Wolkait, managed to get the ethnicity changed on Abraha's identity card. On paper he became Wolkait, too.

It happened just in time. When Amhara militia members came to his home, Abraha showed the altered ID. He addressed them in Amharic, Ethiopia's main language, not daring to speak a word of his native Tigrinya.

He also showed them his baby girls.

Any suspicions disappeared. The militia came to the house several times after that. They offered Abraha a little money and tried to comfort him for his loss.

"They thought I was one of them," Abraha said.

His family was safe, for now. But he knew they couldn't stay. The fake Wolkait identity had worked almost too well. Abraha's brother-in-law, 19-year-old Goytom Tsegay, said Amhara special forces tried to recruit him.

Life in Mai Kadra was more dangerous by the day. Every night, Abraha heard someone else had been killed. A month after the fighting began, he decided to leave.

He didn't even know where to go.

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The family packed light, so the Amhara who now controlled Mai Kadra would not notice they were leaving for good. Abraha, his children and his brother-in-law carried just five pieces of the local injera bread, a tin of milk and two liters of water, plus a change of clothes for the twins.

A woman in the community brought the pink bassinet for the babies. Abraha hid a small book of photos of his wife and children under its mattress, along with his wife's jewelry. He was scared the militia would find them, but he couldn't bear to leave them behind.

The family walked to the checkpoint on the edge of town, accompanied by the Amhara neighbor. She chatted with fighters there. This family is Amhara, she said.

Sympathetic, the militia unknowingly helped the fleeing Tigrayan family. They stopped a car on the

road and arranged a ride, saving Abraha and his children a six-hour walk to the city of Humera near the Sudanese border.

Blinded by grief and nervousness, Abraha hardly looked out the window during the drive, one he had made many times. Other desperate families were fleeing on foot through the lowland farms, trying to stay out of sight of the militia, clutching whatever possessions they had left.

In Humera, also under growing Amhara control, Abraha's family went to the hospital to ask for milk. Again, one glance at the babies in his arms won new friends.

"All the staff was sorry for me, even the cleaners," he said.

A fellow Tigrayan, one of the few remaining on staff, quietly took them to her home and suggested they go to Sudan for safety. It was a four-hour walk away.

Abraha had heard that the Amhara youth militia and soldiers from nearby Eritrea roamed the route. Both have been accused of beating or shooting people trying to flee.

"We were very afraid we would be killed," he said.

The family started their final walk before dawn. They stayed off the roads, crossing fields instead, asking fellow Tigrayans they met for the safest way. They stopped sometimes to hide in the grass and give milk to the crying babies.

The heat quickly grew with the rising sun. The flat expanse of Sudan came into sight, then the narrow Tekeze river.

Frantic Tigrayans jostled for places aboard the boats that would ferry them across the border. Many were waiting. It was loud and chaotic, and the twins began to wail.

The sight of Abraha, the bassinet and what it carried stilled some in the crowd. To Abraha's astonishment, the family was waved to the front and given a reduced price for the crossing.

He and the babies were ushered to a boat of their own that was lashed together from a dozen 20-liter jerrycans. It was flat, with no guardrail.

Abraha couldn't swim. But as he settled into place in the center of the boat and its bottom scraped free of his country, he felt the burden of the past month ease.

"I was 100% sure the babies would grow up, that things would change from that moment," he said. "My stress melted away. There were no more fears for our lives."

Even the twins had become quiet. He looked down. They had fallen asleep.

The family arrived in Sudan exhausted, with the twins badly underweight. Megan Donaghy, a nurse midwife with Doctors Without Borders, wondered what had happened to their mother.

Abraha pulled out a picture and said, "This is my wife." The entire family smiled as they looked at it.

"And that's when I cried, when I saw her face," Donaghy remembered. "She was just this beautiful, vibrant woman, a young woman, who loved her family, and here they were in tattered clothes, run-down, tired, hungry, with these sweet little babies."

A fellow refugee, Mulu Gebrencheal, a mother of five, came across the family and wept. She has since become an informal adviser on the babies' care. Abraha and his sons are quick learners, she said, but she mourns for the twins.

"Even the hug of a mother is very sweet," she said. "They've never had this. They never will."

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Months after arriving in Sudan, the twins lay on their backs under tiny mosquito nets on metal-frame beds, gnawing a fist or smiling up at the besotted men who have become experts in infant care. On their tiny wrists, the girls take turns wearing a single protective amulet given to them by a local woman.

But for Abraha, a painful task remained. He had finally managed to reach his relatives inside Tigray for the first time since the war began. His sister picked up the phone, and he asked her to invite other family members to an important call the following day.

He made his way alone back to the border with Ethiopia, where refugees come with their phones for a clearer signal. He forced himself to begin with the good news.

His family, excited, clamored for details of his wife.

"Did she give birth?" they asked.

"Yes, twins," Abraha replied. Joyful, his family pressed for more.
"Boys or girls?"
"Who looks like whom?"
"How was the labor?"
Finally, Abraha calmed them, and continued.
"But," he said, "I couldn't save her life."
His family began to cry. He joined them. He worried about what awful things might have happened to his sister and others that they were hiding from him even now.
As the tears calmed, his family tried to comfort him.
"God has his own plan."
"Try to be strong."
"Look after the babies, and the boys."
"You're all they have."
That evening, Abraha returned to what he and his children now call home, thanks to those who helped them get out alive. He picked up the baby girls and again searched their faces for traces of their mother. His family agrees, one of the babies does look like Letay.
In the fear and despair following their birth, the twins were left unnamed. There was no time. Finally, Abraha's young son Micheale christened them himself.
One of the girls was named Aden, or "paradise."
The other, who reminds people of her mother, was named Turfu, or "left behind."

SpaceX launches 3rd crew in under year, fly on reused rocket

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — SpaceX launched four astronauts into orbit Friday using a recycled rocket and capsule, the third crew flight in less than a year for Elon Musk's rapidly expanding company.
The astronauts from the U.S., Japan and France should reach the International Space Station early Saturday morning, following a 23-hour ride in the same Dragon capsule used by SpaceX's debut crew last May. They'll spend six months at the orbiting lab.
It was the first time SpaceX reused a capsule and rocket to launch astronauts for NASA, after years of proving the capability on station supply runs. The rocket was used last November on the company's second astronaut flight.
Embracing the trend, spacecraft commander Shane Kimbrough and his crew weeks ago wrote their initials in the rocket's soot, hoping to start a tradition.
"Glad to be back in space," Kimbrough radioed once the capsule was safely in orbit.
For NASA astronaut Megan McArthur, it was a bit of deja vu. She launched in the same seat in the same capsule as her husband, Bob Behnken, did during SpaceX's first crew flight. This time it was Behnken and their 7-year-old son waving goodbye. McArthur blew kisses and offered virtual hugs.
Also flying SpaceX on Friday: Japan's Akihiko Hoshide and France's Thomas Pesquet, the first European to launch in a commercial crew capsule.
It was a stunning scene: The launch plume glowed against the dark sky, reflecting the sunlight at high altitude. "Just spectacular," said NASA's acting administrator Steve Jurczyk.
A masked Musk met briefly with the astronauts at NASA's Kennedy Space Center before they boarded white gull-winged Teslas from his electric car company. The astronauts' spouses and children huddled around the cars for one last "love you" before the caravan pulled away and headed to the pad in the predawn darkness.
"From now on, I'll see you on a screen!" tweeted Pesquet's partner, Anne Mottet.
Despite the early hour, spectators lined surrounding roads to watch the Falcon take flight an hour before sunrise. Liftoff was delayed a day to take advantage of better weather along the East Coast in case of a

launch abort and emergency splashdown.

NASA limited the number of launch guests because of COVID-19, but SpaceX's next private passengers made the cut. Tech billionaire Jared Isaacman, who's bought a three-day flight, watched the Falcon soar with the three people who will accompany him. Their capsule is still at the space station and due back on Earth with four astronauts next Wednesday. It will be refurbished in time for a September liftoff.

For Friday's automated flight, SpaceX replaced some valves and thermal shielding, and installed new parachutes on the capsule, named Endeavour after NASA's retired space shuttle. Otherwise, the spacecraft is the same vehicle that flew before.

"We're thrilled to have a crew on board Endeavour once again," SpaceX Launch Control radioed just before liftoff.

All four astronauts clasped hands as Kimbrough noted it was the first time in more than 20 years that U.S., European and Japanese astronauts had launched together.

The first-stage booster touched down on an ocean platform nine minutes after liftoff.

Rapid reusability is critical to Musk's effort to open space to everyone, land NASA's next moonwalkers and, his loftiest goal by far, build a city on Mars.

Musk will go a long way toward achieving that first objective with the private flight in September. It will be followed in October by SpaceX's fourth crew launch for NASA.

SpaceX picked up the station slack for NASA after the space agency's shuttles retired in 2011, starting with supply runs the following year. The big draw was last year's return of astronaut launches to Florida, after years of relying on Russia for rides.

"It's awesome to have this regular cadence again," said Kennedy's director Robert Cabana, a former shuttle commander.

Boeing, NASA's other contracted crew transporter, isn't expected to start launching NASA astronauts until early next year. First, it needs to repeat a test flight of an empty Starliner capsule, possibly in late summer, to make up for its software-plagued debut in December 2019.

Last week, SpaceX beat out two other companies, including Jeff Bezos' Blue Origin, to land astronauts on the moon for NASA in three or more years. They'll descend to the lunar surface in Starship, the shiny, bullet-shaped rocketship that Musk is testing in the skies over Texas, with fiery, explosive results.

"It's a great time to be here, and we're very excited," the European Space Agency's Frank De Winne, an astronaut turned manager, said shortly before liftoff. The space station eventually will come to an end, he noted, but the partnership will continue amid hopes of "European astronauts one day walking on the surface of the moon."

Japan issues 3rd virus emergency in Tokyo, Osaka area

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan declared a third state of emergency for Tokyo and three western prefectures on Friday amid skepticism it will be enough to curb a rapid coronavirus resurgence just three months ahead of the Olympics.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga announced the emergency for Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo from April 25 through May 11.

The step is largely intended to be "short and intensive" to stop people from traveling and spreading the virus during Japan's "Golden Week" holidays from late April through the first week of May, Suga said. He is due to explain the measures at a news conference later Friday as he seeks the public's understanding.

Japan's third state of emergency since the pandemic began comes only a month after an earlier emergency ended in the Tokyo area. For days, experts and local leaders said ongoing semi-emergency measures have failed and tougher steps are urgently needed.

Past emergency measures, issued a year ago and then in January, were toothless and authorized only non-mandatory requests. The government in February toughened a law on anti-virus measures to allow authorities to issue binding orders for nonessential businesses to shorten their hours or close, in exchange

for compensation for those who comply and penalties for violators.

The measures this time are to include shutdown orders for bars, department stores, malls, theme parks, theaters and museums. Restaurants that do not serve alcohol and public transportation services are asked to close early. Schools will stay open, but universities are asked to return to online classes.

Mask-wearing, staying home and other measures for the general public remain non-mandatory requests, and experts worry if they will be followed.

Japan, which has had about half a million cases and 10,000 deaths, has not enforced lockdowns. But people are becoming impatient and less cooperative and have largely ignored the ongoing measures as the infections accelerated.

Osaka, the epicenter of the latest resurgence, has since April 5 been under semi-emergency status, which was expanded to 10 areas including Tokyo, a step promoted by Suga's government as an alternative to a state of emergency with less economic damage.

Osaka Gov. Hirofumi Yoshimura, who on Tuesday requested the emergency, said the semi-emergency measures were not working and hospitals were overflowing with patients.

The virus surge, fueled by a new, more contagious variant detected earlier in Britain, has spread rapidly across the country.

The government has also been slow in rolling out vaccinations, leaving the population largely unprotected before the Olympics begin on July 23.

The May 11 end of the emergency, just ahead of an expected visit by International Olympic Committee President Thomas Back, triggered speculation that the government is prioritizing the Olympic schedule over people's health.

Suga has been reluctant to hurt the already pandemic-damaged economy and faced criticism for being slow to take virus measures.

Japan's inoculation campaign lags behind many countries, with imported vaccines in short supply while its attempts to develop its own vaccines are still in the early stages. Inoculations started in mid-February but progress has been slow amid shortages of vaccines and healthcare workers.

The rapid increase in patients flooding hospitals has raised concerns of a further staff shortage and delay in vaccinations.

Russian troops start pulling back from Ukrainian border

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian troops began pulling back to their permanent bases Friday after a massive buildup that caused Ukrainian and Western concerns.

On Thursday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared the sweeping maneuvers in Crimea and wide swaths of western Russia over, and ordered the military to pull the troops that took part in them back to their permanent bases by May 1.

At the same time, he ordered their heavy weapons kept in western Russia for another massive military exercise called Zapad (West) 2021 later this year. The weapons were to be stored at the Pogonovo firing range in the southwestern Voronezh region, 160 kilometers (100 miles) east of the border with Ukraine.

The concentration of Russian troops amid increasing violations of a cease-fire in the conflict in eastern Ukraine raised concerns in the West, which urged the Kremlin to pull its forces back.

The U.S. and NATO have said the buildup was the largest since 2014, when Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its support behind separatists in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of Donbas.

Moscow has rejected Ukrainian and Western concerns about the troop buildup, arguing that it's free to deploy its forces anywhere on Russian territory. But the Kremlin also sternly warned Ukrainian authorities against trying to use force to retake control of the rebel east, saying it could intervene to protect civilians there. More than 14,000 people have been killed in seven years of fighting between Ukrainian troops and Russia-backed separatists in Donbas.

Asked if the Kremlin thinks that the Russian troop pullback could help ease tensions with the United States, Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said that the issues aren't connected.

"It's not an issue for Russia-U.S. relations," Peskov said in a call with reporters. "We have said that any movement of Russian troops on Russian territory doesn't pose any threat and doesn't represent an escalation. Russia does what it thinks is necessary for its military organization and training of troops."

The Russian Defense Ministry said its forces that took part in the massive drills in Crimea were moving Friday to board trains, transport aircraft and landing vessels en route to their permanent bases.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has welcomed the Russian pullback.

EXPLAINER: What does Japan's virus state of emergency mean

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan on Friday declared a state of emergency to curb a rapid coronavirus resurgence, the third since the pandemic began. The measures in parts of Japan, including Tokyo, have so far failed to curb infections caused by a more contagious new variant of the virus.

Here's a look at how the state of emergency differs from previous ones, what measures are included, and whether Japan can control infections before the Tokyo Olympics in July.

HOW BAD IS JAPAN'S SITUATION?

Japan, with about 550,000 cases and fewer than 10,000 deaths, is better off than much of the world, though not so good when compared with other places in Asia. It has not imposed any hard lockdowns. Infections briefly dipped in March, but have since risen above five times to exceed 5,000 Wednesday. Experts have warned that a new variant of the virus, detected earlier in Britain, is rapidly spreading among younger people in offices and classrooms, causing more serious cases, overburdening hospitals and disrupting regular medical care. Testing remains insufficient despite calls for increased testing for new variants at elderly homes and for the young.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

The latest state of emergency covers Tokyo and the western metropolises of Osaka, Kyoto and Hyogo, home to about a quarter of Japan's population of 126 million. The 17-day emergency begins Sunday and lasts until May 11, just after the end of Japan's "golden week" holidays, to discourage traveling. The scheduled end, ahead of an expected visit to Japan of International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach in mid-May, has led to criticism that the government is putting the Olympic schedule over people's health.

WHAT CAN A STATE OF EMEGENCY DO?

Emergency measures were toughened under a law revised in February, and the state of emergency now allows prefectural governors in the areas to issue binding orders for businesses to shorten hours or close in exchange for daily compensation of up to 200,000 yen ($1,850), while imposing fines of up to 300,000 yen ($2,780) for violators.

WHAT WILL CHANGE FROM EARLIER MEASURES?

Department stores, malls, theme parks, bars and restaurants serving alcohol, as well as theaters and museums, will close. Restaurants that do not serve alcohol and public transportation services are asked to finish early. Groceries and schools will stay open, but universities are asked to return to online classes. The third emergency is similar to the first one a year ago and tougher than a second one in January that was limited to 8 p.m. closure requests for bars and restaurants.

WILL THE PUBLIC COMPLY?

Residents are asked to avoid nonessential outings, work from home and stick to mask-wearing and other safety measures, but those are non-mandatory requests. Experts worry whether the requests will be followed as many people are increasingly fatigued by restraints and less cooperative, and they have largely ignored ongoing social distancing requests in Tokyo, Osaka and other areas since earlier this month.

HOW DOES THE EMERGENCY AFFECT THE OLYMPICS?

Tokyo Olympic organizers and the government have repeated their determination to hold the July 23-

Aug. 8 Games, while a majority of the public have supported canceling or further postponement. The surge in cases has caused a rerouting of the Olympic torch relay after its March 25 start in Fukushima.

WHAT ABOUT JAPAN'S VACCINATIONS?

Japan's inoculation campaign lags behind many countries, with imported vaccines in short supply. Japan's attempts to develop its own vaccines are still in the early stages. Inoculations started in mid-February and have covered only about 1% of the Japanese people. The rapid rise of the new patients in hospitals has raised worry of further staff shortages and a slowdown of vaccinations. Some top officials have mentioned the Games being held without audiences, or canceled in worst-case scenarios. Organizers have postponed a decision on what to do with fans until June.

Jobs are make-or-break argument for Biden in climate plan

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, CHRISTINA LARSON and MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The White House is bringing out the billionaires, the CEOs and the union executives Friday to help sell President Joe Biden's climate-friendly transformation of the U.S. economy at his virtual summit of world leaders.

The closing day of the two-day summit on climate change is to feature Bill Gates and Mike Bloomberg, steelworker and electrical union leaders and executives for solar and other renewable energy.

It's all in service of an argument U.S. officials say will make or break Biden's climate agenda: Pouring trillions of dollars into clean-energy technology, research and infrastructure will jet-pack a competitive U.S. economy into the future and create jobs, while saving the planet.

"Climate change is more than a threat," Biden declared on Thursday's opening day of his climate summit. "It also presents one of the largest job creation opportunities in history."

The new urgency comes as scientists say that climate change caused by coal plants, car engines and other fossil fuel use is worsening droughts, floods, hurricanes, wildfires and other disasters and that humans are running out of time to stave off catastrophic extremes of global warming.

The event has featured the world's major powers — and major polluters — pledging to cooperate on cutting petroleum and coal emissions that are rapidly warming the planet.

But Republicans are sticking to the arguments that former President Donald Trump made in pulling the U.S. out of the 2015 Paris climate accord. They point to China as the world's worst climate polluter — the U.S. is No. 2 — and say any transition to clean energy hurts American oil, natural gas and coal workers.

It means "putting good-paying American jobs into the shredder," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said on the Senate floor Thursday in a speech in which he dismissed the administration's plans as costly and ineffective.

"This is quite the one-two punch," McConnell said. "Toothless requests of our foreign adversaries ... and maximum pain for American citizens."

In an announcement timed to his summit, Biden pledged the U.S. will cut fossil fuel emissions as much as 52% by 2030.

Allies joined the U.S. in announcing new moves to cut emissions, striving to build momentum going into November's U.N. climate summit in Glasgow, where governments will say how far each is willing to go to cut the amount of fossil fuel fumes it pumps out.

Japan announced its own new 46% emissions reduction target, and South Korea said it would stop public financing of new coal-fired power plants, potentially an important step toward persuading China and other coal-reliant nations to curb the building and funding of new ones as well. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his nation would boost its fossil fuel pollution cuts from 30% to at least 40%.

Biden was scheduled to address the summit Friday at a session on the "economic opportunities of climate action." Leaders from Israel, Singapore, the United Arab Emirates, Kenya, Denmark, Norway, Poland, Nigeria, Spain and Vietnam also were scheduled to participate Friday, along with Biden's transportation, energy and commerce secretaries and others.

Travel precautions under the coronavirus pandemic compelled the summit to play out on livestream,

limiting opportunities for spontaneous interaction and negotiation. Its opening hours were sometimes marked by electronic echoes, random beeps and off-screen voices.

But the summit opening Thursday also marshaled an impressive display of the world's most powerful leaders speaking on the single topic of climate change.

China's Xi Jinping spoke first among the other global figures. He made no reference to disputes over territorial claims, trade and other matters that had made it uncertain until Wednesday that he would even take part in the U.S. summit.

"To protect the environment is to protect productivity, and to boost the environment is to boost productivity. It's as simple as that," Xi said.

The Biden administration's pledge would require by far the most ambitious U.S. climate effort ever, nearly doubling the reductions that the Obama administration had committed to in the Paris climate accord.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was one of many allies welcoming the U.S. return after Trump.

"I'm delighted to see that the United States is back, is back to work together with us in climate politics," Merkel declared in her virtual appearance. "Because there can be no doubt about the world needing your contribution if we really want to fulfill our ambitious goals."

Pope Francis contributed a video from the Vatican, saying, "I wish you success in this beautiful decision to meet, walk together going forward, and I am with you all the way."

Leaders of smaller states buffeted by rising seas and worsening hurricanes appealed for aid and fast emissions cuts from world powers.

Gaston Alfonso Browne, prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda, called for debt relief and more international assistance to recover from storms and the pandemic to prevent a flow of climate refugees. His people, he said, are "teetering on the edge of despair."

Longtime climate policy experts, no strangers to climate summits with solemn pledges, watched some speeches with skepticism. After Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro promised an end to clearcutting in the Amazon, Dan Wilkinson of Human Rights Watch's environmental programs noted, "It is going to be hard for anyone to take it seriously until they actually start taking steps."

US drop in vaccine demand has some places turning down doses

LEAH WILLINGHAM, HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and MICHELLE SMITH Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Louisiana has stopped asking the federal government for its full allotment of COVID-19 vaccine. About three-quarters of Kansas counties have turned down new shipments of the vaccine at least once over the past month. And in Mississippi, officials asked the federal government to ship vials in smaller packages so they don't go to waste.

As the supply of coronavirus vaccine doses in the U.S. outpaces demand, some places around the country are finding there's such little interest in the shots, they need to turn down shipments.

"It is kind of stalling. Some people just don't want it," said Stacey Hileman, a nurse with the health department in rural Kansas' Decatur County, where less than a third of the county's 2,900 residents have received at least one vaccine dose.

The dwindling demand for vaccines illustrates the challenge that the U.S. faces in trying to conquer the pandemic while at the same time dealing with the optics of tens of thousands of doses sitting on shelves when countries like India and Brazil are in the midst of full-blown medical emergencies.

More than half of American adults have received at least one vaccine dose, and President Joe Biden this week celebrated eclipsing 200 million doses administered in his first 100 days in office. He also acknowledged entering a new phase to bolster outreach and overcome hesitancy.

Across the country, pharmacists and public health officials seeing the demand wane and supplies build up. About half of Iowa's counties have stopped asking for new doses from the state, and Louisiana didn't seek shipment of some vaccine doses over the past week.

In Mississippi, small-town pharmacist Robin Jackson has been practically begging anyone in the community to show up and get shots after she received her first shipment of vaccine earlier this month and

demand was weak, despite placing yard signs outside her storefront celebrating the shipment's arrival. She was wasting more vaccine than she was giving out and started coaxing family members into the pharmacy for shots.

"Nobody was coming," she said. "And I mean no one."

In Barber County, Kansas, which has turned down vaccine doses from the state for two of the past four weeks, Danielle Farr said she has no plans to be vaccinated. The 32-year-old said she got COVID-19 last year, along with her 5- and 12-year-old sons and her husband.

Blood tests detected antibodies for the virus in all four of them, so she figures they're already protected.

"I believe in vaccines that have eradicated terrible diseases for the past 60, 70 years. I totally and fully believe in that," said Farr, who works at an accounting firm. "Now a vaccine that was rushed in six, seven months, I'm just going to be a little bit more cautious about what I choose to put into my body."

Barbara Gennaro, a stay-at-home mother of two small children in Yazoo City, Mississippi, said everybody in her homeschooling community is against getting the vaccine. Gennaro said she generally avoids vaccinations for her family in general, and the coronavirus vaccine is no different.

"All of the strong Christians that I associate with are against it," she said. "Fear is what drives people to get the vaccine — plain and simple. The stronger someone's trust is in the Lord, the least likely they are to want the vaccine or feel that it's necessary."

Another challenge for vaccinations in a rural state like Mississippi is that in many cases, doses are being shipped in large packages with one vial containing at least 10 doses.

During a news conference in early April, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves said Mississippi officials have requested that the federal government send the vaccines in smaller packaging so it's not going to waste.

"If you're in New York City, and you're sending a package to one of the large pharmacies in downtown Manhattan, there are literally millions and millions of people within walking distance most likely of that particular pharmacy," Reeves said. "Well, if you're in rural Itta Bena, Mississippi, that's just not the case."

To combat the hesitancy, Louisiana continues to increase its outreach work with community organizations and faith-based leaders, set up a hotline to help people schedule appointments, and work to find free transportation to a vaccination center. The health department is sending out more than 100,000 mailers on Monday to encourage people to get vaccinated, and robocalls from regional medical directors are going out to landline phones around the state.

In New Mexico, state officials are exploring the recruitment of "community champions" — trusted residents of regions with vaccine hesitancy who can address concerns about safety and efficacy. Question-and-answer style town halls are also a possibility. And video testimonials about coronavirus vaccines already have been recorded.

Nirav Shah, director of the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the president of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said now that everyone qualifies to get vaccinated, public health officials are encountering three groups: "not able," "not now" and "not ever."

The first group, he said, isn't able to get their shots because they don't have time. The "not nows" have earnest questions about vaccine safety, efficacy and whether they need the shot.

He said they're not prepared to write off "not evers," but instead are "working to find trusted messengers like doctors, family members, community members" to give them good information.

In Corinth, Mississippi, pharmacist Austin Bullard said a lot of people were waiting to become vaccinated until a one-dose shot became available. The news about the Johnson & Johnson vaccine and the risk for blood-clotting — however slim — has scared people about getting any type of vaccination.

"I do feel like there has been more hesitancy across the board since then," he said.

Indian hospitals plead for oxygen, country sets virus record

By NEHA MEHROTRA and ASHOK SHARMA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India put oxygen tankers on special express trains as major hospitals in New Delhi on Friday begged on social media for more supplies to save COVID-19 patients who are struggling to

breathe. More than a dozen people died when an oxygen-fed fire ripped through a coronavirus ward in a populous western state.

India's underfunded health system is tattering as the world's worst coronavirus surge wears out the nation, which set another global record in daily infections for a second straight day with 332,730.

India has confirmed 16 million cases so far, second only to the United States in a country of nearly 1.4 billion people. India has recorded 2,263 deaths in the past 24 hours for a total of 186,920.

The fire in a hospital intensive care unit killed 13 COVID-19 patients in the Virar area on the outskirts of Mumbai early Friday.

The situation was worsening by the day with hospitals taking to social media pleading with the government to replenish their oxygen supplies and threatening to stop fresh admissions of patients.

A major private hospital chain in the capital, Max Hospital, tweeted that one of its facilities had one hour's oxygen supply in its system and was waiting for replenishment since early morning. Two days earlier, they had filed a petition in the Delhi High Court that they were running out of oxygen, endangering the lives of 400 patients, of which 262 were being treated with COVID-19.

The government started running Oxygen Express trains with tankers to meet the scramble at hospitals, Railroad Minister Piyush Goyal said.

"We have surplus oxygen at plants which are far off from places where it is needed right now. Trucking oxygen is a challenge from these plants," said Saket Tiku, president of the All India Industrial Gases Manufacturers Association. "We have ramped up the production as oxygen consumption is rising through the roof. But we have limitations and the biggest challenge right now is transporting it to where its urgently needed. "

The Supreme Court told Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government on Thursday that it wanted a "national plan" on the supply of oxygen and essential drugs for the treatment of coronavirus patients.

The New Delhi government issued a list of a dozen government and private hospitals facing an acute shortage of oxygen supplies.

At another hospital in the capital, questions were raised about whether low oxygen supplies had caused deaths.

The Press Trust of India reported 25 COVID-19 patients died at Sir Ganga Ram Hospital in the past 24 hours and the lives of another 60 were at risk amid a serious oxygen supply crisis. The news agency quoted unnamed officials as saying "low pressure oxygen" could be the likely cause for their deaths.

However, Ajoy Sehgal, a hospital spokesperson, would not comment on whether the 25 patients died from a lack of oxygen. He said an oxygen tanker had just entered the hospital complex and hoped it would temporarily relieve the fast depleting supply.

The New Delhi Television channel later cited the hospital chairman as saying the deaths cannot be ascribed to a lack of oxygen.

On the outskirts of Mumbai, the fire early Friday was the second deadly incident at a hospital this week.

The fire on the second-floor ICU was extinguished and some patients requiring oxygen were moved to nearby hospitals, said Dilip Shah, CEO of Vijay Vallabh hospital. Shah said there are 90 patients in the hospital, about 70 kilometers (43 miles) north of Mumbai, India's financial capital.

The cause of the fire is being investigated, he said. An explosion in the ICU air conditioning unit preceded the fire, PTI quoted government official Vivekanand Kadam as saying.

On Wednesday, 24 COVID-19 patients on ventilators died due to an oxygen leak in a hospital in Nashik, another city in Maharashtra state.

In New Delhi, Akhil Gupta was waiting for a bed for his 62-year-old mother, Suman. On April 2, she tested positive and was asymptomatic for 10 days. Then she developed a fever and started experiencing difficulty breathing.

For the next two days, her other sons, Nikhil and Akhil, drove around the city, visiting every hospital in search of a bed. Sometimes they took their mother with them, sometimes they went on their own. They looked everywhere, to no avail.

On Friday, they got their mother into the emergency room at the Max Hospital in Patparganj, where she was put on oxygen temporarily as she waited in line for a bed to open up inside.

"Now the doctors are asking us to take her away because they don't have enough oxygen to keep her in the emergency room. But we're not even getting any ambulance with oxygen to transport her to some other facility," said Akhil Gupta.

The family decided to stay at Max and continue waiting for a bed.

"What else can we do?" said Akhil.

A year ago, India was able to avoid the shortages of medical oxygen that plagued Latin America and Africa after it converted industrial oxygen manufacturing systems into a medical-grade network.

But many facilities went back to supplying oxygen to industries and now several Indian states face such shortages that the Health Ministry has urged hospitals to implement rationing.

The government in October began building new plants to produce medical oxygen, but now, some six months later, it remains unclear whether any have come on line, with the Health Ministry saying they were being "closely reviewed for early completion."

Tanks of oxygen are being shuttled across the country to hotspots to keep up with the demand, and several state governments have alleged that many have been intercepted by other states en route to be used for their needs.

Ashok Kumar Sharma, 62, was finally put on oxygen Monday in his home in West Delhi. It only happened after days of frantically searching for an oxygen cylinder from various hospitals, clinics and private distributors.

"I called at least 60 people looking for oxygen, but everyone's numbers were switched off," said Kunal, Sharma's son.

Kunal's father was diagnosed with pneumonia on April 14, and a few days later, tested positive for COVID-19. The doctors recommended he be put on oxygen immediately. When Kunal could not find any, he put out an SOS on social media.

"But there is so much black marketeering going on. People contacted me selling cylinders for 3 times, 4 times the original price," said Kunal. He finally acquired one from a personal contact.

"It's horrible how people are taking advantage of our helplessness," he said.

Denmark tells some Syrians to leave, separating families

By DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — An email brought Faeza Satouf's world to a standstill.

The 25-year-old Syrian refugee had fled the civil war with her family in an all-too-familiar journey across the sea to Europe, where they finally arrived in Denmark and were granted asylum in 2015. Yet six years later, she was being told she had to go back — alone, and soon.

Ten years after the start of the uprising against Bashar al-Assad's regime, Denmark has become the first European country to start revoking the residency permits of some Syrian refugees, arguing that the Syrian capital, Damascus, and neighboring regions are safe. Yet few experts agree with Denmark's assessment.

"There are no laws in Syria that can protect me like here in Denmark," Satouf said with palpable anxiety. "My father is sought after in Syria, so of course I will be arrested upon my return."

In the past six years, Satouf has learned Danish, graduated from high school with flying colors and is now studying to be a nurse while working in a supermarket. She can't understand why a country that encouraged integration and which needs nurses amid a pandemic would expel her and others, mainly women.

For now, the decision affects only people from certain areas of Syria who got their initial asylum because they were fleeing civil war. It doesn't include those who can prove a specific threat to their lives, such as men who could face conscription into Assad's army.

"This is very much down the line of gender," said Satouf's lawyer, Niels-Erik Hansen. "When I have a male client, I will send him right away to the Immigration Service and he will get asylum within three weeks. A female client will get rejected ... and we will have to take this case to the refugee board. So

when I look into the pile of cases that I'm representing at the board, it's like 90% women and 10% male."

Because Denmark has no diplomatic relations with Syria, those who refuse to leave the country cannot be sent to Syria. Instead, they are sent to deportation centers, separated from family, unable to work and withdrawn from education programs.

Single women are likely to be sent to the Kaershovedgaard deportation center, a remote complex of buildings about 300 kilometers (185 miles) west of Copenhagen. Access is strictly limited, but Red Cross photos show rudimentary infrastructure where cooking is banned and activities are restricted. Even Danish language lessons are not allowed.

"It is like a prison, but they are allowed to go out in the daytime," said Gerda Abildgaard, who has visited the center for several years for the Red Cross.

The policy is the product of a left-wing Social Democratic-led government, whose immigration stance has come to resemble that of far-right parties after years of large migrations peaked in 2015 with 1 million new arrivals in Europe. The large numbers of people coming from Africa and the Middle East energized populist movements across the continent, pushing parties that had a more welcoming position to embrace stricter policies.

It's a dilemma that Democrats are facing in the U.S., as a surge of young migrants at the Southern border tests President Joe Biden's campaign promise to accept more refugees than in the Trump era.

Though the numbers of asylum-seekers in Denmark have since plummeted, particularly during the pandemic, Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen reiterated in January a vision of having "zero asylum-seekers."

The Danish government argues that it made clear to the Syrians from the beginning that they were being offered only temporary protection.

"It's a cornerstone of our legislation … that you get temporary protection, and as soon as you don't need protection anymore, you will have to leave Denmark," said Rasmus Storklund, a Social Democratic lawmaker and member of Parliament's Immigration and Integration Committee.

Standing in front of the deportation center's heavy gates, Abildgaard pleads: "But is Syria safe again? It's only Denmark who says that. All the other European countries don't say that. Only Denmark."

This week, experts who contributed to reports on which the Danish authorities based their assessment condemned that conclusion, warning in a joint statement published by Human Rights Watch that "conditions do not presently exist anywhere in Syria for safe returns."

In government-controlled areas, including in the suburbs of Damascus and many parts of central Syria previously held by opposition rebels, the security situation has stabilized, but entire neighborhoods are destroyed, and many people have no houses to return to. Basic services such as water and electricity are poor to nonexistent.

Moreover, forced conscription, indiscriminate detentions and forced disappearances continue.

In a borderless European Union, Denmark tightening migration regulations means that people facing deportation may flee to neighboring Sweden or to Germany, which welcomed refugees in past years but where there is little political will now to take more.

"This is also a lack of solidarity with the rest of Europe," said Hansen, Satouf's lawyer. "As the first country that starts to withdraw residence permits for these refugees, we are, in fact, pushing people to go to other European countries."

Denmark's approach marks a dramatic transformation of a nation that was the first to sign the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention, and which was long seen as a paragon of openness and tolerance.

"We used to be known as one of the most humanitarian countries in Europe, with a lot of freedom, a lot of respect for human rights," says Michala Bendixen, the head of Refugees Welcome Denmark, a non-governmental group. Now, she notes, Denmark's policies look much more like those of countries with hard-line immigration policies, like Hungary.

The ultimate goal, Bendixen believes, is "making it less attractive for refugees and foreigners to arrive in Denmark."

On Wednesday, hundreds of people gathered in front of parliament to protest the deportation orders, surrounded by Danish friends, classmates and work colleagues.

Addressing the crowd, a nervous Satouf told her story.

Others also spoke: A brother and sister facing separation, siblings whose residence permits were expiring the next day, a high school student surrounded by her Danish classmates, a single woman who couldn't comprehend how Denmark, with its claim to uphold and defend women's rights, could be doing this.

"They say I should marry someone who has political asylum to stay here," said Nevien Alrahal who traveled to Denmark with her elderly father and who faces her final appeal on Friday. "That's a choice I don't want to make."

Frantic search for missing Indonesian sub as air dwindles

By EDNA TARIGAN and NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesia's navy scoured the waters off Bali on Friday, bolstered by the arrival of a sonar-equipped Australian warship with a helicopter, in an increasingly frantic search for a missing submarine with only hours left in its oxygen supply for its 53 crewmembers.

The KRI Nanggala 402 went missing after its last reported dive Wednesday off the resort island, and concern is mounting it may have sunk too deep to reach or recover in time. The navy chief said the submarine was expected to run out of oxygen early Saturday morning.

"We will maximize the effort today, until the time limit tomorrow at 3 a.m.," military spokesperson Maj. Gen. Achmad Riad told reporters.

There have been no signs of life from the submarine, but family members held out hope that the massive search effort would find the vessel in time.

"The family is in a good condition and keeps praying," said Ratih Wardhani, the sister of 49-year-old crewman Wisnu Subiyantoro. "We are optimistic that the Nanggala can be rescued with all the crew."

Twenty-four Indonesian ships and a patrol plane were mobilized for the search Friday, focusing on the area where an oil slick was found after the submarine disappeared during an exercise. Rescuers made similar massive searches in the previous two days.

An American reconnaissance plane was expected to join the search Saturday and a second Australian ship was due soon.

"These two Australian ships will help expand the search area and extend the duration of the search effort," Australian Navy Rear Adm. Mark Hammond said.

Singaporean and Malaysian rescue ships were also expected in the coming days.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo canceled a visit to Banyuwangi port, where some rescue ships left earlier, to prepare for a weekend regional summit in Jakarta, officials said. He asked Indonesians to pray for the crew's safe return, while ordering all-out efforts to locate the submarine.

"Our main priority is the safety of the 53 crew members," Widodo said in a televised address on Thursday. "To the family of the crew members, I can understand your feelings and we are doing our best to save all crew members on board."

There's been no conclusive evidence the oil slick was from the sub. Navy Chief of Staff Adm. Yudo Margono said oil could have spilled from a crack in the submarine's fuel tank or the crew could have released fuel and fluids to reduce the vessel's weight so it could surface.

Margono said an unidentified object exhibiting high magnetism was located at a depth of 50 to 100 meters (165 to 330 feet) and officials held out hope it is the submarine.

The navy said it believes, however, that the submarine sank to a depth of 600-700 meters (2,000-2,300 feet), much deeper than its collapse depth, at which water pressure would be greater than the hull could withstand. The vessel's collapse depth was estimated at 200 meters (655 feet) by a South Korean company that refitted the vessel in 2009-2012.

The cause of the disappearance is still uncertain. The navy has said an electrical failure could have left the submarine unable to execute emergency procedures to resurface.

Submarine accidents are often disastrous.

In 2000, the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk suffered internal explosions and sank during maneuvers

in the Barents Sea. Most of its 118 crew died instantly, but 23 men fled to a rear compartment before they later died, mainly of suffocation. In November 2017, an Argentine submarine went missing with 44 crew members in the South Atlantic, almost a year before its wreckage was found at a depth of 800 meters (2,625 feet).

But in 2005, seven men aboard a Russian mini-sub were rescued nearly three days after their vessel was snagged by fishing nets and cables in the Pacific Ocean. They had only six hours of oxygen left before reaching the surface.

The German-built diesel-powered KRI Nanggala 402 has been in service in Indonesia since 1981 and was carrying 49 crew members and three gunners as well as its commander, the Indonesian Defense Ministry said.

Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago nation with more than 17,000 islands, has faced growing challenges to its maritime claims in recent years, including numerous incidents involving Chinese vessels near the Natuna islands.

Beyond the Pandemic: London's West End readies for next act

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Noah Thomas saw his name in lights, and then the lights went out.

The young actor was still in drama school when he was cast to play the lead role in the London West End musical "Everybody's Talking About Jamie." Thomas made his professional debut in early 2020. Weeks later, as the coronavirus pandemic washed over Britain, the city's theaters closed.

"It was a bit of a rude awakening," Thomas said. "As the months ticked on — month one, month two, month three — you think, 'This is a lot bigger than any of us could have anticipated.'"

More than a year on, the West End is preparing, with hope and apprehension, to welcome audiences back.

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Plagues, fires, war — London has survived them all. But it has never had a year like this. The coronavirus has killed more than 15,000 Londoners and shaken the foundations of one of the world's great cities. As a fast-moving mass vaccination campaign holds the promise of reopening, The Associated Press looks at the pandemic's impact on London's people and institutions and asks what the future might hold.

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The pandemic has devastated British theater, a world-renowned cultural export and major economic force.

The stages that collectively employ 300,000 people were ordered shut a week before the country went into full lockdown in March 2020. They have remained closed for most of the last 13 months, endangering thousands more related jobs in bars, restaurants and hotels that cater to theater-goers.

"We were the first to be closed," producer Nica Burns said. "And we were the last to come back."

One of those sidelined when theaters went dark was Neil Maxfield, who turned his love of musicals into a job leading walking tours of London's West End, the district that is home to more than three dozen theaters and long-running juggernaut shows including "Les Miserables," "The Lion King," "Hamilton" and "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child."

"I just love the West End," said the energetic Maxfield, sporting the top hat that he wears on tours. "I love how vibrant it is, I love how versatile it is — that mixture of not just musical theater but plays as well, and new things coming in all the time."

But for most of the past year, the West End has been spookily deserted, the streets resounding to road crews and construction work rather than nighttime crowds.

Some wonder if its energy will ever return. When lockdown froze much of the economy, the British government stepped in to support jobs. Many theater workers fell through the cracks; as freelancers, they weren't eligible for the payments given to furloughed employees. Many took jobs as delivery drivers or retail workers; some were forced to leave London because of sky-high rents.

"When you get told that you don't apply for such and such government funding or benefit schemes, you sort of think, 'Oh wow, OK. So I really didn't get into this for the money,'" said Thomas, whose face still adorns the Apollo Theatre marquee as Jamie, a working-class teenager who dreams of being a drag queen.

But actors, the 22-year-old said, "stand our ground."

"We're coming back to do our jobs. We're not going to give up what we do, what we've trained to do," he said.

"Everybody's Talking About Jamie" is set to reopen on May 20, one of the first West End shows to return once the government allows indoor venues to admit limited audiences on May 17.

Burns, who owns the Apollo and five other London theaters, has invested in hand sanitizer stations, one-way arrows and an electronic ticketing system. She has had seats removed so mask-wearing, temperature-checked audience members can keep a distance from one another. Cast and crew members will be tested every 48 hours and kept apart from audiences and front-of-house staff.

The producer says reopening is a "leap into the dark," but she's encouraged by what she observed during a brief period in December when theaters opened up — only to close days later for another national lockdown.

"I watched audiences leave the theaters much, much happier than when they arrived," Burns said.

About a third of West End theaters plan to reopen in the coming weeks, but it will be a long way from normality. Big, expensive shows can't afford to run at the half-capacity limit demanded by social distancing requirements. The government is aiming to remove attendance limits on June 21, but may keep them in place if the virus starts to surge again.

Although two-thirds of British adults have had at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, the government is nervous about new virus variants that may resist existing shots.

Even if British audiences return, U.K. theaters will have to do without international tourists for the foreseeable future. Theater and music businesses have also lobbied, so far unsuccessfully, for a government-backed insurance program in case live events have to be canceled because of COVID-19.

Julian Bird, chief executive of the Society of London Theatre, an umbrella group, said the industry is crying out for certainty that the government will follow the reopening road map it created earlier this year.

"People are risking money, they're spending actual money," Bird said. "And that is all at risk if the government changes its mind now."

Those working in the industry are confident theaters and other cultural institutions will survive. Artists are resilient, and the government, after strong criticism, has handed out more than 1.2 billion pounds ($1.7 billion) in grants and loans to arts and culture organizations.

But many worry about the damage already done. Nickie Miles-Wildin, associate director of Graeae Theatre Company, which is run by deaf and disabled artists, fears a setback for hard-won diversity in the theater.

"My fear with that is that it's potentially going to be those more diverse voices that we've lost along the way," she said. "That, for me, is what is potentially going to be incredibly sad — it will still feel like a very white, non-disabled, straight middle-class thing."

For its millions of fans, London's West End has a special magic, an energy rivaled only by its New York competitor, Broadway. London-born actor Hiba Elchikhe, 28, who plays the title character's best friend in "Everybody's Talking About Jamie," is confident that will endure.

"Honestly, there is nothing like it," she said. "I've worked overseas. I've worked in other places. And for me, there's nothing like playing your hometown. The kind of buzz — leaving the theater, seeing posters everywhere, the buses having the theater posters. It really is electric.

"And I don't believe that this (pandemic) is going to hinder it in any way. I think people are really craving to be back in theaters."

Shooting revives criticism of Israel's use of deadly force

By JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Hours after Israeli soldiers shot and killed Osama Mansour at a temporary checkpoint

in the occupied West Bank, the military announced that it had thwarted a car-ramming attack — but the facts didn't seem to add up.

By all accounts, Mansour had initially stopped his car when ordered to do so. His wife, the mother of his five children, was sitting in the passenger seat. And after the soldiers sprayed the vehicle with gunfire, killing him and wounding her, they declined to arrest her as an accomplice.

Witnesses say the soldiers killed Mansour for no apparent reason, part of what rights groups say is a pattern of fatal shootings of Palestinians by Israeli forces under questionable circumstances. The debate over the soldiers' conduct echoes that over the high-profile police killings of Black Americans in the United States.

The conviction this week of former Minneapolis, Minn., police officer Derek Chauvin in the killing of George Floyd, who police initially said had died of a "medical incident" during a "police interaction," drew attention to the accuracy of official statements about deadly encounters.

In its initial statement, the Israeli military said the vehicle had accelerated "in a way that endangered the lives of the soldiers" and that forces opened fire to "thwart the threat." But shortly afterwards, the military said the shooting was under investigation, without elaborating.

A military spokeswoman declined to answer detailed questions about the incident submitted by The Associated Press, including whether the army still believes it thwarted an attack.

Somaya, the widow of the deceased, says her husband took her to see a doctor in the early hours of April 6. On the drive back to their home village of Biddu they passed through the village of Bir Nabala, just outside Jerusalem.

They saw Israeli troops and armored jeeps up ahead, a common sight in the occupied West Bank, where Israeli forces often carry out overnight arrest raids.

"I said 'There's a checkpoint, Osama, stop,'" she told the AP. "He said 'I see it,' and he stopped like the other cars."

She said two soldiers came over to the car with their rifles pointed at them. One of them ordered Osama to shut off the ignition, and he complied. The soldier asked where they were from and what they were doing, and they told him, she said.

"He said 'Fine, OK, go.' So we started the car, we moved forward, and a second later they opened fire," she said. "I froze out of fear, with broken glass falling over my head and the sound of bullets. It was very scary."

She said the car veered back and forth. She called out to her husband to go faster, then saw that he was slumped between the seats and took the wheel until they reached some people who helped them get to a hospital.

"There was blood all over the floor, so much blood," she said. "I was asking about Osama, I was crying out for him. They said he was in the operating room, for four hours he was in the operating room, and finally they said he had died."

The Israeli human rights group B'Tselem says it interviewed two witnesses who largely corroborated her account. Roy Yellin, a spokesman for the group, said the fact that Somaya was not arrested strongly indicates that the military did not think it was an attack. She has been summoned for questioning next week, but there's no indication Israel views her as a suspect.

"The army is not very conservative about detaining Palestinians who are suspected of anything," Yellin said, pointing to the routine arrests of protesters and stone-throwers.

B'Tselem has documented severalsimilarincidents in recent years, in which Israeli forces said they opened fire to prevent car-ramming attacks, killing or wounding Palestinians, only to later back away from the claims without making arrests or pressing charges.

"There's a very trigger-happy approach in the West Bank in which Palestinians are guilty until proven otherwise," Yellin said.

The army's suspicions are not always unfounded.

In recent years, Palestinians have carried out a series of stabbings, shootings and car-ramming attacks that have killed or wounded Israeli soldiers and civilians. Military checkpoints in the West Bank are a

frequent target. Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 war, and the Palestinians want it to form the main part of their future state. Defenders of the military say soldiers must make split-second decisions in life-or-death situations.

International law and the Israeli military's rules of engagement say lethal force can be used in life-threatening situations. But rights groups say Israel often falls short of that standard and rarely punishes wrongdoing by its security forces. B'Tselem says it stopped referring such cases to military authorities in 2016 after concluding that doing so was ineffective.

Yellin says Israel only prosecutes wrongdoing in rare cases in which there is overwhelming evidence. Even then, soldiers often get light sentences.

The military said it investigates every incident in the West Bank in which a person is killed. "In cases where a deviation from the rules is found, steps are taken according to the circumstances of the case," it said.

The military pointed to an incident in March 2019 in which a soldier shot and killed a Palestinian after mistaking him for another individual suspected of throwing stones at passing Israeli vehicles. Under a plea bargain, the soldier was sentenced to three months in prison and demoted, it said.

The International Criminal Court will likely scrutinize Israel's handling of such cases as part of a probe it launched earlier this year into possible war crimes. Israel has condemned the investigation, which was requested by the Palestinians, and says the court is biased against it.

Earlier this month, Israel said it would send a formal letter to the ICC rejecting its mandate. Israel denied committing any such crimes and said it was able to investigate and prosecute any violations by its forces. That was two days after Mansour was shot dead.

Israel is not a party to the ICC, but Israelis could be subject to arrest in other countries if the court hands down warrants.

In the meantime, with little hope for accountability, Somaya is left to raise her five children alone.

"After Osama, what am I supposed to do with my life?" she said. "It's over."

Vocabulary, lightning round added to National Spelling Bee

By BEN NUCKOLS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Scripps National Spelling Bee is undergoing a major overhaul to ensure it can identify a single champion, adding vocabulary questions and a lightning-round tiebreaker to this year's pandemic-altered competition.

The 96-year-old bee has in the past included vocabulary on written tests but never in the high-stakes oral competition rounds, where one mistake eliminates a speller. The only previous tiebreaker to determine a single champion was a short-lived extra written test that never turned out to be needed.

The changes, announced this week, amount to a new direction for the bee under executive director J. Michael Durnil, who started in the job earlier this year.

Both new elements, however, also signal a departure from what for many observers is the core appeal of the bee: watching schoolchildren who have such mastery of roots and language patterns that they can figure out how to spell the trickiest words in the dictionary, even if they've never heard them before.

The 2020 bee was canceled because of the pandemic, the first time since World War II that the bee wasn't on the calendar. This year's event will be mostly virtual, and the in-person finals on July 8 have been moved from the bee's longtime home in the Washington area to an ESPN campus in Florida.

The bee had co-champions from 2014-16, and the 2019 bee ended in an eight-way tie after organizers ran out of words difficult enough to challenge the top spellers, whose preparation with personal coaches and comprehensive study guides was no match for the vaunted Scripps word list.

Durnil did not directly criticize the previous bee but said ending with one winner was a priority.

"I think the spellers don't enter into our competition thinking that they're going to have to share the ultimate distinction of the spelling champion with anybody else," Durnil told The Associated Press. "From a competitive standpoint, we owe it to the spellers to identify the champion of the spelling bee."

In the lightning round, spellers would have 90 seconds to spell as many words as they can correctly. The rapid-fire tiebreaker would only be used if the bee gets toward the end of its allotted time and can't get to a single winner in the traditional way, by eliminating spellers for getting a word wrong. The remaining spellers would get the same words in the lightning round and be isolated from one another.

Adding vocabulary, Durnil said, brings more academic rigor to the bee in keeping with its educational mission.

Siyona Mishra, a finalist in the bee in 2015 and 2017 who now coaches younger spellers — kids can't compete after eighth grade — said there was a contradiction in Scripps' justification for the changes.

"Simultaneously saying that vocab questions on (the) live stage are being added to encourage understanding of words doesn't really match up with their addition of a lightning round of spelling," Mishra wrote in an email. "Adding a lightning round will only emphasize to spellers that memorizing and immediately recognizing a word is what is more important than really learning the words."

Memorizing definitions is not a core element of spellers' training, said Zaila Avant-Garde, a 14-year-old from Hardey, Louisiana, who will be competing in this year's bee.

"I just kind of pick up the definition. It seeps into me from looking at them. It's not like I specifically dedicate time to studying vocabulary," Zaila said. "Will I now study it? I'm not really sure."

Zaila stressed that she didn't mind the addition of vocabulary or the lightning round, which she said "will be really entertaining to watch or even to compete in."

Scripps said live vocabulary rounds — in which spellers are given multiple-choice questions about word definitions — are being used in some regional bees this year, but some spellers were caught off guard by the change.

"I think it's unfortunate that these changes were rolled out so late in the process," Scott Remer, a former speller and spelling coach who wrote a book about how to train for the bee, said in an email. "Many students (including my tutees) have been studying hard for nationals for many months without any certainty about the format of the bee."

Amber Born, who competed in the bee from 2010-13, said the lightning round "emphasizes speed over skill in a contest where that shouldn't be the deciding factor."

"I would prefer they just asked harder words," Born added, "but it probably wouldn't be as interesting on TV."

Evidence in Chauvin case contradicted first police statement

By CLAUDIA LAUER Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Moments after former officer Derek Chauvin was convicted of murder in George Floyd's death, copies of the original Minneapolis police statement began recirculating on social media. It attributed Floyd's death to "medical distress" and made no mention that the Black man had been pinned to the ground at the neck by Chauvin, or that he'd cried out that he couldn't breathe.

Many were posting the release to highlight the distance between the initial police narrative and the evidence that led to the conviction Tuesday, including excruciating video shot by a teenage bystander of Chauvin with his knee on Floyd's neck, even after Floyd had stopped moving.

And while Chauvin's conviction is a high-profile case of video rebutting initial police statements, criminal justice experts and police accountability advocates say the problem of inaccurate initial reports — especially in fatal police encounters — is widespread.

"If it wasn't for this 17-year-old who took the video, Derek Chauvin would in all likelihood still be on the police force training officers," said Andre Johnson, a University of Memphis professor of communication studies. "Sadly, this has been going on for a while, and it's just now coming to light for a lot of Americans because of video evidence."

For their part, police officials say they give the most accurate information they can during fast-moving and complicated investigations. But the frequency with which misleading information is published cannot be ignored, critics say.

In 2014, the New York Police Department's narrative of Eric Garner's death was that he'd gone into

cardiac arrest. It made no mention of an officer's extended chokehold on Garner, shown in a bystander video that captured repeated pleas that he couldn't breathe. A grand jury declined to indict the since-fired officer Daniel Pantaleo, who said he was using a legal maneuver called a seat belt.

A year later, then-policeman Michael Slager said he shot Walter Scott because he'd grabbed for the officer's stun gun. But bystander video of the North Charleston, South Carolina, shooting showed Slager chase Scott after he fled a traffic stop and fatally shoot him in the back. Slager was charged with murder in state court, but released after a hung jury. He later pleaded guilty to federal civil rights violations.

As the chorus of complaints about misinformation on such interactions grows, so do calls for body cameras for police. Roughly 80% of departments with 500 officers or more are now using cameras, but video storage can be costly.

Official police video is also increasingly showing discrepancies in initial police narratives, though generally the images are withheld for days or sometimes months during internal investigations.

Chicago police were ordered by a court to release dashcam video of the 2014 killing of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald more than 13 months after the shooting. It was initially ruled a justified shooting based on an officer narrative that McDonald had approached police while refusing to drop a knife. The video showed then-officer Jason Van Dyke shooting the teen 16 times as he walked away. Van Dyke was found guilty of second-degree murder.

Johnson said it shouldn't take video evidence of Black Americans being mistreated or killed for people to support policing changes. He noted that when there is video evidence, it's often scrutinized and still rejected by some as fake or deceptive.

"Why does it have to take the video evidence, the activism, the testimony?" asked Johnson, who is Black. "It takes all that because since the inception of policing, we as Americans have taken the police at their word. But this is nothing new to communities of color."

"The question is, Have police now begun to lose the default position that they're truthful?" he said. "I think it's beginning to erode."

Police and prosecutors in several cities have released body camera videos more quickly after recent fatal encounters. Some experts say that's in part to quell the potential for large-scale protests against racial injustice and police brutality that took place nationwide after Floyd's death. Others say it's a move to regain the trust of the community amid demands for transparency.

Officials in Columbus, Ohio, released initial body camera footage of the fatal police shooting of 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant just hours after it happened Tuesday. More footage released Wednesday showed a chaotic scene where the teen charged at two people with a knife.

The release was a departure from the Columbus Division of Police protocol, and it came as the agency faces immense public scrutiny following two other high-profile killings by city police and one by the county sheriff's department in Columbus since Dec. 3.

Meanwhile, in Tennessee, a district attorney came under fire for initially refusing to release body camera video after an officer shot and killed a student in a Knoxville high school April 12.

Activists, political leaders and media outlets had demanded that Knox County District Attorney Charme Allen's office release the footage.

Just hours after Knoxville police officer Jonathon Clabough fatally shot 17-year-old Anthony J. Thompson Jr., Tennessee Bureau of Investigation Director David Rausch said the teen had fired shots as officers entered the bathroom, striking an officer.

But, after Allen released the video Wednesday to comply with a judge's order, it showed Thompson was holding a handgun in his sweatshirt front pocket, fired only one shot and didn't strike any of the four officers. It was Clabough who accidentally shot fellow Officer Adam Wilson during the scuttle, officials said.

Allen told reporters she had spoken extensively with Thompson's family, who begged her not to release the video so close to his funeral.

"My preference would be not to do this today, but I'm under pressure from you (the media), from politicians and activist groups," she said. "I get it. You should be able to see the video. I just think the timing, we have to come up with a better process."

In Minneapolis, police spokesperson John Elder previously told The Associated Press that he did not visit the scene on May 25, 2020, as he usually does after major events, and he was not able to review body camera footage of Floyd's death for several hours. Elder released the initial description after being briefed by supervisors, who he learned later also had not been to the scene.

After the bystander video surfaced, the department realized the statement was inaccurate and immediately requested an FBI investigation, he said. By then, state investigators had taken over, and he was unable to issue a corrected statement.

"I will never lie to cover up the actions of somebody else," Elder said.

Panel: End commanders' power to block military sex cases

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Pentagon panel is recommending that decisions to prosecute service members for sexual assault be made by independent authorities, not commanders, in what would be a major reversal of military practice and a change long sought by Congress members, The Associated Press has learned.

The recommendation by an independent review commission created by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin goes against decades of vehement Pentagon arguments to keep cases within the chain of command. It was among a number of initial recommendations delivered to Austin on Thursday, according to two senior defense officials.

Austin expects to seek input from military service leaders before making any final decision, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal reports not yet made public. But combating sexual assault in the military is a top priority for Austin, and the fact that this recommendation was made so directly and quickly suggests it will carry a lot of weight.

The proposed changes outlined in the report represent Austin's effort to leave his mark on a problem that has long plagued the department, triggered widespread congressional condemnation and frustrated military leaders struggling to find prevention, treatment and prosecution efforts that work.

The review panel said that for certain special victims crimes, designated independent judge advocates reporting to a civilian-led office of the Chief Special Victim Prosecutor should decide two key legal questions: whether to charge someone and, ultimately, if that charge should go to a court martial, the officials said. The crimes would include sexual assault, sexual harassment and, potentially, certain hate crimes.

According to the officials, that recommendation would affect a small fraction of the wide range of military discipline cases that commanders regularly handle.

The panel also is recommending that sexual harassment claims be investigated outside the chain of command, and that if a charge is substantiated, the military should immediately begin the process of discharging that person from the force while other legal proceedings continue.

The officials said a driving part of the panel's deliberations was the belief that many service members have lost faith in the system and that these changes would help restore that faith. Eventually, they said, it could lead to increased reporting by victims of sexual assaults. The changes would require an increase in funding and personnel, but it is not yet clear how much.

Removing legal decisions from the chain of command, however, won't eliminate the role of a commander in addressing sexual misconduct, the officials said. Unit leaders will still be responsible to setting a proper command climate and still must play a role in preventing and addressing sexual assault, harassment and other problems with their service members.

Reports of sexual assaults have steadily gone up since 2006, according to department reports, including a 13% jump in 2018 and a 3% increase in 2019. The 2020 data is not yet available.

There have been a number of changes in the Military Code of Justice over the last decade to add more civilian oversight to the military's prosecution of sexual assault cases and to beef up assistance for victims. But, lawmakers, such as Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, have long demanded a more concrete shift, arguing that commanding officers should be stripped of the authority to decide whether serious crimes go to trial.

Those commanders, Gillibrand and other argue, are often reluctant to pursue charges against their

troops, and overrule recommendations for courts martial or reduce the charges. And they say that victims consistently say they are reluctant to file complaints because they don't believe they'll get support from their chain of command since often their attacker is a senior military member.

Military leaders have persistently fought such a change, saying it would erode the chain of command. Taking that authority away, senior military officials have said, will hurt unit cohesion.

"I am tired of the statement I get over and over from the chain of command: 'We got this, madam, we got this.' You don't have it!" Gillibrand, a New York Democrat, shouted during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing in May 2019. "You're failing us."

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The officials said other initial recommendations sent to Austin seek to professionalize the workforce involved in the cases, calling for a military justice career track for prosecutors, judges, investigators and victims' advocates. They also recommended improvements in allowing victims to get protective orders, and said there should be a set timeline for the justice process.

The officials said they expect Austin to give service leaders about a month to review the recommendations and come back to him with their response.

Every two years, the Defense Department conducts an anonymous survey that is released along with the annual report on sexual assaults. The most recent survey, done in 2018, found that more than 20,000 service members said they experienced some type of sexual assault, but only a third of those filed a formal report.

The survey number was about 37% higher than the previous one two years earlier, and it fueled frustration within the department and outrage on Capitol Hill.

This year there has been more momentum for change to sexual assault prosecutions, with a number of senior congressional leaders sounding open to adjustments in the process.

Former Kentucky guard Terrence Clarke dies in LA car crash

LEXINGTON, Ky. (AP) — Kentucky freshman guard Terrence Clarke died Thursday following a car accident in Los Angeles. He was 19.

The university announced Clarke's death in a release Thursday night, but did not include any more details. Coach John Calipari said he was "absolutely gutted and sick tonight" and called the player "a beautiful kid, someone who owned the room with his personality, smile and joy."

"We are all in shock," Calipari said. "I am on my way to Los Angeles to be with his mother and his brother to help wherever I can. This will be a difficult period for all those who know and love Terrence, and I would ask that everyone take a moment tonight to say a prayer for Terrence and his family. May he rest in peace."

Los Angeles Police Department Sergeant John Matassa, who works in the Valley Traffic Division, told ESPN that Clarke was a solo occupant in a vehicle that ran a red light going "at a very high rate of speed" in the San Fernando Valley area of Los Angeles at approximately 2:10 p.m. PDT.

Matassa said surveillance video showed that Clarke collided with another vehicle preparing to turn left, hit a street light pole and then a block wall. Clarke was taken to Northridge Hospital Medical and later pronounced dead.

Matassa said the other driver, who was in a truck, did not claim any injuries. Clarke was driving a 2021 Hyundai Genesis and not wearing his seat belt properly, according to Matassa.

The 6-foot-7 Clarke entered the NBA draft last month after playing in just eight games last season because of a right leg injury. He averaged 9.6 points and 2.6 rebounds.

On Wednesday, Clarke and former Kentucky teammate Brandon Boston Jr. signed with Klutch Sports

Group. Agency CEO Rich Paul announced on Twitter that "we are saddened and devastated" by Clarke's passing and called him "an incredibly hard-working young man."

From Boston, Clarke started Kentucky's first six games and was one of its top scorers, highlighted by a career-best 22 points in a loss to Georgia Tech on Dec. 6. The injury ultimately sidelined him for the entire Southeastern Conference regular-season schedule, though he returned to post three assists and two points off the bench in the Wildcats' SEC Tournament loss to Mississippi State that ended a 9-16 season.

Despite his limited action, Clarke announced his decision to enter the NBA draft on March 19 and lamented in a release that he didn't expect to be injured. But he understood that it was "part of the game" and thanked Calipari and teammates among many.

Celtics coach Brad Stevens heard reports about the crash and Clarke's death shortly after his team beat the Phoenix Suns on Thursday night. Clarke was familiar to the Celtics, their players and even Stevens' son.

"Not sure how much I want to talk about the game, when you consider he's a Boston kid ... those kids are important to us here," Stevens said. "I never met him. My son looks up to him. Hard to talk about a basketball game."

Man killed by deputy recalled as storyteller, jokester

By ALLEN G. BREED and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

ELIZABETH CITY, N.C. (AP) — Andrew Brown Jr.'s easy smile, which belied hardship, loss and troubles with the law, was memorable for his dimples, his relatives said. He was quick to crack a joke at the family gatherings he tried not to miss after losing both of his parents. He encouraged his children to make good grades even though he dropped out of high school himself. Above all, he was determined to give them a better life than he had.

The 42-year-old Black man from Elizabeth City, North Carolina, was shot to death Wednesday by one or more deputy sheriffs trying to serve drug-related search and arrest warrants. An eyewitness said Brown tried to drive away, but was shot dead in his car. The shooting has prompted protests and demands for accountability in the eastern North Carolina city of about 18,000. The sheriff said deputies involved have been put on leave pending a state investigation.

Despite his hard life — Brown was partially paralyzed on his right side by an accidental shooting, and he lost an eye when he was stabbed, according to aunt Glenda Brown Thomas — "Drew," as he was called, looked for the humor in things.

"He had a good laugh, a nice smile. And he had good dimples," Thomas said in an interview Thursday, a day after her nephew was killed. "You know, when he's talking and smiling, his dimples would always show. And he was kind of like a comedian. He always had a nice joke."

His cousin Jadine Hampton said Brown often entertained relatives with his humorous stories at family gatherings, including a socially distanced celebration in October of their grandmother's 92nd birthday, the last time Hampton saw Brown. Photos that Thomas shared with an AP reporter show him smiling at a church ceremony held to honor his grandmother as woman of the year.

"Great heart," said Hampton, 51, who lives in Atlanta. "Everybody would just wait to hear him tell a story because it would be like a comedian telling the play-by-play about something that happened."

Brown had seven children of his own and helped take care of others, Harry Daniels, an attorney representing the family, said Thursday.

Hampton said Brown was a proud father.

"Although he didn't finish school, he pushed them to finish school," she said. "I believe a few of them were on honor roll."

Court records show Brown had a history of criminal charges stretching back into the 1990s, including a misdemeanor drug possession conviction and some pending felony drug charges.

When he was 12 or 13, his mother was slain in Florida, Thomas said. Not long afterward, he dropped out of school around the 10th grade. She said her nephew was a good basketball player but had trouble with reading comprehension. Several years ago, his father died in federal prison after a medical proce-

dure, Thomas said.

With his own troubles with drugs and the law, Brown had trouble keeping a job, Thomas said. But she said he still found ways to earn money to support his children, including card games and shooting pool. She said he sent his father money every month when the older man was in prison.

Another aunt who helped raise Brown in the absence of his parents, Martha McCullen, said it's hard to find a job, especially with a criminal record, in Elizabeth City, where 1 in 5 live in poverty.

"Because they're convicted ... they can't get no jobs," she said. "It's crazy."

Despite Brown's past trouble with the law, several relatives and friends said they never knew him to be a violent person.

"No matter what his past reflects, it still doesn't give him (the deputy) the right to shoot him, period," said Daniel Bowser, who said he had been friends with Brown for 30 years.

Authorities have said little about how the shooting transpired, but on Thursday, Pasquotank Sheriff Tommy Wooten II issued a video statement saying that deputies including a tactical unit were serving arrest warrants in addition to a search warrant he'd previously disclosed. On the day before the shooting, nearby Dare County had issued two arrest warrants for Brown on drug-related charges including possession with intent to sell cocaine, according to court documents released Thursday. Wooten has said a Dare County law enforcement officer was also present.

While Wooten had previously said one Pasquotank County deputy had shot Brown and was on leave, he indicated on Thursday that multiple deputies were involved and had been placed on leave.

"Our deputies attempted to serve the arrest warrants, they fired the shots. They've been put on administrative leave until we know all the facts," he said. He didn't immediately respond to an email asking how many of his deputies are on leave.

The prosecutor who oversees both Dare and Pasquotank counties, District Attorney Andrew Womble, did not respond to an email asking about the arrest warrants. The Dare County sheriff's office declined comment.

The state Bureau of Investigation will turn over its findings to Womble, who said Wednesday that he was looking for "accurate" not "fast" answers.

An eyewitness said that deputies fired at Brown multiple times as he tried to drive away. The car skidded out of Brown's yard and eventually hit a tree, said Demetria Williams, who lives on the same street. A car authorities removed from the scene appeared to have multiple bullet holes.

While deputies were wearing body cameras, footage has yet to be released. In North Carolina, a judge generally has to approve release of police video, and no timetable has been given.

"We're waiting for the bodycam footage because we really just don't know what happened," said Brown's cousin Hampton. "But if this is a case where he was killed, running away, unarmed, then we absolutely are going to pursue justice in whatever capacity that can be."

Panel: End commanders' power to block military sex cases

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Pentagon panel is recommending that decisions to prosecute service members for sexual assault be made by independent authorities, not commanders, in what would be a major reversal of military practice and a change long sought by Congress members, The Associated Press has learned.

The recommendation by an independent review commission created by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin goes against decades of vehement Pentagon arguments to keep cases within the chain of command. It was among a number of initial recommendations delivered to Austin on Thursday, according to two senior defense officials.

Austin expects to seek input from military service leaders before making any final decision, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal reports not yet made public. But combating sexual assault in the military is a top priority for Austin, and the fact that this recommendation was made so directly and quickly suggests it will carry a lot of weight.

The proposed changes outlined in the report represent Austin's effort to leave his mark on a problem that has long plagued the department, triggered widespread congressional condemnation and frustrated military leaders struggling to find prevention, treatment and prosecution efforts that work.

The review panel said that for certain special victims crimes, designated independent judge advocates reporting to a civilian-led office of the Chief Special Victim Prosecutor should decide two key legal questions: whether to charge someone and, ultimately, if that charge should go to a court martial, the officials said. The crimes would include sexual assault, sexual harassment and, potentially, certain hate crimes.

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The panel also is recommending that sexual harassment claims be investigated outside the chain of command, and that if a charge is substantiated, the military should immediately begin the process of discharging that person from the force while other legal proceedings continue.

The officials said a driving part of the panel's deliberations was the belief that many service members have lost faith in the system and that these changes would help restore that faith. Eventually, they said, it could lead to increased reporting by victims of sexual assaults. The changes would require an increase in funding and personnel, but it is not yet clear how much.

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There have been a number of changes in the Military Code of Justice over the last decade to add more civilian oversight to the military's prosecution of sexual assault cases and to beef up assistance for victims. But, lawmakers, such as Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, have long demanded a more concrete shift, arguing that commanding officers should be stripped of the authority to decide whether serious crimes go to trial.

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California goes from worst to first in virus infections

By BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Just a few months ago, California was the epicenter of the coronavirus pandemic in the U.S. Hospitals in Los Angeles were drowning in patients, and ambulances were idling outside with people struggling to breathe, waiting for beds to open.

The death count was staggering — so many that morgues filled and refrigerated trucks were brought in to handle the overflow.

Now as cases spike in other parts of the country, California has gone from worst to first with the lowest infection rate in the U.S. even as it has moved quickly to reopen more businesses with greater customer counts and allow larger gatherings.

A scramble to get COVID-19 vaccinations has given way to an open invite in many places. Where people lined up hours and counties struggled to get doses, there now appears to be a glut of the shots in many locations.

"It has been a success story for California to have gone from our, if you will, viral tsunami that happened after the back-to-back holiday season to where we are now," said Dr. Robert Kim-Farley of the University of California, Los Angeles' public health school.

At the peak of California's winter surge that followed the Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's holidays, the state was recording 40,000 new cases daily and well above 500 deaths per day. Those numbers have dwindled to 2,300 new cases and 68 deaths daily.

The state surpassed Hawaii on Thursday with the lowest average number of cases per capita in the past two weeks, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. One in every 2,416 people in California tested positive in the past week. At the other end of the spectrum, one in every 223 people in Michigan was diagnosed with the virus.

Kim-Farley said it's been like turning around a massive tanker ship to reach today's level of improvement. He credited government and public health agencies with providing clear guidelines that businesses, schools and individuals largely followed, including mask mandates and social distancing.

Gov. Gavin Newsom has been allowing businesses and schools to reopen by county based on case levels. At different points in the pandemic, he has faced heavy criticism for being too restrictive, and now some worry he is moving too quickly.

All counties have improved enough to move out of the strictest of four tiers, and 38 of the 58 counties — accounting for 87% of the state's population — now are in the second least-restrictive tier. Newsom said he plans to lift most remaining coronavirus restrictions by June 15.

The pandemic has surged unevenly across the U.S.

Cases were low in California a year ago, compared with New York, where hospitals were overwhelmed last spring. When California was in the throes of a second winter spike in mid-January, Michigan cases were tapering to a low point in February before surging to the highest current infection rate in the U.S.

Kim-Farley said California's surge had put fear into more people to wear masks, a rule still in place that he said he has helped prevent a resurgence.

"Some states in the United States that lifted mask mandates are suffering the consequences of that with increasing numbers of cases while we are continuing to see decreases," he said.

California struggled with its vaccine rollout like other states, limiting doses to health workers and elderly who were more at risk of being hospitalized or dying. Doses have increased as cases have tapered, and the high number of infections over the winter also led to a certain level of natural immunity.

Only weeks ago, counties struggled to get doses. The state limited eligibility for the precious vaccine, and stories abounded of cheaters jumping the line to get a shot.

The Vaccine Spotter website that helps book appointments showed a state map Thursday awash in green dots, indicating available appointments. Many were available the same day, and some sites were allowing people to show up without appointments.

Los Angeles County opened up sites in Palmdale and Lancaster to walk-ups. The largest mass vaccination clinic in Napa County saw demand drop from a flood to a trickle just days after California last week expanded vaccine eligibility to everyone 16 and older. It's also allowing walk-ins.

"We definitely have the capacity," county spokeswoman Janet Upton said. "But now what we're lacking is, seemingly, public interest."

California has about 40 million residents, and a little more than half the 32 million eligible for vaccines have gotten at least one shot.

A combination of concern over reports of rare complications along with misinformation and conspiracy theories and a sense among some that the danger has waned has led to vaccine hesitancy.

Los Angeles County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer tried to persuade more people to set aside worries about the vaccine, noting that the chance of a serious side effect is the same as dying in a 200-mile road trip that most people would not hesitate to take.

"The risk of having a serious side effect from COVID vaccine is about one in a million," she said. "We take these tiny risks every day as we go about our lives because we know what's on the other side of it is so worthwhile. Similarly, the return to normal that's on the other side of vaccination is worthwhile."

With the rollout of the vaccine, mortuaries that had run out of space have returned to normal.

"It's the difference between night and day," said Todd Beckley, the general manager of Inglewood Cemetery Mortuary. "There was a time where we had nine deaths a day, and they were all COVID. We haven't had a COVID death in four days."

Mexico's drought reaches critical levels as lakes dry up

By FERNANDO LLANO Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Drought conditions now cover 85% of Mexico, and residents of the nation's central region said Thursday that lakes and reservoirs are simply drying up, including the country's second-largest body of fresh water.

The mayor of Mexico City said the drought was the worst in 30 years, and the problem can be seen at the reservoirs that store water from other states to supply the capital.

Some of them, like the Villa Victoria reservoir west of the capital, are at one-third of their normal capacity, with a month and a half to go before any significant rain is expected.

Isaías Salgado, 60, was trying to fill his water tank truck at Villa Victoria, a task that normally takes him just half an hour. On Thursday he estimated it was taking 3 1/2 hours to pump water into his 10,000-liter tanker.

"The reservoir is drying up," said Salgado. "If they keep pumping water out, by May it will be completely dry, and the fish will die."

Mexico City Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum said that as the drought worsened, more people have tended to water their lawns and gardens, which worsens the problem.

The capital's 9 million inhabitants rely on reservoirs like Villa Victoria and two others — which together are at about 44% capacity — for a quarter of their water; most of the rest comes from wells within city limits. But the city's own water table is dropping and leaky pipes waste much of what is brought into the city.

Rogelio Angeles Hernandez, 61, has been fishing the waters of Villa Victoria for the last 30 years. He isn't so much worried about his own catch; in dry seasons of the past, residents were able to cart fish off in wheelbarrows as water levels receded.

But tourism at reservoirs, like Valle de Bravo further to the west, has been hit by falling water levels.

In the end, it is the capital that is really going to suffer.

"Fishing is the same, but the real impact will be on the people in Mexico City, who are going to get less water," Angeles Hernandez said.

Farther to the west, in Michoacan state, the country is at risk of losing its second-largest lake, Lake Cuitzeo. About 75% of the lake bed is now dry, said Alberto Gómez-Tagle, a biologist and researcher who chairs the Natural Resources Institute of the University of Michoacán.

Gómez-Tagle said that deforestation, roads built across the shallow lake and diversion of water for human use have played a role, but three extremely dry years have left the lake a dusty plain.

"2019, 2020 and so far 2021 have been drier than average, and that has had a cumulative effect on the lake," he said.

Michoacan Gov. Silvano Aureoles said so much of the lake has dried up that shoreline communities now suffer dust storms. He said communities might have to start planting vegetation on the lake bed to prevent the storms.

In a petition to the government, residents of communities around the lake said only six of 19 fish species once present in Cuitzeo now remain. They said the dust storms had caused tens of thousands of respiratory and intestinal infections among local residents.

Senate OKs bill to fight hate crimes against Asian Americans

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Thursday overwhelmingly passed a bill that would help combat the rise of hate crimes against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, a bipartisan denunciation of such violence during the coronavirus pandemic and a modest step toward legislating in a chamber where most of President Joe Biden's agenda has stalled.

The measure would expedite the review of hate crimes at the Justice Department and provide support for local law enforcement in response to thousands of reported violent incidents in the past year. Police have seen a noted uptick in such crimes, including the February death of an 84-year-old man who was pushed to the ground near his home in San Francisco, a young family that was injured in a Texas grocery store attack last year and the killing of six Asian women in shootings last month in Atlanta.

The names of the six women killed in Georgia are listed in the bill, which passed the Senate on a 94-1 vote. Biden applauded the measure, tweeting, "Acts of hate against Asian Americans are wrong, un-American, and must stop." The House is expected to consider similar legislation in the coming weeks.

Democratic Sen. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii, the legislation's lead sponsor, said the measure is incredibly important to Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, "who have often felt very invisible in our country, always seen as foreign, always seen as the other." She said the message of the legislation is as important as its content and substance.

Hirono, the first Asian American woman elected to the Senate, said the attacks are "a predictable and foreseeable consequence" of racist and inflammatory language that has been used against Asians during the pandemic, including slurs used by former President Donald Trump.

Illinois. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, a former Army helicopter pilot who lost her legs during a 2004 attack in Iraq, said she had been asked what country she was from while wearing her U.S. military uniform. Duckworth, the first member of Congress born in Thailand, said there is more work to be done, but the bill's passage tells the community that "we will stand with you and we will protect you."

It's unclear whether the bipartisan bill is a sign of things to come in the Senate, where Republicans and Democrats have fundamental differences and often struggle to work together. Under an agreement struck by Senate leaders at the start of the year, Republicans and Democrats pledged to at least try to debate bills and see if they could reach agreement through the legislative process. The hate crimes legislation is the first byproduct of that agreement. Some said it doesn't need to be the last.

Hirono said it is her "sincere hope that we can channel and sustain the bipartisan work done on this important piece of legislation" to a larger bill that would change policing laws, which Senate Republicans

are negotiating with House Democrats. South Dakota Sen. John Thune, the No. 2 Republican, said ahead of the vote that he hopes the bipartisan example of the hate crimes bill will extend to an infrastructure package that has so far divided the parties.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said the legislation shows that the chamber can work in a bipartisan fashion, and he aims to make that happen as much as possible. "That doesn't mean we forgo our principles. It doesn't mean we cut back on the boldness that is needed," he said. "It means we try to work with our Republican colleagues wherever we can."

But unlike many of the larger, more controversial policy issues Democrats hope to tackle in their new majority, efforts to combat the rising violence against Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders have almost universal backing. More than 3,000 incidents have been reported to Stop AAPI Hate, a California-based reporting center for such crimes, and its partner advocacy groups since mid-March 2020.

Republicans said last week that they agreed with the premise of the legislation and signaled they were willing to back it with minor changes, an unusual sign of comity amid frequent standstills in the polarized Senate. Hirono worked closely with Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, to incorporate some additional Republican and bipartisan provisions, including better reporting of hate crimes nationally and grant money for states to set up hate crime hotlines.

The revised bill would also replace language in the original legislation that called for "guidance describing best practices to mitigate racially discriminatory language in describing the COVID–19 pandemic." The legislation would instead require the government to issue guidance aimed at "raising awareness of hate crimes during the pandemic" to address some GOP concerns about policing speech.

Republicans agreed to back the compromise bill after the Senate also voted on and rejected a series of GOP amendments, including efforts to prevent discrimination against Asian Americans in college admissions and reporting about restrictions on religious exercise during the pandemic.

Only one Republican, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, voted against the bill. In a statement, Hawley said he believed the legislation was too broad, and "my view is it's dangerous to simply give the federal government open-ended authority to define a whole new class of federal hate crime incidents."

Rep. Grace Meng, D-N.Y., introduced a similar bill in the House, which she says is expected to be considered in May.

"For more than a year, Asian Americans all across our nation have been screaming out for help," Meng said, and the Senate showed that "they heard our pleas."

Gold-medal project: Judo seeks solutions in police training

By EDDIE PELLS AP National Writer

DOUGLAS, Wyo. (AP) — The stakes were clear to the two dozen police officers who gathered for a workshop with an ambitious and increasingly urgent mission — recalibrating the way police interact with the public in America.

The class took place the same week as jury selection for the trial of Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis officer who was convicted Tuesday of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter in the death of George Floyd.

No one attending the conference would deny that the profession failed the day Floyd died with Chauvin's knee on his neck. They came to the classes with the idea that judo, the martial art with a deep global history and an imprint at the Olympics, but still shallow roots in the United States, might be able to help fix it.

"The social contract between police officers and the public is degrading a bit," said Joe Yungwirth, a trainer at the workshop who built his career doing counterterrorism work for the FBI and now runs a judo academy in North Carolina. "All law-enforcement officers I know, we feel we need to bring that back in line somehow."

That's been a common refrain over a year's worth of police shootings and protests, all of which have been underscored by calls for police reform.

The judo project is, by any account, an outside-the-box idea. Because the sport, known by insiders as "the gentle way" of martial arts, has little emphasis on striking and is considered less violent than some of its brethren, some leaders in judo, and in policing, saw an opportunity to use the discipline to rethink officer training. Last summer's headlines pushed these courses, which had been in development since 2018, to the top of the priority list.

The main concept over the week of classes held at the Wyoming Law Enforcement Academy centered on teaching cops how to engage suspects verbally, then employ physical judo techniques if needed, to deescalate confrontations without using deadly force.

The goal is to avoid situations the likes of which led to Floyd's death and, just last week, to the death of Daunte Wright, whose funeral was Thursday. Wright was shot and killed by an officer who thought she was reaching for her taser when it was, in fact, her gun.

Jim Bacon, a former athlete on the U.S. judo team who now serves as a police officer in Lafayette, Colorado, says the most damning police-on-suspect encounters — many now caught on police body cameras or by onlookers holding iPhones — have this in common: "The cop resorts to higher levels of force than should've been used. If they have more skills, they might not have to rely on the gadgets on the belt," he said.

The workshop also offered a window into the different role an Olympic organization, and maybe the Olympics themselves, can play in society at large. The USA Judo P3 Program is sponsored by USA Judo, the six-person operation in Colorado Springs, Colorado, that has helped Kayla Harrison and Ronda Rousey, now of Ultimate Fighting Championship fame, bring Olympic medals back home, but that also must constantly nourish its own grassroots system.

The national governing body has been losing ground on both fronts, most recently because of the pandemic, and over the years because of the growing popularity of other martial arts, such as jujitsu and taekwondo, that have kept judo in the shadows in America.

With an emphasis not on hitting, but rather on using leverage and body position to execute holds and takedowns, judo has long been easy to overlook, both in the days when Bruce Lee kicked and nunchucked martial arts into the American conscience, then more recently, when UFC octagons overshadowed boxing rings among a wide, big-spending cross-section of 21st-century sports fans.

"This hits a societal issue," USA Judo CEO Keith Bryant said. "And for us, it has potential to get more people on the mat."

In an exercise that cut to the core of the judo training, conference planners Taybren Lee and Mike Verdugo played suspects who were impaired, or mentally unstable, and challenged the officers to use judo to deescalate the situations. The scenarios were acted out as though they were happening in public, with pedestrians shooting the action from every angle on their phone cameras.

"If we can talk to you, if we can keep you up, that's going to change the whole visual, especially when people have their iPhones recording," Verdugo said. "This is a matter of keeping you up on your feet and not grinding you into the ground."

Lee says the public would be alarmed at how little training the average police department provides to officers for street confrontations. And because so many more interactions are now caught on video, police are being scrutinized in ways previously impossible.

"It's not the officers' fault that they don't have the training," said Lee, an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department who also teaches judo for the youth-based Police Athletic League, a sponsor of the training program. "Sometimes, the departments haven't spent the money for the training, and in a lot of ways, the training hasn't caught up to the realities of the technology that's out there."

The officers for the initial workshop came from Fort Worth, Texas; Billings, Montana; Meridian, Idaho; and other small towns scattered around the West. Another workshop for other cities is being planned for next month.

Spearheading this sort of endeavor is hardly the traditional role for leaders at an organization such as USA Judo, whose most high-profile mission is to help Americans bring home Olympic medals. But, as the

past 13 months have shown, this could be an ideal time for the nonprofits that make up the backbone of the U.S. Olympic system to reinvent themselves.

USA Judo was among the 70% of U.S. national governing bodies that asked the government for loans under the federal government's Paycheck Protection Program during COVID-19. It cut two of its eight-person staff. It currently has one Olympic medal contender, Angelica Delgado, in a sport that fans will have to scour the listings to find among the 7,000 of hours of NBC coverage this summer.

Over the course of the pandemic, most of the 400 clubs that USA Judo sanctions across the country were forced to close or severely curtail operations. With no sanctioned events to offer — the NGB will hold its first national competition in 17 months this weekend in Salt Lake City — its membership has dropped by half, to about 5,000. By comparison, there are between 600,000 and 800,000 judoka in France, host of the 2024 Olympics, and between 150,000 and 200,000 in this year's Olympic country, Japan.

"People have always said, as soon as we get a gold medalist, then judo will grow" Bryant said. "But people thought that before. We had a gold medalist who won two gold medals (in Harrison). It didn't really move the needle."

The unheralded and unglamorous art of police training might not, either. But Bryant sees judo as one of those rare sports — unlike, say, gymnastics or basketball — that has a spot both in a competitive venue and in real-world situations.

Among the program's task force members are 2004 Olympic judoka Nikki Kubes Andrews, now a detective for the Fort Worth Police Department. And Bacon, the former U.S. national team member who is now an officer in Colorado.

"The public wants police officers to be better trained," Bacon said. "That's why we're trying to integrate judo, so we can be more effective in these situations without hurting the other person."

USA Judo is offering free memberships to officers who participate in the training, and has hopes the police initiative could spark new interest in the sport. But Bryant readily concedes that growing the sport in America will take time — and that none of this is designed to bring home gold medals from Tokyo this summer.

He is also acutely aware that there are other ways to measure success during a difficult time in America.

"We sat down and started talking," Bryant said, "and we agreed that when you look at George Floyd, and all these situations, we felt like if these officers had been trained in judo appropriately, it wouldn't have happened."

Sharpton decries 'stench of racism' in Daunte Wright's death

By AARON MORRISON, TIM SULLIVAN and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Daunte Wright, the young Black man shot by an officer during a traffic stop in suburban Minneapolis, was not "just some kid with an air freshener," but a "prince" whose life ended too soon at the hands of police, the Rev. Al Sharpton said Thursday during an emotional funeral.

Hundreds of people wearing COVID-19 masks packed into Shiloh Temple International Ministries to remember Wright, a 20-year-old father of one who was shot by a white police officer on April 11 in the small city of Brooklyn Center. The funeral was held just two days after former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin was convicted in the death of George Floyd and amid a national reckoning on racism and policing.

"The absence of justice is the absence of peace," Sharpton said. "You can't tell us to shut up and suffer. We must speak up when there is an injustice."

The civil rights leader's thundering eulogy included a stinging rebuke of the possibility that Wright was pulled over for having air fresheners dangling from his mirror. Wright's mother has said her son called her after he was stopped and told her that was the reason. Police said it was for expired registration.

"We come today as the air fresheners for Minnesota," Sharpton said, vowing changes in federal law. "We're trying to get the stench of police brutality out of the atmosphere. We're trying to get the stench of racism out of the atmosphere. We're trying to get the stench of racial profiling out of the atmosphere.

"We come to Minnesota as air fresheners because your air is too odorous for us to breathe," he said." We can't breathe in your stinking air no more!"

Brooklyn Center's police chief said it appeared from body camera video that the officer who shot Wright used her pistol when she meant to use her Taser as Wright struggled with police. The 26-year veteran, Kim Potter, is charged with second-degree manslaughter. Both she and the chief resigned after the shooting.

Ben Crump, attorney for both the Floyd and Wright families, has called for more serious charges against Potter and said Wright's son "is going to get old enough to watch that video of how his father was slain so unnecessarily. A misdemeanor, a misdemeanor."

"It's too often that traffic stops end up as deadly sentences, a death sentence," Crump said, adding he wants Wright's son to know, "We stood up for Daunte, his father."

Daunte's mother, Katie Wright, told mourners, "The roles should be completely reversed. My son should be burying me," before burying her face in her hands.

Wright recalled her son becoming a father to a boy born prematurely: "He was so happy and so proud, and he said he couldn't wait to make his son proud. Junior was the joy of his life. He lived for him every single day."

Funeral attendees were brought to their feet when artist Ange Hillz painted a portrait of Wright — white paint on a black canvas — as trumpeter Keyon Harrold played "Amazing Grace" and "Lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing," the Black national anthem.

And during a silent reading of Wright's obituary, some could be heard crying softly.

Later, at the cemetery where Wright was buried, some shouted "Daunte!" after his parents opened a basket, freeing two white doves that flew away.

The families of several other Black people killed by police were there, too, including the mothers of Philando Castile, who was shot by a police officer during a traffic stop in a Minneapolis suburb in 2016, and Eric Garner, who was filmed saying "I can't breathe" in a fatal 2014 encounter with New York City police.

Also attending were relatives of Oscar Grant, killed in 2009 by a California transit officer who mistook his service weapon for a stun gun, similar to the Wright case, and of Emmett Till, the teenager whose 1955 lynching in Mississippi helped spark the civil rights movement, as well as the boyfriend of Breonna Taylor, who was shot in her Kentucky apartment by officers serving a warrant in 2020.

U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Gov. Tim Walz and Minneapolis Mayor Jacob Frey also attended.

"True justice is not done as long as having expired tags means losing your life during a traffic stop," Klobuchar said before a minister gave the closing prayer. "True justice is not done as long as a chokehold, the knee on the neck or a no-knock warrant is considered legitimate policing."

More than a dozen members from an armed team of local men, the Minnesota Freedom Fighters, provided security.

Wright was killed when a scuffle broke out as police tried to arrest him after realizing he had an outstanding warrant for failing to appear in court on charges of fleeing police and having a gun without a permit.

It set off protests in Brooklyn Center, a working-class, majority nonwhite city, with hundreds of people gathering every night for a week outside the city's heavily guarded police station. While the mayor called for law enforcement and protesters to scale back their tactics, the nights often ended with demonstrators lobbing water bottles and rocks at the officers, and law enforcement responding with pepper spray, tear gas and rubber bullets.

EXPLAINER: Why is Chauvin unlikely to face maximum sentence?

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Derek Chauvin is already locked away in Minnesota's only maximum-security prison, held in a single cell for his own safety. But it will be two months before the former Minneapolis police officer learns his sentence for George Floyd's death.

Chauvin, 45, was convicted Tuesday of second-degree unintentional murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter for pressing his knee against Floyd's neck for 9 1/2 minutes as the Black man said he couldn't breathe.

Even though he was found guilty of three counts, under Minnesota statutes he'll only be sentenced on the most serious one — second-degree murder. While that count carries a maximum sentence of 40 years, experts say he won't get that much. They say that for all practical purposes, the maximum he would face is 30 years, and he could get less.

Here's a breakdown on Minnesota's sentencing nuances:

WHY WON'T WE SEE MULTIPLE SENTENCES?

Because all the charges stem from one act, carried out against one person. Multiple sentences are typically handed down in cases when there are convictions for multiple victims, or multiple crimes against one victim.

For example, if a defendant is convicted of kidnapping and sexually assaulting a woman — two crimes against one victim — a judge would issue a sentence on each count, and could rule that they be served at the same time or consecutively, said former Hennepin County chief public defender Mary Moriarty.

That's not the case here, Moriarty said. "This case involved three different theories of the same behavior toward the same person."

IS THERE ANOTHER EXAMPLE OF THIS?

In another high-profile murder case involving a Minneapolis officer, Mohamed Noor was convicted of third-degree murder and manslaughter in the 2017 shooting death of Justine Ruszczyk Damond. Noor was sentenced to 12 1/2 years in prison on the third-degree murder conviction, but no penalty was issued for manslaughter.

If Noor's murder charge is tossed out on appeal, which is pending, he would then be sentenced on that lesser count. Likewise, if Chauvin's second-degree murder count is ultimately dismissed, he would be brought back to court for resentencing on the top remaining charge.

WHY IS IT UNLIKELY CHAUVIN WILL GET THE 40-YEAR MAX?

Minnesota has sentencing guidelines that were created to establish rational, consistent sentences and ensure sentences are neutral without considering factors such as race or gender. The guidelines say that even though they are advisory, presumptive sentences "are deemed appropriate" and judges should only depart from them when "substantial and compelling circumstances can be identified and articulated."

For second-degree unintentional murder, guidelines say the presumptive sentence for someone with no criminal record like Chauvin would be 12 1/2 years. Judges can sentence someone to as little as 10 years and eight months or as much as 15 years and still be within the advisory guideline range.

But in this case, prosecutors are seeking a sentence that goes above the guideline range, called an "upward departure." They cited several aggravating factors, including that Floyd was particularly vulnerable, that Chauvin was a uniformed officer acting in a position of authority, and that his crime was witnessed by multiple children — including a 9-year-old girl who testified that watching the restraint made her "sad and kind of mad."

After the verdicts, Attorney General Keith Ellison said: "We believe there are aggravating factors and the sentence should exceed the sentencing guidelines."

SO WHAT'S REALISTIC?

Experts say the max will be 30 years — double the high end of the guideline range. If Judge Peter Cahill were to sentence Chauvin to anything above that, he risks having his decision reversed on appeal.

Mark Osler, a professor at University of St. Thomas School of Law, said the Minnesota Supreme Court set a standard maximum for upward departures in the 1981 State v. Evans case, finding that generally, when an upward departure is justified, "the upper limit will be double the presumptive sentence length."

The court stressed that doubling the guideline range is only an upper limit and shouldn't be automatic. The justices also left room for the rare case in which a judge would be justified in going even higher. Mitchell Hamline law professor Ted Sampsell-Jones said last year's State v. Barthman opinion reaffirmed the Evans rule and "sent a signal" that sentences exceeding a doubling of guidelines "should be in fact extremely rare" and almost never happen.

WHAT GOES INTO THE PROCESS?

Osler said when deciding on an upward departure, Cahill has to look at what distinguishes this case from a case without aggravating factors. He said one aggravating factor is particular cruelty, but Cahill has to weigh this case's specific circumstances with the inherent cruelty of killing someone in the first place.

If he decides aggravating factors exist, he has to keep them in proportion to the crime.

"It's going to be a really difficult decision for Judge Cahill," Osler said.

TIME ACTUALLY SERVED?

No matter what sentence Chauvin gets, in Minnesota it's presumed that a defendant with good behavior will serve two-thirds of the penalty in prison and the rest on supervised release, commonly known as parole.

That means if Chauvin is sentenced to 30 years, he would likely serve 20 behind bars, as long as he causes no problems in prison. Once on supervised release, he could be sent back to prison if he violates conditions of his parole.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Both sides are writing legal briefs on aggravating factors, which Cahill will review before determining whether they exist.

Cahill also ordered a pre-sentence investigation report, which is usually nonpublic. This report is typically prepared by a probation officer and includes highly personal information such as family history and mental health issues. It also includes details of the offense and the harm it caused others and the community.

Cahill said he'll issue a sentence in two months. A date for sentencing has not been set.

WILL WE HEAR FROM CHAUVIN?

That's hard to say. He has the right to make a statement during his sentencing hearing, but Moriarty said that can be tricky. While judges want people to take responsibility and be remorseful — and can take that into consideration in sentencing — a defendant also wouldn't want to say anything that could jeopardize a possible appeal.

"That's the hard part because I think everybody, including family, wants to hear him say something about how he is sorry," she said.

High court moves away from leniency for minors who murder

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court made it easier Thursday to sentence minors convicted of murder to life in prison without the possibility of parole, a ruling that reflects a change in course driven by a more conservative group of justices.

In a dissent, a liberal justice accused her colleagues of gutting earlier decisions that said life without parole sentences for people under age 18 should be rare.

The current case, which involved a Mississippi inmate and a crime committed when he was 15, asked the justices whether a minor has to be found to be "permanently incorrigible," incapable of being rehabilitated, before being sentenced to life without parole.

In a 6-3 decision that split the justices along ideological lines, the court said no. The ruling followed more than a decade in which the court moved gradually toward more leniency for minors convicted of murder.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh, writing for the majority, said previous decisions only require a judge to consider "an offender's youth and attendant characteristics" before imposing a sentence of life without parole. Kavanaugh rejected a more demanding standard.

The "argument that the sentencer must make a finding of permanent incorrigibility is inconsistent with the Court's precedents," Kavanaugh wrote for himself and Chief Justice John Roberts, as well as Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Amy Coney Barrett.

Justice Clarence Thomas agreed with the result but said he would have instead rejected outright a 2016 decision in favor of the juveniles.

The court's three liberal justices dissented, with Justice Sonia Sotomayor writing that the decision "guts" prior cases in favor of minors. Sotomayor called the decision an "abrupt break" and an "abandonment"

of those cases. Sotomayor said that all the almost 1,500 juvenile offenders serving life without parole sentences wanted was "the opportunity, at some point in their lives, to show a parole board all they have done to rehabilitate themselves and to ask for a second chance."

Beginning in 2005, the Supreme Court had concluded in a series of cases that minors should be treated differently from adults, in part because of minors' lack of maturity. That year, the court eliminated the death penalty for juveniles. Five years later, it later barred life-without-parole sentences for juveniles except in cases of murder. In 2012 and 2016 the court again sided with minors. The court said life-without-parole sentences should only be given to "the rarest of juvenile offenders, those whose crimes reflect permanent incorrigibility."

Since that time, Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Justice Anthony Kennedy, whose votes were key to those decisions, have been replaced by more conservative justices. Kavanaugh, the author of Thursday's majority opinion and a former clerk to Kennedy, replaced him on the court. Kennedy had been the author of the decisions favoring juveniles in 2005, 2010 and 2016.

In a statement, Kymberlee Stapleton of the California-based Criminal Justice Legal Foundation called the decision a "victory for the families of victims murdered by juveniles."

But Heather Renwick, the legal director of the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth, said the decision was out-of-step with national trends and would "result in uneven and arbitrary imposition of life without parole on children." She noted that the number of states that ban life without parole sentences for minors has grown significantly in the last decade. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia bar life without parole sentences for youth.

Both groups had weighed in on the case on opposite sides.

The specific case before the justices involved Mississippi inmate Brett Jones, who was 15 and living with his grandparents when he fatally stabbed his grandfather. The two had a fight in the home's kitchen after Bertis Jones found his grandson's girlfriend in his grandson's bedroom. Brett Jones, who was using a knife to make a sandwich before the fight, stabbed his grandfather first with that knife and then, when it broke, with a different knife. He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Brett Jones had argued he is not "permanently incorrigible" and should therefore be eligible for parole. Mississippi argued that the Eighth Amendment doesn't require that Jones be found to be permanently incorrigible to receive a life-without-parole sentence, just that Jones' status as a minor when he committed his crime be considered.

In a statement, Mississippi's Attorney General Lynn Fitch said the state was pleased. "At its core, this case is about a state's ability to craft the laws and procedures that reflect the will of its people," she wrote. Jones' attorney declined to comment.

The case is Jones v. Mississippi, 18-1259.

Expedition hauls tons of plastic out of remote Hawaii atolls

By CALEB JONES Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — A crew returned from the northernmost islands in the Hawaiian archipelago this week with a boatload of marine plastic and abandoned fishing nets that threaten to entangle endangered Hawaiian monk seals and other animals on the uninhabited beaches stretching more than 1,300 miles north of Honolulu.

The cleanup effort in Papahanaumokuakea Marine National Monument lasted three weeks and the crew picked up more than 47 tons (43 metric tons) of "ghost nets" and other marine plastics such as buoys, crates, bottle caps and cigarette lighters from the shores of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

The monument, the largest protected marine reserve in the U.S. and one of the largest in the world, is in the northern Pacific Ocean and surrounded by what is known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch — a huge gyre of floating plastic and other debris that circulates in ocean currents. The islands act like a comb that gather debris on its otherwise pristine beaches.

The ecosystem in the monument is diverse, unique and one of the most intact marine habitats on Earth.

But the beaches are littered with plastic and nets that ensnare endangered Hawaiian monk seals — of which there are only about 1,400 left in the world — and green turtles, among other wildlife.

The crew removed line from a monk seal on the expedition's first day.

With virtually no predators, the islands are a haven for many species of seabirds, and Midway Atoll is home to the largest colony of albatross in the world. There, the land is littered with carcasses of birds that have ingested plastics and died.

The cleanup was organized by the nonprofit Papahanaumokuakea Marine Debris Project, which partners with the state of Hawaii and federal agencies, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Kevin O'Brien, president of the new organization and a former NOAA employee, said the work is expensive but important.

"Talking to some of these folks that are up there for the monk seal camps every summer, they'll talk about specific nets that have been there for several years," O'Brien said. "So a trip like this where we're able to yank pretty much everything we see can have an impact."

The latest expedition focused on the shorelines of the various atolls, and a trip later this year will remove nets from the reefs that surround the islands.

A NOAA study estimated that the shores of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands accumulate about 57 tons (52 metric tons) of debris each year. An analysis of the upcoming reef removal is expected to estimate the total amount of debris that gathers on both the beaches and the critical reef ecosystems that surround them, giving researchers a more complete view of the problem.

The crew of 12, which included people from the marine debris project, federal agencies, Hawaii and a local university, removed debris from Laysan Island, Lisianski Island, Midway Atoll, French Frigate Shoals and Kure Atoll.

Matt Saunter, president of the Kure Atoll Conservancy, was among those working on the expedition. He's spent more than a decade doing monthslong field work on Kure Atoll. He rode out the first nine months of the coronavirus pandemic isolated there with a small crew and returned in November to a new world.

He said being back on his "home away from home" in a new role was a unique experience.

"I definitely always wanted to remain involved with work being done in the monument, but I thought maybe I could try it at a different capacity," Saunter said. "We basically visited all the different islands in a short time frame, so I got to see all the different wildlife and how they nest differently and the different types of vegetation this time of the year, and the different state that the beaches are in."

While on Kure, which is managed by the state of Hawaii and has a year-round team of workers, the crew dropped off new staff and picked up one to return home. They also resupplied the remote field camp.

The Kure field crews had about 13 tons (12 metric tons) of debris collected over three years, and it was ready to be picked up when the ship arrived.

The marine monument is also a valued Native Hawaiian cultural site, and Hawaiian ceremonies were conducted each day of the trip. The cultural protocols honor the islands and seek permission to work in this rarely visited part of the world.

"Papahanaumokuakea is one of the most amazing landscapes on Earth, central to many Native Hawaiian narratives — a place where nature and culture are one," said Athline Clark, NOAA's superintendent for the marine monument. "It sustains the most vulnerable Hawaiian wildlife species, and nearly all of its habitat is used by seabirds, turtles and seals for critical nesting, burrowing, basking and pupping."

The monument is also home to the famed World War II Battle of Midway, where researchers recently found sunken Japanese warships that were lost in the fight.

Most of the debris that was brought back will be incinerated and turned into electricity that powers homes and businesses on Oahu. Some of the gear will be set aside for student recycling projects, and a number of the fishing nets will be taken to Hawaii Pacific University's Center for Marine Debris Research for a study that's trying to identify the sources of this fishing gear.

Groton Daily Independent
Friday, April 23, 2021 ~ Vol. 29 - No. 291 ~ 60 of 88

Oscar slate holds 'firsts' for Asian actors, filmmakers

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

It may be hard to believe that there are still many "firsts" left to check off after 93 years of the Academy Awards, and yet this year there were a handful for Asian actors and filmmakers.

Steven Yeun ("Minari") became the first Asian American actor to be nominated for best actor. Riz Ahmed ("Sound of Metal") is the first Muslim to be nominated for best actor. It's the first time that there are two best actor candidates of Asian heritage. Youn Yuh-jung ("Minari") is the first Korean woman to be nominated for any acting award. "Nomadland's" Chloé Zhao is the first Asian woman to be nominated for best director. And, with director Lee Issac Chung 's directing nomination for "Minari," it's also the first time there are two Asian nominees in that race.

The historic gains spotlight where the organization has made progress and where there is still work to do, especially after a year in which Asian Americans were increasingly targeted in racist attacks.

Nancy Yuen, author of the book "Reel Inequality: Hollywood Actors and Racism," said the nominations this year are exciting. The actors are being recognized for roles, Yuen said, "That are not demeaning, that aren't fitting into stereotypes that are problematic. They are fully complex human beings."

That hasn't always been the case for Asian actors who have broken through to the Oscars. The first and last time an Asian woman won for acting was in 1958 when Japanese actor Miyoshi Umeki won for her supporting role in "Sayonara." In 1985, Haing Ngor became the first Asian man to win a supporting award for playing Cambodian journalist Dith Pran in "The Killing Fields." And none have won in the leading category since Ben Kingsley, whose father is Indian, won for "Gandhi" in 1982. Yul Brynner, who was born in Russia, won for "The King and I" in 1957.

It's coupled with the fact that there have been multiple Asian-led best picture winners that didn't receive any acting nominations. In the history of best picture winners, it's only happened 12 times, and three of them had predominately Asian casts: "The Last Emperor," "Slumdog Millionaire" and last year's " Parasite." Ang Lee's "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" and "Life of Pi" were also nominated for best picture without a single acting nod.

"I think Asian Americans and Asians in the Western diaspora tend to be seen as invisible and background. They are window dressing," Yuen said. "It leads to not recognizing Asians as fully complex actors and characters."

Yuen andothers noticed with "Parasite," that people largely referred to the small ensemble as "they" rather by individual names: Chang Hyae Jin, Cho Yeo Jeong, Choi Woo Shik, Lee Jung Eun, Lee Sun Kyun, Park So Dam and Song Kang Ho. Whether a Western blind spot, a racial bias or some combination of the two, it's at least part of the reason for the systemic oversights.

"People don't bother to even try to learn," Yuen said. "That added layer of challenge, I think, makes it that people in the academy aren't even going to be nominating someone in those films unless they are already a known entity."

Yuen, who grew up in the United States and also found herself having to look up the names on occasion, said that she tried to always single out the actors if she was going to compliment "Parasite" or share a gif or an image on social media.

And the biases aren't just relegated to the nominations. In 2016, the first show after #oscarssowhite became a household phrase, host Chris Rock brought out three Asian children dressed up in suits for a now infamous joke about accountants and iPhones.

It was not well-received at the time and provoked a lot of immediate social media backlash from people like actor Constance Wu and basketball player Jeremy Lin. The academy even apologized and pledged to be more culturally sensitive.

The strides at the Oscars also come after over a year of a pandemic-fueled rise in racially motivated attacks on Asian Americans. It was not lost on anyone that the day after the Oscar nominations, a white gunman was charged with killing eight people, most of whom were Asian women, at Atlanta-area massage businesses.

"It was this kind of high of like, oh, my gosh, Asians are finally being recognized for their excellence. And then there's this horrific hate crime that really just shook everyone. It feels like we're under the spotlight, but for polar opposite reasons," Yuen said. "One doesn't cancel out the other. The positives are not canceling out the racism. At the same time, I think it's bringing awareness to the racism. And the fact that Asian excellence is being recognized, the more voice and platform Asian Americans have to be able to speak out against the hate."

The actors themselves have complex feelings about the moment and the "firsts."

Youn told Deadline that, "It's very stressful. It's not like I'm representing the country by going to the Olympics, but I feel like I'm competing for my country."

In an interview with Variety before the nominations announcement, Yeun said: "As great as it would be to set a precedent or be part of a moment that breaks through a ceiling, I personally don't want to be ensnared by that moment, either."

As for Ahmed, speaking to The New York Times on the morning of his nomination, he said, "What's most important is if it's meaningful to other people. I just think the more and more people that can find themselves celebrated and included in these moments, the better."

Part of the reason for the gains could be due to diversification efforts within the Academy's membership ranks. After the 2015 and 2016 #oscarssowhite spotlight, the organization vowed to double the number of women and people of color in its voting body by 2020. They hit that milestone last summer, but the organization is still 81% white and 67% male. In 2024, they'll introduce new inclusion standards for best picture hopefuls.

"Historically there were pockets of the academy that were more diverse, particularly internationally, specifically the directors branch," said Turner Classic Movies host and Oscars expert Dave Karger. "But the academy's attempts at diversification have opened the door for more worthy nominees, particularly Black and Asian nominees to be represented, not just foreign white nominees."

Now the big unknown is whether this year actually represents a sea change.

"You have to see whether it is just an uptick, a random year, or is it actually the beginning of a pattern of change?" Yuen said. "And we really don't know yet."

World leaders pledge climate cooperation despite other rifts

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER, MATTHEW DALY and CHRISTINA LARSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The leaders of Russia and China put aside their raw-worded disputes with U.S. President Joe Biden on Thursday long enough to pledge international cooperation on cutting climate-wrecking coal and petroleum emissions in a livestreamed summit showcasing America's return to the fight against global warming.

Neither Vladimir Putin nor Xi Jinping immediately followed the United States and some of its developed allies in making specific new pledges to reduce damaging fossil fuel pollution during the first day of the two-day U.S.-hosted summit. But climate advocates hoped the high-profile — if glitch-ridden — virtual gathering would kickstart new action by major polluters, paving the way for a November U.N. meeting in Glasgow critical to drastically slowing climate change over the coming decade.

The entire world faces "a moment of peril" but also "a moment of opportunity," Biden declared, speaking from a TV-style chrome-blue set for the virtual summit of 40 world leaders. Participants appeared one after the other onscreen for what appeared to be a mix of live and recorded addresses.

"The signs are unmistakable," Biden said. "The science is undeniable. The cost of inaction keeps mounting."

Biden's new U.S. commitment, timed to the summit, would cut America's fossil fuel emissions as much as 52% by 2030. It comes after four years of international withdrawal from the issue under President Donald Trump, who mocked the science of climate change and pulled the U.S. out of the landmark 2015 Paris climate accord.

Biden's administration this week is sketching out a vision of a prosperous, clean-energy United States

where factories churn out cutting-edge batteries and electric cars for export, line workers re-lay an efficient national electrical grid and crews cap abandoned oil and gas rigs and coal mines.

But Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell dismissed the administration's plans as costly and ineffective.

"This is quite the one-two punch," McConnell said in a Senate speech Thursday. "Toothless requests of our foreign adversaries ... and maximum pain for American citizens."

At the summit, Japan announced its own new 46% emissions reduction target and South Korea said it would stop public financing of new coal-fired power plants, potentially an important step toward persuading China and other coal-reliant nations to curb building and funding of new ones as well.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, one of the leaders shown watching summit proceedings in the coronavirus pandemic's familiar Brady Bunch-style multibox conference screen, said his nation would up its fossil fuel pollution cuts from 30% to at least 40%.

Travel precautions under the pandemic compelled the summit to play out on livestream, limiting opportunities for spontaneous interaction and negotiation. Its opening hours were sometimes marked by electronic echoes, random beeps and off-screen voices.

But the summit also marshaled an impressive display of the world's most powerful leaders speaking on the single issue of climate change.

China's Xi, whose country is the world's biggest emissions culprit, followed by the United States, spoke first among the other global figures. He made no reference to disputes over territorial claims, trade and other matters that had made it uncertain until Wednesday that he would even take part in the U.S. summit. And he said China would work with America in cutting emissions.

"To protect the environment is to protect productivity, and to boost the environment is to boost productivity. It's as simple as that," Xi said.

Putin and his government have been irate over Biden's characterization of him as a "killer" for Russia's aggressive moves against its opponents, and he is under pressure this week over the declining health of jailed opposition figure Alexei Navalny. But he made no mention of those disputes in his own climate remarks.

"Russia is genuinely interested in galvanizing international cooperation so as to look further for effective solutions to climate change as well as to all other vital challenges," Putin said. Russia by some measures is the world's fourth-biggest emitter of climate-damaging fossil fuel fumes.

Climate efforts in recent years have proved a forum where even rival world leaders want to be seen as putting aside disputes to serve as international statesmen and women, even though the cumulative output of fossil fuel emissions is still hurtling the Earth toward disastrous temperature rises.

The pandemic made gathering world leaders for the climate summit too risky. So Biden's staff built a small set in the East Room that looked like it was taken from a daytime talk show.

Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris joined Secretary of State Antony Blinken and White House climate envoy John Kerry at a horseshoe-shaped table set up around a giant potted plant to watch fellow leaders' speeches.

The format meant a cavalcade of short speeches by world leaders, some scripted, some not. "This is not bunny-hugging," British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said of the climate efforts. "This is about growth and jobs."

The Biden administration's pledge would require by far the most ambitious U.S. climate effort ever, nearly doubling the reductions that the Obama administration had committed to in the Paris climate accord.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel was one of many allies welcoming the U.S. return after Trump..

"I'm delighted to see that the United States is back, is back to work together with us in climate politics," Merkel declared in her virtual appearance. "Because there can be no doubt about the world needing your contribution if we really want to fulfill our ambitious goals."

Pope Francis contributed a video from the Vatican, saying, "I wish you success in this beautiful decision to meet, walk together going forward and I am with you all the way."

The new urgency comes as scientists say that climate change caused by coal plants, car engines and

other fossil fuel use is worsening droughts, floods, hurricanes, wildfires and other disasters and that humans are running out of time to stave off catastrophic extremes of global warming.

Leaders of smaller states and island nations buffeted by rising seas and worsening hurricanes appealed for aid and fast emissions cuts from world powers.

"We are the least contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, but the most affected by climate change," said Gaston Alfonso Browne, prime minister of Antigua and Barbuda. He called for debt relief and more international assistance to recover from storms and the pandemic to prevent a flow of climate refugees. His people he said, are "teetering on the edge of despair."

Longtime climate policy experts, no strangers to climate summits with solemn pledges, watched some speeches with skepticism. After Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro promised an end to clearcutting in the Amazon, Dan Wilkinson of Human Rights Watch's environmental programs noted, "It is going to be hard for anyone to take it seriously until they actually start taking steps."

COVID-19 hospitalizations tumble among US senior citizens

By MATTHEW PERRONE and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — COVID-19 hospitalizations among older Americans have plunged more than 70% since the start of the year, and deaths among them appear to have tumbled as well, dramatic evidence the vaccination campaign is working.

Now the trick is to get more of the nation's younger people to roll up their sleeves.

The drop-off in severe cases among Americans 65 and older is especially encouraging because senior citizens have accounted for about 8 out of 10 deaths from the virus since it hit the U.S., where the toll stands at about 570,000

COVID-19 deaths among people of all ages in the U.S. have plummeted to about 700 per day on average, compared with a peak of over 3,400 in mid-January.

"What you're seeing there is exactly what we hoped and wanted to see: As really high rates of vaccinations happen, hospitalizations and death rates come down," said Jodie Guest, a public health researcher at Emory University.

The best available data suggests COVID-19 deaths among Americans 65 and older have declined more than 50% since their peak in January. The picture is not entirely clear because the most recent data on deaths by age from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is incomplete and subject to revision.

Still, the figures suggest that the fall in deaths among senior citizens is driving the overall decline in lives lost to COVID-19, vindicating the U.S. strategy of putting elderly people at or near the front of the line for shots when the vaccine became available over the winter.

The U.S. trends mirror what is happening in other countries with high vaccination rates, such as Israel and Britain, and stand in stark contrast to the worsening disaster in places like India and Brazil, which lag far behind in dispensing shots.

According to U.S. government statistics, hospitalizations are down more than 50%, but most dramatically among senior citizens, who have been eligible for shots the longest and have enthusiastically received them.

Two-thirds of American senior citizens are fully vaccinated, versus just one-third of all U.S. adults. Over 80% of senior citizens have gotten at least one shot, compared with just over 50% of all adults.

At the same time, however, overall demand for vaccinations in the U.S. seems to be slipping, even as shots have been thrown open to all adults across the country. The average number of doses administered per day appeared to fall in mid-April from 3.2 million to 2.9 million, according to CDC figures.

"My concern is whether the vaccine uptake will be as strong in these younger age groups," Guest said. "If it's not, we will not see the positive impact for vaccines in these younger age groups that we've seen in our older population."

Also, new virus cases in the U.S. have been stuck at worrisome levels since March, averaging more than 60,000 per day, matching numbers seen during last summer's surge. The new cases are increasingly among people in their 30s, 40s and 50s, who also make up a larger portion of hospitalizations.

In Michigan, which has been battered by a recent surge of infections, hospitalizations among people in

their 50s have increased 700% since late February, outpacing all other age groups.

In Seattle's King County, hospital physicians are seeing fewer COVID-19 patients overall, fewer needing critical care and fewer needing breathing machines. These younger patients are also more likely to survive.

"Thankfully they have done quite well," said Dr. Mark Sullivan, a critical care doctor at Swedish Medical Center in Seattle. "They tend to recover a little quicker because of their youth."

With enough people vaccinated, COVID-19 cases should eventually begin to fall as the virus finds fewer and fewer people to infect. Guest and other experts say Israel appeared to reach that threshold last month after it fully vaccinated roughly 40% of its population of 9 million people.

But the U.S. faces challenges in conducting mass vaccinations because of its far greater size, diversity, geography and health disparities.

On Tuesday, President Joe Biden announced new federal funding for small businesses so that employees can take time off with pay to get vaccinated or recover from the shot's side effects.

The challenge will be quickly vaccinating younger Americans, who feel they are less vulnerable to the coronavirus but are mainly the ones spreading the disease.

"To really feel that we're out of the woods we've got to see a lot less cases than we're seeing now," said Dr. Jesse Goodman, a vaccine specialist at Georgetown University. "It's going to take a wider, continuing effort."

In Chicago's Cook County, where 91% of adults 65 and older have had at least one shot, the patients in the hospital these days are younger and do better.

"That feeling of dread is definitely eased with older patients getting vaccinated," said Dr. Tipu Puri, a kidney specialist and associate chief medical officer for clinical operations at University of Chicago Medical Center.

At some moments, there's even joy, he said. He recently stopped to help an elderly couple find the hospital's vaccination clinic. The woman was pushing her husband's wheelchair.

"Those are people you hope you won't see in the hospital," Puri said. "We're not going to see them in the emergency room or in the ICU."

He added: "This is what coming out of the pandemic feels like."

Countering Biden, GOP pitches $568B for infrastructure

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A group of Senate Republicans on Thursday unveiled a public works proposal with a much smaller price tag and a narrower definition of infrastructure than what President Joe Biden has proposed, highlighting the stark differences between the two sides that will be difficult to bridge in the coming months.

The price of the Republicans' two-page outline came in at $568 billion over five years, compared to the $2.3 trillion that Biden has called for spending over eight years. The lawmakers framed their counter proposal as a "very, very generous offer."

"This is the largest infrastructure investment that Republicans have come forward with," Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.V., told reporters. "This is a robust package."

Yet the unveiling of the GOP proposal also made clear the parties are leagues apart on the size and scope of what's needed. Biden is spending time listening to Republicans and voicing a willingness to consider their ideas, but Democrats are intent on passing a major infrastructure boost this year with or without GOP support. They have made clear they are willing to use the budget reconciliation process to bypass Republicans altogether, just as they did on COVID relief earlier this year.

Whether to raise taxes is perhaps the biggest dividing line. To help pay for their plan, the Republicans would instead rely on user fees, including for electric vehicles, and on redirecting unspent federal dollars. The outline does not offer specifics, such as which federal programs would lose unspent dollars to infrastructure. Biden has proposed raising the corporate income tax from 21% to 28% to help pay for his plan, a move the Republican senators rejected.

The GOP's slimmer infrastructure plan received a positive reception from the White House, with press secretary Jen Psaki characterizing it as a legitimate starting point for negotiations. She said Biden's aides looked forward to reviewing the details and that Biden would invite members to the White House to discuss it further after he addresses a joint session of Congress on Wednesday.

"We certainly welcome any good faith effort and see this as that," Psaki said.

Republican lawmakers have been quick to criticize the infrastructure proposal from Biden. They say just a fraction of the spending would go to traditional infrastructure. Biden's plan devotes $400 billion to expand Medicaid support for caregivers, and substantial portions would fund electric vehicle charging stations and address the racial injustice of highways that were built in ways that harmed Black neighborhoods.

The Republican plan would dedicate $299 billion to roads and bridges, $65 billion to broadband internet and $61 billion to transit. Another big-ticket item: $44 billion for airports. Absent from the plan are Biden priorities like electric vehicle charging stations and caregiver support, as well as billions of dollars to renovate schools and public housing.

The senators delivered their blueprint to the White House about 30 minutes prior to holding a press conference on it.

"We take the part of the president's plan that most Americans agree is real, hard infrastructure, we give it our touch and we think we have a very good number here," said Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss.

Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., found little to like in the proposal.

"It goes nowhere near what has to be done to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure and the funding is totally regressive and anti-working class," Sanders said.

Republicans have been dismissive of aspects of Biden's plan that focus on easing the country's reliance on fossil fuels. Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Penn., said the Republican plan "consists of actual, real infrastructure."

But the investments Biden is proposing to curb global warming matches what many Democrats are looking for and could dampen their support if removed in negotiations.

"Any infrastructure proposal has to be green and cannot be paid for on the backs of working people," Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. said.

It's not the first time Republicans have tried to draw Biden into negotiations. Earlier this year, they offered a counterproposal to Biden's $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan. Their price tag came in at about one-third of what the president wanted, and he soon declared it inadequate. Democrats went forward on their own and passed the relief bill without the support of any GOP lawmaker.

Capito said she is optimistic that compromise can be found this time.

"I've been reading this very closely," she said. "I feel like the White House and other counterparts on the House side want to try to reach a consensus."

As debate continues regarding the size and scope of the infrastructure bill, Biden's team is finalizing its "American Families Plan" to be outlined next week during the president's joint address to Congress. That proposal would likely seek to extend the expanded child tax credit through 2025, universal pre-kindergarten and free community college by raising taxes on the wealthiest Americans.

Psaki said that the president is meeting "over the coming days to finalize details of the package" and how to pay for it.

The New York Times reported Thursday that Biden would make good on a campaign plan to nearly double the capital gains tax on people earning more than $1 million, increasing it from 20% to 39.6%. White House officials declined to confirm the precise numbers, but they emphasized that taxes would not increase for anyone making under $400,000.

Is this an 'Asterisk Oscars' or a sign of things to come?

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

In 93 years of existence, the Oscars have been postponed by shootings — the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the attempted killing of Ronald Reagan — and by a flood, when 1938 rainstorms overwhelmed the Los Angeles River. Sunday's ceremony will be the first Academy Awards delayed by a pandemic.

After a year that erased movie titles from marquees and sent seismic shockwaves through Hollywood, the show is going on — two months later than usual, in a crowdless ceremony at Los Angeles' Union Station and with a batch of nominees that have barely played in movie theaters. The biggest box office of the best-picture nominees belongs to "Promising Young Woman" — a pandemic blockbuster with $6.3 million in U.S. ticket sales.

That this is all very strange goes without saying. Given such an unusual year, this year's awards have been called the "Asterisk Oscars." But there is reason to believe, and even to hope, that some of this year's changes are here to stay.

The broadcast, beginning 8 p.m. EDT Sunday on ABC after a red-carpet pre-show, will be the most transformed in decades. The show's producers, led by filmmaker Steven Soderbergh, are pledging an entire makeover, one perhaps long overdue for an institution resistant to innovation. They plan to treat the awards more like a movie, including shooting it in 24 frames-per-second, rather than the typical 30. Zooms are strictly forbidden. Instead, tested and quarantined maskless nominees will gather at the downtown train station, while satellite feeds connect others from around the world.

On the heels of a humbling year, the Oscars — usually a frothy night of self-congratulation — this year may feel more like a therapeutic rally for an industry in the midst of convulsive change.

Just the weeks leading up to the Academy Awards saw one of Los Angeles' most iconic movie theaters, the Cinerama Dome, along with ArcLight Cinemas, go out of business. When the Walt Disney Co. announced that it would delay "Black Widow" from May to July and open it both theatrically and on Disney+, cinemas shuddered. Adding to the sense of wholesale change was the news that Searchlight Pictures' Nancy Utley and Steve Gilula — who have steered so many Oscar winners, including this year's best-picture favorite, Chloé Zhao's "Nomadland" — were stepping down.

"Even as the pandemic is winding down, I don't know that we're going to return to business as usual," said Darnell Hunt, dean of UCLA's College of Social Sciences, who studies Hollywood.

That's good news, too. 2020 saw, Hunt says, "profound diversity" unlike any year before. In a study released Thursday and authored by Hunt and Ana-Christina Ramón, researchers found that 42% of roles overall and 39.7% of lead roles in 2020 films were played by actors of color — roughly in line with U.S. population demographics.

There are many caveats. Representation still lags behind the camera and among executives. With many of the biggest studio films put on hold, smaller, lower-budget films — many of them streamed — were much of 2020's atypical output. But the diversity of those films has also transferred to the Oscars. In recent years, the film academy — which this year extended eligibility by two months and to films that bypassed movie theaters — has made strides in expanding its membership. In the coming years, the academy will institute inclusion standards in the best-picture category.

A record nine of the 20 acting nominees are non-white. If Viola Davis ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"), Chadwick Boseman ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"), Yuh-Jung Youn ("Minari") and Daniel Kaluuya ("Judas and the Black Messiah") all win — as they did at the Screen Actors Guild Awards — it would be the first time people of color swept the acting awards, and a dramatic reversal from the recent years of "OscarsSoWhite."

More women are nominated than ever before. Two — Emerald Fennell ("Promising Young Woman") and Zhao — are nominated for best director for the first time. (Only five women have ever been nominated until now.) Zhao, the clear front-runner, is poised to be only the second woman to ever win the award, and the first woman of color.

Yes, it's an odd year. But with a class of widely admired films and roundly applauded nominees from groups that have historically been marginalized by the academy, a sea change in Hollywood is set to stirringly take the stage.

"This is clearly a watershed moment for the Oscars," says Hunt. "It shows us what's possible. If you go for generations without ever acknowledging the actors, director and writers of color, it's hard to break out of that pattern. Now we're creating a whole new culture of what's Oscar worthy."

Streaming — "a different animal," says Hunt — has played a major role in making the film industry

more inclusive. But it's also disrupted and morphed movie culture. The Oscar nominees, like most films in the past year, were watched largely at home in more solitary settings than the packed theaters that usually feed the buzz of Oscar season. "Nomadland" found its largest audience, after a theatrical run, on Hulu. Netflix leads all studios with 36 nominations. Movies are more widely and more easily accessible on streaming services, but their grip on popular culture is potentially less firm amid oceans of digital content.

According to a survey last month of 1,500 active entertainment consumers by the research firm Guts + Data, not many people are familiar with this year's Oscar nominees. Some 35% hadn't heard of any of the eight films up for best picture. Warner Bros.' "Judas and the Black Messiah" ranked highest with 42% awareness but only 12% had watched it. Sunday's lead-nominee, Netflix's "Mank," was unfamiliar to 82% of respondents.

You could chalk some of that up to people having their attention elsewhere during a global pandemic. But some believe cinemas are the missing link. On Sunday, Patrick Corcoran, vice president of the National Association of Theater Owners, hopes to see a connection between movies "and the movie theaters that make the experience of seeing movies so special."

"I think people already feel that," says Corcoran. "It's why the ratings for movie awards shows have fallen so precipitously this year – movie theaters are the missing element that drives the interest in movies and lifts their presence in the culture."

Award show ratings, along with everything else on linear television, had been declining before the pandemic. Last year's Oscar broadcast, in which Bong Joon Ho's "Parasite" triumphed, had the smallest U.S. audience ever, with 23.6 million total viewers, according to Nielsen.

But ratings have nosedived this year. The Golden Globes dropped 63% to 6.9 million viewers. The Grammys fell 51% to 9.2 million. The Oscars are sure to sink to their lowest audience ever. Less clear is if that's part of a downward trend — or another asterisk.

"I don't worry about it," says Soderbergh, who says he's focused on putting on the best show possible. "The larger issue of whether this is a secular shift or a cyclical shift, we don't know. It's still too early to tell. But it doesn't really meet my metric for tragedy or outrage."

Navalny hails rallies; doctors urge him to end hunger strike

By DARIA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny said in an emotional message from behind bars Thursday that he felt "pride and hope" after learning from his lawyer about the mass protests demanding his freedom that swept across Russia the previous night.

Meanwhile, Navalny's doctors urged him to "immediately" end a prison hunger strike now in its fourth week "to save his life and health." And a top aide said Wednesday night's protests seemed to have brought a compromise from Russian authorities on getting Navalny the medical help he had demanded when launching the hunger strike.

In an Instagram post Thursday, Navalny called people who turned out to protest in his support "the salvation of Russia."

The 44-year-old who is President Vladimir Putin's most well-known critic said he hadn't known "what was really happening" outside the prison because he only has access to one TV channel, but his lawyer visited him Thursday and brought him up to speed. "And, I will sincerely say, two feelings are raging inside me: pride and hope."

"People are marching in the street. It means they know and understand everything," said Navalny. "They won't give up their future, the future of their children, their country. Yes, it will be difficult and dark for some time. But those pulling Russia back historically are doomed. There are more of us in any case."

Navalny was arrested in January upon his return from Germany, where he had spent five months recovering from a nerve agent poisoning he blames on the Kremlin — accusations that Russian officials reject.

Soon after, a court found that the politician's stay in Germany violated the terms of his suspended sentence for a 2014 embezzlement conviction and ordered him to serve 2 1/2 years in prison.

The mass street protests in support of Navalny — which authorities had declared unlawful — swept dozens of cities and smaller towns across Russia. The largest crowds were seen in Moscow, where thousands marched down the city center amid a heavy police presence.

Yet unlike on past occasions, officers in riot gear didn't interfere with the rally in the Russian capital, allowing crowds to swarm streets and squares for hours. According to OVD-Info, a rights group that monitors political arrests, police detained only 31 people in Moscow, which usually accounts for the vast majority of arrests across the country.

But overall, OVD-Info tallied more than 1,900 arrests Wednesday night, with more than 800 in St. Petersburg. While some violent detentions, with police using stun guns, were reported in St. Petersburg, in many cities the demonstrations went on without clashes with law enforcement.

Leonid Volkov, Navalny's top strategist and chief of staff, noted in the YouTube live stream that the number of arrests was significantly lower than during the nationwide protests in January after Navalny was arrested.

Independent political analyst Abbas Gallyamov believes the turnout at Wednesday's protests indicates that the harsh Russian crackdown on previous demonstrations hasn't scared off Navalny's supporters.

Hundreds were jailed after the January demonstrations and Navalny allies were slapped with criminal charges for allegedly violating coronavirus restrictions.

Navalny's aides and associates in different Russian regions, in the meantime, were targeted with detentions and raids both before and after Wednesday's protests. Many were jailed, and one was reportedly brutally beaten by police who came to search his apartment.

Gallyamov said this indicated a change of tactics for the authorities, from sweeping crackdowns on all demonstrators to targeting suspected protest leaders.

Last week, Russian authorities took the pressure on Navalny's allies and supporters to a new level, with the Moscow prosecutor's office petitioning a court to label as his Foundation for Fighting Corruption and his network of regional offices as extremist groups. Human rights activists say such a move would paralyze their activities and expose their members and donors to prison sentences of up to 10 years.

Navalny began the hunger strike to protest prison authorities' refusal to let his doctors visit after he developed severe back pain and numbness in his legs. Officials insisted Navalny was getting all the medical help he needs. But Navalny's doctors said last week that the politician could be near death, as his test results showed sharply elevated levels of potassium, which can bring on cardiac arrest, and heightened creatinine levels that indicated impaired kidneys.

Navalny was transferred Sunday from a penal colony east of Moscow to the hospital ward of another prison in Vladimir, a city 180 kilometers (110 miles) east of the capital.

On Thursday, Navalny's personal physician Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva released a letter she signed with four other doctors, urging him to end his hunger strike.

The letter revealed that Navalny was taken to a regular hospital Tuesday in Vladimir, where he underwent tests and was examined by specialists "in accordance" with requests from his doctors. It said they were given the results of those tests through Navalny's lawyers and family on Thursday.

Navalny's doctors said they would continue to insist on access to their patient — his chief demand in launching his hunger strike — but urged him "to immediately stop the hunger strike in order to save life and health," saying that they consider being examined by "civilian," non-prison doctors and undergoing "objective tests" enough to end the strike.

Volkov in a tweet Thursday said the pressure Navalny's supporters put on the authorities, first by calling a demonstration and then by making it happen, helped achieve this result.

"As soon as the protest was announced, Alexei was taken for a multidisciplinary medical exam to a civilian hospital in Vladimir, and had a large amount of tests. As soon as the protest happened, today, all of a sudden, we were given all the test results."

Restoring service central to Biden's postal board nominees

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

President Joe Biden's nominees to the governing board of the U.S. Postal Service pledged Thursday to rebuild trust with the American public through prompt deliveries, as they outlined a vison for the agency in their first formal statements to lawmakers.

The nominees — Ron Stroman, a former deputy postmaster general; Amber McReynolds, who leads the nonprofit National Vote at Home Institute; and Anton Hajjar, the former general counsel of the American Postal Workers Union — made the remarks during their confirmation hearing before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee. The panel did not immediately vote on the nominations.

The hearing marked the first step in a process that could reshape the board as Postmaster General Louis DeJoy pursues a controversial overhaul of mail operations following outrage last year over delivery slowdowns. If approved by the committee then the full Senate, the nominees would give Democrats and Democratic appointees a majority on the board.

The hearing was relatively tame compared to the combative spats that have characterized DeJoy's appearances on Capitol Hill since he took over the agency last year and since weathered several calls to step down. Under questioning, all three nominees said they have not faced any outside pressure to oust DeJoy, a major GOP donor, and instead focused on their plans to improve service and agency infrastructure.

"There is an enormous reservoir of goodwill among the people for the Postal Service. That has to be preserved, it cannot be squandered, it's the strength of the Postal Service," said Hajjar. "Service has to be job one."

The nominations came after DeJoy and the board Chairman Ron Bloom, a Democrat, debuted a sweeping, 10-year strategic plan meant to stem a projected $160 billion loss at the agency over the next decade.

Among other things, the plan would relax the current first-class letter delivery standard of one-to-three-days to a one-to-five-day benchmark for mail going to the farthest reaches of the postal network. Officials have said 70% of mail would still be delivered within a three day standard. The plan also includes a proposal to consolidate underused post offices, hints at a potential postage rate increase as well as investments in a new fleet of delivery vehicles.

The agency is seeking advisory opinions from the independent Postal Regulatory Commission on potential changes to delivery standards as well as other initiatives in the plan.

Democrats have had DeJoy in their crosshairs since he took over the Postal Service, and have ramped up their criticism after he detailed his long-term strategy for the agency.

A wealthy logistics executive, DeJoy was accused of trying to sabotage the agency when he implemented a series of policy changes that slowed mail deliveries before the 2020 Election. He has strongly disputed that claim though he eventually suspended some of his initiatives following intense public pushback and a raft of legal challenges. Despite the concerns, more than 99% of ballots were delivered to election officials within five days during the general election, according to the Postal Service.

DeJoy was again drawn into the spotlight during the holiday season as delivery times plummeted across the nation, renewing calls for him to step down. Service has shown signs of rebounding since the holiday dip, with national on-time rates improving to 87% in the beginning of April, according to postal delivery data.

During the hearing, the nominees stressed the need to establish a clear plan to improve delivery service as lawmakers pressed them on delays.

"The universal service obligation of the Postal Service requires delivering prompt, reliable and efficient service to all Americans, all over the country," said Stroman. "And it starts, it seems to me, with having a plan to ensure that you have great service."

EPL looks to deploy moves to stop future Super League threat

By ROB HARRIS AP Global Soccer Writer

LONDON (AP) — Having rapidly mobilized to thwart rebel clubs from joining a breakaway European competition, the Premier League is taking steps to prevent the so-called "Big Six" from attempting some-

thing similar in the future.

England's biggest clubs have often used threats of joining a Super League as a power play in the past but now find themselves badly weakened after such a venture collapsed within 48 hours of being launched amid a torrent of outrage from fans, players, government and even royalty.

Now the Premier League is working to neuter those clubs further with punishments and measures to stop them playing the same bargaining chip again, a person with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press.

The league is considering sanctions aimed at the club officials who plotted to join the breakaway venture, rather than punishing the teams themselves, the person said. They spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations within the Premier League.

Varying degrees of public apologies have come from Arsenal, Liverpool, Manchester United, Manchester City and Tottenham, although not Chelsea, since quitting the 12-team Super League project on Tuesday night in the face of a growing public backlash.

But that won't stop the Premier League trying to remove club executives from key committees like the one assessing the sale of television rights — which gave them access to commercially valuable insight as they schemed to create a new competition with Spanish and Italian clubs away from the UEFA Champions League structure.

A governance review by the Premier League will also explore measures to leave clubs exposed legally if they go against the collective by trying to revive a Super League — with Juventus chairman Andrea Agenlli and Real Madrid President Florentino Perez still clinging on to the prospect.

The big clubs previously threatened a Super League in 2016 and leveraged that to secure four automatic Champions League qualification places for England, Spain, Italy and Germany each year.

Agnelli also tried to turn the Champions League into a largely closed competition in 2019 with up to 24 locked-in places before smaller clubs and European domestic leagues marshaled opposition.

Agnelli served as head of the European Club Association until Sunday night, when he resigned in connection to the Super League plans being announced. Two days earlier, he had promised UEFA President Aleksander Ceferin that he and the other elite clubs were backing UEFA's plans for a reformatted Champions League.

When their true intentions emerged, Premier League chief executive Richard Masters rallied the other 14 Premier League clubs, the Football Association and British government to repel the Big Six who had spent years throwing its weight around the English game.

The Super League rebels went ahead with their announcement despite being publicly warned after a leak on Sunday afternoon that they would be prevented from playing in domestic competitions if they formed a European competition they didn't have to qualify for each season.

The Premier League is looking at tightening the regulations to make it easier to expel any club that tried to pursue a breakaway in future — especially with Real Madrid and Barcelona not giving up on the idea.

Italy's Serie A and Spain's La Liga, meanwhile, seem to be taking it easier on their clubs.

The Italian soccer federation said Wednesday it will not punish Juventus, Inter Milan and AC Milan for their involvement in the failed breakaway attempt.

"You can't punish an idea that wasn't carried out," FIGC president Gabriele Gravina said.

La Liga President Javier Tebas hinted that Barcelona and Real Madrid won't face any sanctions either, but said stricter rules are intended to puncture hopes of a breakaway.

"The most important thing is these clubs have been sanctioned by their own fans," Tebas said in Madrid on Thursday. "Rather than sanctions we are looking at protective measures so that this doesn't happen again. They haven't abandoned LaLiga. They abandoned the idea of European competition."

It was the English clubs who were the first to pull out of the Super League project — with Chelsea and Manchester City withdrawing on Tuesday, followed by the other four. By then it had been publicly opposed by Prince William, who is the Football Association president, and Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who threatened to introduce laws to stop the English clubs joining a Super League.

The rapid climbdown hasn't quelled fan unrest, though.

Manchester United manager Ole Gunnar Solskjaer had to go and speak to a protest group of around 20 supporters who gained access to the team's training ground on Thursday morning demanding that the owning Glazer family sell the club.

Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta said he received a personal apology from the owning Kroenke family.

"This has given big lessons and it shows the importance of football in the world," Arteta said. "And it shows that the soul of this sport belongs to the fans."

DC statehood approved by House as Senate fight looms

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A decades-long movement to reshape the American political map took a further step Thursday as the House of Representatives approved a bill to make the nation's capital the 51st state.

Approval came by a 216-208 vote along strict party lines. Republicans oppose the idea given that the new state would be overwhelmingly Democratic — and the proposal faces a far tougher road in the Senate, where even full Democratic support isn't guaranteed.

The legislation proposes creating a 51st state with one representative and two senators, while a tiny sliver of land including the White House, the U.S. Capitol and the National Mall would remain as a federal district. Instead of the District of Columbia, the new state would be known as Washington, Douglass Commonwealth — named after famed abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who lived in Washington from 1877 until his death in 1895.

An identical statehood bill passed the House in 2020, but died in the then-Republican-controlled Senate. Now, with the 2020 elections leaving Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House, Republican senators may resort to a filibuster to stymie the statehood bill.

The Senate is split 50/50 with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tie-breaker. But it takes 60 senators to break a concerted filibuster attempt. Senate Democrats could vote to tweak the filibuster rules and slip the statehood issue through a loophole — but that would require total unity and some moderate Democrats have expressed opposition to that strategy.

Perennial swing vote and Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia had already publicly stated that he will not vote to eliminate or weaken the filibuster. Manchin is also one of a handful of Democratic Senators who has not openly supported the D.C. statehood initiative.

For now, though, Democrats and statehood advocates are celebrating their House victory.

D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser tied the statehood issue to America's ongoing reckoning over police brutality and longstanding issues of racial injustice.

"This vote comes at a critical time when Americans nationwide are eager to deliver on the promise of liberty and justice for all," Bowser said in a statement. "For centuries, an incremental approach to equality in America has delayed this promise for too many. Now is the time for bold action."

Kentucky Republican Rep. James Comer called the measure "flatly unconstitutional."

"It won't withstand judicial scrutiny, but it will cause massive confusion for years as it's reviewed by the courts," Comer said in a statement. "Democrats are pushing D.C. statehood to pack the U.S. Senate with two progressive senators so they can end the filibuster, pack the Supreme Court, enact the Green New Deal, and create the socialist utopia the Squad dreams about."

The bill received strong support from the White House, which has called Washington's current status "an affront to the democratic values on which our Nation was founded."

During Thursday floor debate, a succession of Republican representatives decried it as a cynical and unconstitutional power-grab. The country's founding fathers, "never wanted D.C. to be a state and then specifically framed the constitution to say so," said Georgia Republican Rep. Jody Hice.

But Virginia Democratic Rep. Gerald Connolly pointed out that Kentucky was once a part of Virginia, and was carved out as a state by Congress.

Connolly argued that the federal district was a theoretical concept when first conceived, not a com-

munity with a higher population than two U.S. states.

"When the constitution was written, this place didn't exist," he said. "When people say this is not about race and partisanship, you can be sure it's about race and partisanship."

During a March hearing by the House oversight committee, GOP representatives claimed D.C. was unfit for statehood and proposed a variety of alternatives that included absolving Washingtonians from federal taxes and "retroceding" most of D.C. back into Maryland.

Opponents also contend that Congress lacks the authority to change D.C.'s status, despite every state other than the original 13 being admitted to the union via congressional vote.

Zack Smith, a legal fellow at the Heritage Institute, a conservative think tank, said the measure becoming law would unleash a wave of lawsuits.

"You're basically looking at a lot of litigation," Smith told The Associated Press. "Every legislative act of this new state would be called into question. ... Things would be in a state of flux for years."

D.C. has long chafed under its relationship with Congress, which has the power to essentially veto or alter any local laws. Its population is larger than that of Wyoming or Vermont and its estimated 712,000 residents pay federal taxes, vote for president and serve in the armed forces, but they have no voting representation in Congress.

The limitations of D.C.'s reality were put in stark relief last summer during a series of protests over the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis and against general police brutality. After a night of widespread vandalism, President Donald Trump usurped D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser's authority and called in a massive multiagency federal force to downtown. The law enforcement forces cleared peaceful protesters from a public street so Trump could pose for a photo outside a church.

Ravi Perry, head of Howard University's political science department, said the events of last summer were a crucial turning point for the perception of the D.C. statehood push, intertwining the issue with the country's ascendant racial justice movement. As recently as 2018, nationwide polls had shown the majority of Americans to be lukewarm at best on the topic, but those poll numbers changed dramatically in the past two years, he said.

"People have started to see D.C. statehood as the racial justice issue that it is," said Perry, who is also on the board of the pro-statehood group D.C. Vote. "There's been a major sea change, and a lot of that has been motivated by Trumpism."

Israel says Syrian missile was not aimed at nuclear reactor

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Israeli military said Thursday that a Syrian missile that reached deep into Israeli territory and set off air raid sirens near the country's top-secret nuclear reactor was the result of a misfire and not a deliberate attack.

The missile landed in southern Israel early Thursday, prompting Israel to respond with airstrikes on the missile launcher and other targets in Syria.

The army's chief spokesman, Brig. Gen. Hidai Zilberman, was quoted as telling military correspondents that the Israeli air force was already operating in Syrian airspace when the anti-aircraft missile was fired. He said the projectile, identified as a Russian-made SA-5 missile, missed its target and exploded in southern Israel.

The missile, also known as an S200, set off air raid sirens in a village near Dimona, the southern desert town where Israel's nuclear reactor is located, and some 300 kilometers (200 miles) south of Damascus.

"There was no intention of hitting the nuclear reactor in Dimona," Zilberman was quoted as saying.

An Israeli missile-defense system tried but failed to intercept the incoming missile. Defense Minister Benny Gantz said the incident was under investigation.

In Washington, Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, gave a similar assessment to the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday.

"I think it reflects, actually, incompetence in Syrian air defense, where they were responding to Israeli

strikes on targets in Syria. The fired their missiles, the missiles went ballistic, literally, and followed a parabolic trajectory to Israel," he said. "I do not believe it was an intentional attack, but just rather a lack of capability on the part of the Syrian air defenders."

In recent years, Israel has repeatedly launched air strikes at Syria, including at military targets linked to foes Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah militia, both allies of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Such strikes routinely draw Syrian anti-aircraft fire. Thursday's exchange was unusual because the Syrian projectile landed deep inside Israel.

Syria's state news agency SANA said the exchange began with an Israeli air strike on Dumeir, a suburb of the capital, Damascus. Dumeir is believed to house Syrian army installations and batteries as well as bases and weapons depots belonging to Iran-backed militias. SANA said four soldiers were wounded.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitoring group based in Britain that tracks Syria's civil war, said the Israeli strikes hit an air defense base belonging to the Syrian military and destroyed air defense batteries in the area. It said the Syrian military fired surface-to-air missiles in response.

Syrian media made no mention of an anti-aircraft missile landing deep inside Israel.

The air raid sirens were sounded in Abu Krinat, a village near Dimona. Explosions heard across Israel might have been the air-defense systems.

Apparent missile fragments were found in a swimming pool in Ashalim, a community approximately 20 miles (32 kilometers) southwest of Dimona. Israeli troops arrived at the scene and collected the fragments. There were no reports of damage or injuries.

The exchange between Israel and Syria comes against the backdrop of growing tensions between Israel and Iran, which maintains troops and proxies in Syria. Iran has accused Israel of a series of attacks on its nuclear facilities, including sabotage at its Natanz nuclear facility on April 11, and vowed revenge.

The exchange of fire also threatened to complicate U.S.-led attempts to revive the international nuclear deal with Iran, to which Israel is deeply opposed.

How long does protection from COVID-19 vaccines last?

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — How long does protection from COVID-19 vaccines last?

Experts don't know yet because they're still studying vaccinated people to see when protection might wear off. How well the vaccines work against emerging variants will also determine if, when and how often additional shots might be needed.

"We only have information for as long as the vaccines have been studied," said Deborah Fuller, a vaccine researcher at the University of Washington. "We have to study the vaccinated population and start to see, at what point do people become vulnerable again to the virus?"

So far, Pfizer's ongoing trial indicates the company's two-dose vaccine remains highly effective for at least six months, and likely longer. People who got Moderna's vaccine also still had notable levels of virus-fighting antibodies six months after the second required shot.

Antibodies also don't tell the whole story. To fight off intruders like viruses, our immune systems also have another line of defense called B and T cells, some of which can hang around long after antibody levels dwindle. If they encounter the same virus in the future, those battle-tested cells could potentially spring into action more quickly.

Even if they don't prevent illness entirely, they could help blunt its severity. But exactly what role such "memory" cells might play with the coronavirus -- and for how long -- isn't yet known.

While the current COVID-19 vaccines will likely last for at least about a year, they probably won't offer lifelong protection, as with measles shots, said Dr. Kathleen Neuzil, a vaccine expert at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

"It's going to be somewhere in the middle of that very wide range," she said.

Variants are another reason we might need an additional shot.

The current vaccines are designed to work against a particular spike protein on the coronavirus, said Mehul Suthar of the Emory Vaccine Center. If the virus mutates enough over time, vaccines might need to be updated to boost their effectiveness.

So far, the vaccines appear protective against the notable variants that have emerged, though somewhat less so on the one first detected in South Africa.

If it turns out we need another shot, a single dose could extend protection of the current shots or contain vaccination for one or more variants.

The need for follow-up shots will also depend partly on the success of the vaccination push globally, and tamping down transmission of the virus and emerging variants.

UK lawmakers pass motion saying China committing genocide

LONDON (AP) — British lawmakers on Thursday approved a parliamentary motion declaring that China's policies against its Uyghur minority population in the far western Xinjiang region amounted to genocide and crimes against humanity.

The motion is non-binding and does not compel the British government to act. But it is another move signalling the growing outcry among U.K. politicians over alleged human rights abuses in China.

The motion was moved by Conservative lawmaker Nus Ghani, one of five British lawmakers recently sanctioned by China for criticizing its treatment of the Uyghurs.

"There is a misunderstanding that genocide is just one act — mass killing. That is false," she said, adding that all the criteria of genocide — an intention to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group — "are evidenced as taking place in Xinjiang."

The U.S. government and the parliaments of Belgium, the Netherlands and Canada have accused Beijing of genocide, although Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been reluctant to use the term.

More than 1 million people have been confined to camps in Xinjiang, according to foreign governments and researchers. Authorities there are accused of imposing forced labor, systematic forced birth control and torture in mass internment camps.

The Chinese government has strongly rejected complaints of abuses and says the camps are for job training to support economic development and combat Islamic radicalism. The government is pressing foreign clothing and shoe brands to reverse decisions to stop using cotton from Xinjiang due to reports of possible forced labor there.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has faced increasing pressure from within his own Conservative government to take a tougher stance against Beijing over human rights abuses.

British parliamentarians have repeatedly tried to push through a bill aiming to give the High Court the right to decide whether a country is committing genocide — and ultimately block U.K. trade deals with China — but the moves were defeated by the government. Johnson has warned against a "Cold War mentality" towards China and maintained it's important to nurture partnerships with Beijing.

Last month Britain, alongside the European Union, Canada and the United States launched coordinated sanctions against a handful of officials in China over the Uyghur issue, provoking swift retaliation from Beijing.

British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said the measures were part of "intensive diplomacy" to force action amid mounting evidence about serious rights abuses against the Uyghur Muslim people.

Russia orders troop pullback but keeps weapons near Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's defense minister on Thursday ordered troops back to their permanent bases following massive drills amid tensions with Ukraine, but said they should leave their weapons behind in western Russia for another exercise later this year.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the Russian pullback along their border.

After watching the drills, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared the maneuvers in Crimea and wide swathes of western Russia over and ordered the military to pull the troops that took part in them back to their permanent bases.

"I consider the goals of the snap check of readiness fulfilled," Shoigu said. "The troops have shown their capability to defend the country and I decided to complete the drills in the South and Western military districts."

Shoigu said the troops should return to their bases by May 1, but he ordered their heavy weapons kept in western Russia for another massive military exercise. The weapons were remaining at the Pogonovo firing range in the southwestern Voronezh region 160 kilometers (100 miles) east of the border with Ukraine.

The Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that came amid increasing violations of a cease-fire in war-torn eastern Ukraine raised concerns in the West, which urged the Kremlin to pull its forces back.

A Ukrainian soldier was killed Thursday by separatist fire in the east, bringing the number of Ukrainian troops killed this year to 32.

The U.S. and NATO have said the Russian buildup near Ukraine was the largest since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and threw its support behind separatists in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland of Donbas.

Ukraine's president applauded the Russian troops' pullback.

"The reduction of troops on our border proportionally reduces tension," Zelenskyy said on Twitter. He noted that Ukraine remains vigilant but "welcomes any steps to decrease the military presence and de-escalate the situation in Donbas."

Earlier this week, Zelenskyy offered to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin in Donbas to defuse tensions.

Putin responded in televised remarks Thursday, saying if the Ukrainian leadership wants to settle the conflict in Donbas, it should first engage in talks with separatist leaders there and only after that discuss it with Russia. If Zelenskyy wants to discuss normalizing ties with Russia, he's welcome to come to Moscow, the Russian leader said.

The Russian military hasn't reported the number of additional troops that had been moved to Crimea and parts of southwestern Russia near Ukraine, and it wasn't immediately clear from Shoigu's statement if all of them will now be pulled back.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the maneuvers in Crimea involved more than 60 ships, over 10,000 troops, around 200 aircraft and about 1,200 military vehicles.

The exercise featured the landing of more than 2,000 paratroopers and 60 military vehicles on Thursday. Fighter jets covered the airborne operation.

Shoigu flew in a helicopter over the Opuk firing range in Crimea to oversee the exercise. He later declared the drills over, but ordered the military to stand ready to respond to any "adverse developments" during NATO's Defender Europe 2021 exercise. The NATO drills began in March and are to last until June.

"NATO has significantly intensified its military activities in the region," Shoigu said. "Intelligence gathering has increased and the intensity and scope of operational training has been growing. One of the alliance's main coalition groups is being deployed in the Black Sea region."

Russia long has bristled at the deployment of NATO's forces near its borders and stepped up its drills as relations with the West have sunk to post-Cold War lows over the annexation of Crimea, Russian meddling in elections, hacking attacks and other issues.

Last week, Russia has announced that it would close broad areas of the Black Sea near Crimea to foreign navy ships and state vessels until November, a move that drew Ukrainian protests and raised Western concerns. Russia also announced restrictions on flights near Crimea this week.

Moscow has rejected Ukrainian and Western concerns about the troop buildup, arguing that it's free to deploy its forces anywhere on Russian territory. But at the same time, the Kremlin sternly warned Ukrainian authorities against trying to use force to retake control of the rebel east, where seven years of fighting with Russia-backed separatists have killed more than 14,000 people. The Kremlin says Russia

could be forced to intervene in eastern Ukraine to protect civilians in the region.

Amid the tensions, Ukraine's president on Wednesday signed a law allowing the call-up of reservists for military service without announcing a mobilization.

Prince fans pay respects at Paisley Park 5 years after death

CHANHASSEN, Minn. (AP) — Paisley Park, where Prince lived and worked, welcomed back select fans Wednesday to mark the fifth anniversary of his death from inside his creative sanctuary. Some wore custom Prince clothes and shoes and left flowers and other mementos as tributes to the late superstar.

The sprawling studio's atrium opened to 1,400 people who were able to snag free reservations, while other fans paid their respects in front of a statue erected outside the front doors in the shape of his famous purple Love Symbol.

A custom-made ceramic urn shaped like Paisley Park with Prince's symbol on top was originally placed in the middle of the atrium when the pop legend's 65,000-square-foot studio in suburban Minneapolis first opened as a museum in October 2016. At the request of Prince's family, the ashes were moved to a less prominent spot in the atrium and eventually removed entirely from public view, disappointing the superstar's legions of fans.

Wednesday was the first time the urn has returned to the atrium for display to the public.

"He reached me through his music and through his words and everything. My daughters, I raised them with the love of Prince," said Raquel Ponce of Mason City, Iowa. She noted while fighting back tears that she tried to give birth to one of her daughters on the singer's birthday, but missed that mark by a day.

Prince died April 21, 2016, of an accidental fentanyl overdose at age 57, shocking fans and setting off waves of grief around the world. Since then, Paisley Park was turned into a museum and paid tours were created. Tours were shut down for the day to mark the fifth anniversary.

"We celebrate his life and legacy every day at Paisley Park, a place that Prince wanted to share with the world," Paisley Park Executive Director Alan Seiffert said in a statement. "So, on this day especially, we acknowledge the incredible force and inspiration Prince is in people's lives and open up our doors for them to pay their respects."

Paisley Park also posted an online memorial at www.Paisleypark.com.

Pepe Willie, Prince's uncle and an early music mentor, still tears up when he thinks of the lost star.

"It was devastating," he recently told The Associated Press of the moment he learned the news. "I'm standing in the living room with my underwear on watching the TV. I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't do anything. I was just in so much shock. It was unbelievable."

Known as the "godfather of the Minneapolis sound," he met Prince as a young musical prodigy after marrying his aunt. The pair developed a bond through music, with Prince soaking up his knowledge about the music business and playing for Willie in a recording studio.

"I cried for him so hard," Willie said. "I didn't even cry at my father's funeral."

Czechs expel more Russians in dispute over 2014 depot blast

By KAREL JANICEK Associated Press

PRAGUE (AP) — The Czech Republic on Thursday ordered 63 more Russian diplomats to leave the country, further escalating a dispute between the two nations over the alleged involvement of Russian spies in a massive ammunition depot explosion in 2014.

Foreign Minister Jakub Kulhanek said Russia won't be allowed to have more diplomats in Prague than the Czechs currently have at their embassy in Moscow. All others have to leave by the end of May, he said.

The Czech secret services have repeatedly warned that Moscow had a disproportionately high number of diplomats at the embassy in the European Union nation, using it as a base for undercover spies.

"I don't want to escalate anything," Kulhanek said. "It's not a role for the foreign minister. But the Czech Republic is a self-confident country and will act accordingly."

He said the Czechs had to respond to the activities of Russian agents on Czech territory. Last weekend,

the Czech government expelled 18 Russian diplomats it identified as spies from the GRU and the SVR, Russia's military and foreign intelligence services. In response, Russia expelled 20 Czech diplomats.

"It's the Russian side that have paralyzed the situation, not the Czech side," Kulhanek said, adding Prague was ready to discuss with Moscow how to set the number of employees at their diplomatic missions "to enable their effective functioning."

Moscow responded immediately.

"Prague has come on a path of destroying relations. We will respond quickly," Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said. "They have gotten stuck in unbridled Russophobia."

Zakharova later said the Foreign Ministry summoned the Czech ambassador to denounce Prague for an "escalation of an anti-Russian campaign under the falsified pretext." She underlined that "the language of ultimatums is unacceptable."

"In response to Prague's hostile actions, we demanded to reduce the personnel of the Czech Embassy in Moscow, taking into account a significant disparity in the category of local hires," she said.

Moscow does not employ Czechs at its Prague embassy.

She added "the ambassador was told that we reserve the right for other moves in case of further escalation."

The Czech government protested what it called Russia's "inappropriate reaction," saying the move had paralyzed the Czech Embassy in Moscow.

Czech leaders said Saturday they have evidence provided by the intelligence and security services that points to the participation of two agents from Russia's elite GRU Unit 29155 in the 2014 depot blast that killed two people. Russia denied that.

The same two Russians were charged by British authorities in absentia in 2018 with trying to kill former Russian spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter with the Soviet-era nerve agent Novichok in the English city of Salisbury.

Kulhanek and Michal Koudelka, the head of the Czech counterintelligence service known as BIS, briefed NATO allies on the situation Thursday.

"Allies express deep concern over the destabilizing actions that Russia continues to carry out across the Euro-Atlantic area, including on alliance territory, and stand in full solidarity with the Czech Republic," they said in a statement.

Neighboring Slovakia on Thursday became the first NATO ally to expel Russian diplomats as a sign of solidarity with the Czechs. Prime Minister Eduard Heger said three diplomats were given seven days to leave. Their expulsion was based on information from the country's intelligence services.

"We are deeply disappointed by the unfriendly actions of Bratislava, which decided to show pseudo-solidarity with Prague on a trumped-up case," said Zakharova, the Russian spokeswoman.

US troops in Afghanistan begin packing gear in pullout prep

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The U.S. military has begun shipping equipment and winding down contracts with local service providers ahead of the May 1 start of the final phase of its military pullout from Afghanistan, a U.S. Defense Department official said Thursday.

The pullout under U.S. President Joe Biden marks the end of America's longest war after a 20-year military engagement. Currently, some 2,500 U.S. soldiers and about 7,000 allied forces are still in Afghanistan.

In February last year, the U.S. military began closing its smaller bases. In mid-April, the Biden administration announced that the final phase of the withdrawal would begin May 1 and be completed before Sept. 11.

Since then, the military has been shipping equipment and winding down local contracts for services such as trash pickup and maintenance work, the U.S. official told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity in line with briefing regulations.

While preparations are under way, troops likely won't begin to depart for a few weeks, he said, adding

that "we won't see a coming down of the (troop) numbers" until remaining bases close.

There have been indications that the pullout could be completed well before Sept. 11, which marks the 20th anniversary of the al-Qaida terror attack on the U.S. and the trigger for the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan.

On Wednesday, Germany's Defense Ministry said discussions are underway among military planners with the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Kabul for a possible withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan as early as July 4.

In the short term, America will likely increase its troop presence in Afghanistan, the Pentagon said last Friday. The additional troops would be in Afghanistan over the coming weeks and months to help with what the herculean task of wrapping up 20 years of war.

While much of the equipment headed back to the U.S. will be shipped by air, the military will also use land routes through Pakistan and north through Central Asia, the Defense Department official said.

The U.S. equipment that is neither shipped back to America nor given to the Afghan National Security forces will be sold to contractors, who will, in turn, sell it in the local markets.

"You'll most likely start seeing it eventually showing up in bazaars as scrap," said the official.

The Taliban, meanwhile, were non-committal when asked by the AP whether the insurgents would attack departing U.S. and NATO troops. "It's too early for these issues, nothing can be said about the future," said Taliban spokesman Mohammad Naeem.

In a deal the Taliban signed last year with former President Donald Trump, the final U.S. withdrawal deadline was set as May 1. Under the agreement, the Taliban promised not to attack U.S. and NATO troops but they also later promised "consequences" if Washington defied the May 1 deadline.

J&J vaccine 'pause' latest messaging challenge for officials

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Confronted with rare cases of blood clots potentially linked to Johnson & Johnson's COVID-19 vaccine, U.S. health officials faced a delicate task: how to suspend distribution of the shots without setting off alarm about their safety.

It was the just the latest challenge in crisis messaging for officials since the start of the pandemic more than a year ago. The behavior of the new virus, the benefits of masks and the need for school and business closings have all been marked by public confusion, changing guidance and squabbling.

With the J&J shots, the recommended "pause" announced last week was a precautionary measure as government advisers investigated the unusual clots and alerted doctors about how to treat them. But the news was bound to inflame fears.

"It's going to be painful either way. It's less painful if you address it early on," said Dr. Wilbur Chen, a member of the government's advisory committee on vaccines, which is expected to meet on Friday and could make a recommendation soon after on whether and how to resume use of the J&J vaccine.

Whether the pause seriously undermines public confidence in the J&J shot — or the other vaccines — remains to be seen.

Even before the coronavirus surfaced, training guides by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted the difficulty of communicating in a public health crisis, when fear and uncertainty are running high. Yet how leaders communicate can be key to winning public cooperation. Or undermining it.

By promptly notifying the public that they were investigating clots, officials were following a fundamental rule in the crisis playbook: transparency, even when the answers aren't yet clear.

"We want people to know what we know," U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy explained at a media briefing soon after the announcement on the J&J vaccine.

Trying to appear confident when uncertain -- which leaders are often taught to do -- can backfire in a public health crisis, a CDC guide notes. In addition to building trust, being up front about the unknowns leaves room for officials to change their guidance as new information emerges.

"COVID is a new disease and we learn new things, and that is hard," said Alice Payne Merritt, an expert

in public health communications at Johns Hopkins University. "What we knew in April 2020 is different than what we know in April 2021."

Quickly stating what isn't yet known and why has another benefit: blunting the potential for misinformation to spread. Otherwise, people may start filling in the blanks themselves, the CDC guide says.

"Silence can be harmful," Payne Merritt agreed.

Still, leaders might be reluctant to acknowledge uncertainty, especially since people crave clear answers and reassurance in stressful and unfamiliar situations.

Another problem: Anxiety can make it difficult for people to process new information, or as Payne Merritt put it, "Fear can override rational thinking. That's just human nature."

With the J&J shots, for example, helping people understand the magnitude of any risk has been a challenge. So far, officials said there have been six cases of the unusual blood clots out of about 7 million J&J shots given in the U.S.

People regularly take bigger risks just getting into a car.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, noted the difficulty of putting the odds of severe side effects in proper perspective for the public.

"They hear about a risk, and they don't know what it is relative to other things that they do," he said in an NBC interview.

Confusion and anger around public messaging haven't been limited to the J&J shots.

In September, President Donald Trump came under fire when it was revealed he sought to " play it down " to avoid a panic about the virus. Last April, U.S. officials sparked criticism when they advised people to wear face coverings, after earlier saying masks weren't needed and should be reserved for health workers.

And for months, officials have been trying to ease worries about the COVID-19 vaccines overall, in part by enlisting local leaders.

In the early days of the rollout, rare cases of severe allergic reactions fueled worries about the vaccines. Chen, the government adviser, said officials built trust by addressing the problem head-on. Now, he said, people have moved past it.

"Can you imagine if we had basically tried to cover it up, tried to minimize it?" said Chen, a vaccine expert at the University of Maryland, adding that U.S. vaccination rates probably wouldn't be where they are today.

As of this week, more than half of American adults have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Scientists get creative to carry on research during pandemic

By KATHIA MARTÍNEZ Associated Press

SAN LORENZO, Panama (AP) — Biologist Claudio Monteza pushed through thick vegetation to install a camera near a Panamanian highway in a dense tropical rainforest. Securing the device to a tree just off the forest floor, he checked its field of vision.

The camera and others were set up to provide insights into which animals steer clear of highways and which ones are more apt to check them out. The findings could someday help transportation officials better protect wildlife in one of the world's most biologically diverse environments.

But the highway study "was not the initial plan," said Monteza, whose career was upended last year when COVID-19 stranded him in his native Panama and suspended his research. Because of the pandemic, many scientists "have had to innovate and look for alternatives."

The coronavirus abruptly halted research by many Latin American scientists, interrupting field work, sample collection and laboratory experiments. Some of them could focus on writing scholarly articles based on previous research, but others had to get creative to avoid losing a year of their careers.

Monteza had just finished a master's degree in the United States when he stopped in Panama for a few days before a planned flight to Germany to begin his doctoral studies. Then the world began shutting down. He started taking doctoral classes virtually.

After governments adopted strict quarantine measures, Monteza concluded that one way to get permis-

sion for research was to look at highways because they could be studied without significant travel.

Other scientists hauled samples of marine sediment and lab equipment or even entire ant colonies into their homes. One researcher, barred from capturing bats to bring to her laboratory, mounted cameras that allowed her to spy on their sexual habits in the wild.

On a recent day, after installing one camera, Monteza pushed about 50 yards deeper into the forest. Field biologist Pedro Castillo helped him install another camera just as heavy raindrops began to fall. In minutes, both men were soaked, but the opportunity to get into the field was a relief.

Monteza believes the highway research could help push authorities to create wildlife crossings for armadillos, the rodents known as lowland pacas and agoutis, and other animals.

During the first half of 2020, when Panama was under an absolute quarantine, scientists had almost "zero mobility, said Erick Núñez, head of the Panama Environmental Ministry's biodiversity department. "There was very little research."

Later, the Health Ministry began to loosen restrictions and granted passes to some scientists who planned to work in protected areas alone or in small groups, Núñez said.

Researcher Brígida De Gracia of the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute was lucky to be able to work from home. She had collected sediment samples in 2018, 2019 and January 2020 that allowed her to continue her research during the pandemic.

But to do so, De Gracia took the samples, a stereoscope, vials, a scale and many books home from her lab in Naos, near where the Panama Canal meets the Pacific Ocean.

De Gracia studies otoliths, tiny stone-like structures in the ears of many vertebrates. In particular, she studies them in fish to see how humans have affected fish over the past several thousand years.

"You have to store them very carefully," because they're so tiny that even a light breeze can move them, said De Gracia, who analyzed and photographed the otoliths at home.

Before the coronavirus arrived, Mariana Muñoz-Romo, a post-doctoral researcher at the Smithsonian, had planned to capture a large sample of bats from different places around the Panamanian town of Gamboa, but the suspension of research activities made that impossible.

So she adjusted. Instead of catching bats to take back to a lab, Muñoz-Romo shifted to observing the bats' sex lives in their own habitat. She hopes to discover the purpose of a strong-smelling substance on the forearms of the fringe-lipped bat.

Her mentor was able to get permits to install video cameras and other devices in a bat sanctuary in Gamboa. They started recording in mid-2020 and plan to continue for several more months.

"Analyzing these recordings is fabulous because you can generate a mountain of information," said Muñoz-Romo, a Venezuelan who is a professor at the University of the Andes in Merida, Venezuela.

When the pandemic closed his laboratory in Gamboa, Dumas Gálvez moved dozens of colonies of ants to his home in Paraiso. He wanted to continue observing them as part of his research into their immune systems.

Before the pandemic, that required many hours in his lab analyzing their blood and how they responded to attacking fungi.

"I had to look for alternatives," Gálvez said. "And one of the alternatives was initially to do it in my house."

Gálvez outfitted an extra bathroom to hold up to 100 ant colonies. His largest colonies were around 200 ants, so he had an estimated 13,000 ants in his home.

He observed their lives and reactions for months, but over time they began to die. Exactly why was not clear. It was either because of the fungus or excessive heat, he said.

"The conditions in the bathroom were not optimal," he said. "It was very hot. They dried quickly."

The pandemic prevented him from going out to collect more ants, so he shifted his focus and is now studying the interaction of ants and a small predatory frog.

Panama has since eased its pandemic restrictions, and the Smithsonian is reopening its facilities there. Gálvez has been able to resume field work and supervising students.

"If not for the pandemic, I wouldn't have invested the energy in considering alternatives," he said. "I

probably would not have ever done this project."

US jobless claims fall to 547,000, another pandemic low

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans applying for unemployment aid fell last week to 547,000, the lowest point since the pandemic struck and an encouraging sign that layoffs are slowing on the strength of an improving job market.

The Labor Department said Thursday that applications declined 39,000 from a revised 586,000 a week earlier. Weekly jobless claims are down sharply from a peak of 900,000 in early January. At the same time, they're still far above the roughly 230,000 level that prevailed before the viral outbreak ripped through the economy in March of last year.

"With 135 million Americans having received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccination and the economy opening up more each day, the number of job opportunities will continue to rise," said James Knightley, chief international economist at ING, a European bank.

About 17.4 million people were continuing to collect unemployment benefits in the week that ended April 3, up from 16.9 million in the previous week. Most of the increase occurred in two states, California and Texas, which process their claims every other week. In California, recipients of a federal program for the long-term unemployed jumped nearly 50%, a sign that the state likely processed a backlog of claims that had been filed earlier.

Still, the number of ongoing recipients has declined by about 2.3 million from early March, when the figure was 19.7 million, evidence that more people are being hired. Some long-term unemployed may have also exhausted all their benefits.

The overall job market has been making steady gains. Last month, the nation's employers added 916,000 jobs, the most since August, in a sign that a sustained recovery is taking hold. The unemployment rate fell from 6.2% to 6%, well below the pandemic peak of nearly 15%.

The number of available jobs has also jumped in recent weeks, leading many employers to complain that they can't find enough workers despite still-high unemployment. Several factors may be keeping some of those out of work from searching for jobs. They include fears of contracting the virus, child care needs and the fact that a federal supplemental unemployment benefit of $300 a week, on top of state aid, means that some low-income workers can receive as much or more income from jobless benefits compared with their former job's pay.

The weekly data on applications for jobless aid is generally seen as a rough measure of layoffs because only people who have lost their jobs through no fault of their own are eligible. But during the pandemic, the numbers have become a less reliable barometer.

States have struggled to clear backlogs of unemployment applications, and suspected fraud has clouded the actual volume of job cuts. In addition, the supplemental federal jobless payment, on top of regular state unemployment aid, might have encouraged more people to apply for benefits.

For now, the economy is showing steady signs of recovering. Sales at retail stores and restaurants soared 10% in March — the biggest increase since last May. Federal stimulus checks of $1,400 have been sent to most adults. And Americans who have kept their jobs have accumulated additional savings, part of which they will likely spend now that states and cities have loosened business restrictions and the virus wanes.

Economic growth is accelerating so fast that the principal concerns surrounding the economy have shifted from a high unemployment rate and anemic spending to bottlenecks in company supply chains and the difficulty some businesses say they are having in finding enough workers.

Those issues, in turn, have fed concerns that the Federal Reserve's low-interest rate policies could fuel a spike in inflation. Last month, wholesale prices jumped 4.2% compared with a year earlier, the biggest 12-month increase in nearly a decade.

Still, consumer prices are, so far, rising at a more restrained pace. They increased 2.6% in March from a year earlier, mostly because of a jump in gas prices. Excluding the volatile food and energy categories,

core inflation rose just 1.6% in the previous 12 months.

Economists expect inflation to rise steadily in the coming months because prices fell about a year ago when the pandemic first hit and the economy largely shut down. That makes comparisons to price levels a year ago look particularly large.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell says he expects that higher inflation to prove temporary and that supply bottlenecks will eventually clear as shipping picks up and factories produce more parts.

'He was guilty.' Extra juror in favor of Chauvin conviction

By DOUG GLASS Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — An alternate juror at the trial of Derek Chauvin said she agreed with the jury's decision to convict him in George Floyd's death, saying she saw Chauvin as the leader of officers at the scene and that he brushed off warnings by bystanders that Floyd was in danger.

"I felt he was guilty," Lisa Christensen said on "CBS This Morning" in a story aired Thursday. "I didn't know if it was going to be guilty on all counts, but I would have said guilty."

Christensen was one of two alternates dismissed by Judge Peter Cahill after Monday's closing arguments. The remaining 12 jurors voted unanimously Tuesday to convict Chauvin on all counts: second-degree murder, third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter. The identities of jurors and alternates are protected under the judge's order, and Christensen is the first to publicly speak out.

Chauvin, 45, was by far the most senior officer at the scene. Prosecutors said he pinned Floyd to the pavement outside Cup Foods, where Floyd had been accused of passing a counterfeit $20 bill, for 9 minutes, 29 seconds. Three other officers, since fired, face trial in August.

"I felt like he was the leader, and the other officers were following his lead," Christensen said. "I kind of felt like he wasn't taking the warnings seriously obviously, kind of like, 'I know what I'm doing.'"

Christensen described her impressions of Chauvin.

"Every time I would look up, he was right in my vision," she said. "So we locked eyes quite a few times and I was pretty uncomfortable."

Prosecutors played a wide range of videos for the jury, including teenager Darnella Frazier's bystander video that was seen worldwide in the hours after Floyd's death. That video and the officers' body camera video captured bystanders shouting at Chauvin and the other officers to get off Floyd, warning that they were cutting off his breathing and asking them to check for a pulse.

Christensen said she felt prosecutors "made a really good, strong argument" and credited Dr. Martin Tobin, one of their medical experts, for his testimony on how Floyd's breathing was cut off by the restraint.

"Dr. Tobin was the one that really did it for me. He explained everything to me, I understood it, down to where he said, 'This was the moment where he lost his life.' Really got to me."

Christensen was critical of the defense, saying attorney Eric Nelson " overpromised in the beginning and didn't live up to what he said he was going to do."

Nelson argued that Floyd died due to his use of drugs and to heart issues. He also argued that videos were deceptive, that Chauvin's knee wasn't on Floyd's neck as long as prosecutors said and that an autopsy found no evidence of damage to his neck. And he sought to portray the concerned bystanders as a threatening crowd that distracted officers.

Nelson has not commented since the verdicts and didn't immediately respond to a message Thursday.

Christensen praised Frazier for shooting the video, saying without it she didn't think the case would have been possible.

"I just don't understand how it got from a counterfeit $20 bill to a death," she said. "It kind of shocks me."

Indonesia looking for submarine that may be too deep to help

By NINIEK KARMINI Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — Indonesian navy ships searched Thursday for a submarine that likely sank too deep to retrieve, making survival chances for the 53 people on board slim. Authorities said oxygen

in the submarine would run out by early Saturday.

The diesel-powered KRI Nanggala 402 was participating in a training exercise Wednesday when it missed a scheduled reporting call. Officials reported an oil slick and the smell of diesel fuel near the starting position of its last dive, about 96 kilometers (60 miles) north of the resort island of Bali, though there was no conclusive evidence that they were linked to the submarine.

"Hopefully we can rescue them before the oxygen has run out" at 3 a.m. on Saturday, Indonesia's navy chief of staff, Adm. Yudo Margono, told reporters.

He said rescuers found an unidentified object with high magnetism at a depth of 50 to 100 meters (165 to 330 feet) and that officials hope it's the submarine.

The navy believes the submarine sank to a depth of 600-700 meters (2,000-2,300 feet), much deeper than its estimated collapse depth.

Ahn Guk-hyeon, an official from South Korea's Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering, which refitted the vessel in 2009-2012, said the submarine would collapse if it goes deeper than around 200 meters (655 feet) because of pressure. He said his company upgraded much of the submarine's internal structures and systems but lacks recent information about the vessel.

Frank Owen, secretary of the Submarine Institute of Australia, also said the submarine could be at too great a depth for a rescue team to operate.

"Most rescue systems are really only rated to about 600 meters (1,970 feet)," he said. "They can go deeper than that because they will have a safety margin built into the design, but the pumps and other systems that are associated with that may not have the capacity to operate. So they can survive at that depth, but not necessarily operate."

Owen, a former submariner who developed an Australian submarine rescue system, said the Indonesian vessel was not fitted with a rescue seat around an escape hatch designed for underwater rescues. He said a rescue submarine would make a waterproof connection to a disabled submarine with a so-called skirt fitted over the recue seat so that the hatch can be opened without the disabled submarine filling with water.

Owen said the submarine could be recovered from 500 meters (1,640 feet) without any damage but couldn't say if it would have imploded at 700 meters (2,300 feet).

In November 2017, an Argentine submarine went missing with 44 crew members in the South Atlantic, almost a year before its wreckage was found at a depth of 800 meters (2,625 feet). In 2019, a fire broke out on one of the Russian navy's deep-sea research submersibles, killing 14 sailors.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo asked all of the country's people to pray that the submarine and crew could be found.

"Our main priority is the safety of the 53 crew members," Widodo said in a televised address. "To the families of the crew members, I can understand your feelings and we are doing our best to save all of the crew members on board."

The military said more than 20 navy ships, two submarines and five aircraft were searching the area where the submarine was last detected. A hydro-oceanographic survey ship equipped with underwater detection capabilities also was on its way to the site around the oil spills.

Margono said the oil slick may have been caused by a crack in the submarine's tank after the vessel sank.

Neighboring countries are rushing to join the complex operation.

Rescue ships from Singapore and Malaysia are expected to arrive between Saturday and Monday. The Indonesian military said Australia, the United States, Germany, France, Russia, India and Turkey have also offered assistance. South Korea said it has also offered help.

"The news of the missing submarine is deeply concerning," Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne said during a visit to New Zealand. "We will provide any assistance that we can. There's no question that submarine search and rescues are very complex."

Australian Defense Minister Peter Dutton called the incident "a terrible tragedy." He told Sydney Radio 2GB that the fact that the submarine is "in a very deep part of waters" makes it "very difficult for the recovery or for location."

"Our fervent prayers and hopes go out to the crew of KRI Nanggala, for their safety and resilience," Singapore's Defense Minister Ng Eng Hen wrote on Facebook.

Indonesia's navy said an electrical failure may have occurred during the dive, causing the submarine to lose control and become unable to undertake emergency procedures that would have allowed it to resurface. It was rehearsing for a missile-firing exercise on Thursday, which was eventually canceled.

The German-built submarine, which has been in service in Indonesia since 1981, was carrying 49 crew members, its commander and three gunners, the Indonesian Defense Ministry said. It had been maintained and overhauled in Germany, Indonesia and most recently in South Korea.

More than 60 of the Type 209 class submarines have been sold and have served in 14 navies around the world, ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems spokesperson Eugen Witte said.

Indonesia, the world's largest archipelago nation with more than 17,000 islands, has faced growing challenges to its maritime claims in recent years, including numerous incidents involving Chinese vessels near the Natuna islands.

Last year, President Widodo reaffirmed the country's sovereignty during a visit to the islands at the edge of the South China Sea, one of the busiest sea lanes where China is embroiled in territorial disputes with its smaller neighbors.

Grim list of deaths at police hands grows even after verdict

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

Just as the guilty verdict was about to be read in the trial of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, police in Ohio shot and killed a Black teenager in broad daylight during a confrontation.

The shooting of Ma'Khia Bryant, 16, who was swinging a knife during a fight with another person in Columbus, is in some ways more representative of how Black and other people of color are killed during police encounters than the death of George Floyd, pinned to the ground by Chauvin and captured on video for all the world to see.

Unlike Chauvin's case, many killings by police involve a decision to shoot in a heated moment and are notoriously difficult to prosecute even when they spark grief and outrage. Juries have tended to give officers the benefit of the doubt when they claim to have acted in a life-or-death situation.

While Tuesday's conviction was hailed as a sign of progress in the fight for equal justice, it still leaves unanswered difficult questions about law enforcement's use of force and systemic racism in policing. The verdict in the Chauvin case might not be quickly repeated, even as the list of those killed at the hands of police grows.

"This was something unique. The world saw what happened," said Salt Lake County District Attorney Sim Gill, who has examined over 100 use-of-force cases there. To have video, witnesses, forensic evidence and multiple police officers testify against one of their own is unique and "demonstrates how high the bar has to be in order to actually have that kind of accountability," he said.

Convictions like Chauvin's are extraordinarily rare. Out of the thousands of deadly police shootings in the U.S. since 2005, about 140 officers have been charged with murder or manslaughter and just seven were convicted of murder, according to data maintained by Phil Stinson, a criminologist at Bowling Green State University.

"This is a success, but there are so many more unjust murders that still need reckoning, that we still need to address," said Princess Blanding, a Virginia gubernatorial candidate whose brother was killed by a Richmond police officer. Marcus-David Peters, who was Black, was fatally shot by a Black officer during a mental health crisis after he ran naked onto an interstate highway and charged at the officer.

In Columbus, Bryant had been swinging a knife wildly at another girl or woman pinned against a car when the officer fired after shouting at the girl to get down, according to police and body camera video released within hours of the shooting. The mayor mourned the teen's death but said the officer had acted to protect someone else.

Kimberly Shepherd, who lives in the neighborhood where Bryant was killed, had been celebrating the

guilty verdict in Floyd's killing when she heard the news about the teenager.

"We were happy about the verdict. But you couldn't even enjoy that," Shepherd said. "Because as you're getting one phone call that he was guilty, I'm getting the next phone call that this is happening in my neighborhood."

In Chauvin's case, by contrast, cellphone video seen around the world showed the white officer pressing his knee to the Black man's neck for more than nine minutes as Floyd gasped for air. It sparked protests across the U.S., and Chauvin's fellow officers took the extraordinary step of testifying against him.

"As we look to future prosecution, the question is going to be: Is this perhaps the beginning of a new era, where those walls of silence are not impenetrable?" said Miriam Krinsky, a former federal prosecutor and executive director of the reform-minded group Fair and Just Prosecution. Chauvin's case could also make future juries more skeptical of police, she said.

The day after Bryant was fatally shot, at least two other people were also killed by police in the United States.

On Wednesday morning, a deputy fatally shot and killed a Black man while serving a search warrant in eastern North Carolina. Authorities wouldn't provide details of the shooting but an eyewitness said that Andrew Brown Jr. was shot while trying to drive away, and that deputies fired at him multiple times. And in the San Diego suburb of Escondido, police said an officer fatally shot a man who was apparently striking cars with a metal pole.

On Thursday, a funeral will be held for Daunte Wright, a 20-year-old Black motorist who was shot during a traffic stop this month in Brooklyn Center, Minnesota, just a few miles from the courthouse as the Chauvin trial unfolded. In Chicago last month, 13-year-old Adam Toledo was fatally shot less than a second after he tossed a gun and began raising his hands as an officer had commanded.

Kim Potter, a white police officer, has been charged with second-degree manslaughter in Wright's shooting. The former police chief said Potter mistakenly fired her handgun when she meant to use her Taser; Potter resigned from the force afterward. Wright's family has called for more serious charges, comparing her case to the murder charge brought against a Black officer who killed a white woman in nearby Minneapolis in 2017.

The Cook County state's attorney's office will decide whether to charge Eric Stillman, the white officer who shot Toledo on March 29 in Little Village, a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood of Chicago's southwest side. The boy, who was Latino, appeared to drop a handgun moments before the officer shot him. The graphic video of the boy's death sparked outrage, but some legal experts have said they don't believe Stillman could or should be charged under criteria established by a landmark 1989 Supreme Court ruling on the use of force by police.

Instead of just prosecuting officers after shootings happen, more must be done to prevent such encounters from happening in the first place, said Eugene Collins, who was a local organizer for the NAACP's Baton Rouge, Louisiana, branch when Alton Sterling, a Black man selling CDs in front of a convenience store, was shot and killed by a white police officer in July 2016. The two officers involved in the encounter weren't charged in his death.

"We're pulled over more, stopped and frisked more," said Collins, now head of the NAACP branch. "It's about putting responsibility on the policymakers."

Activists say the fight for police reform and a more just legal system is far from over.

Rachael Rollins, the first woman of color to become district attorney in Massachusetts, said it must start in part by breaking down the misconception that questioning the police or suggesting ways they can improve means "you don't back the blue."

"The police have an incredibly hard job, and believe me, I know there are violent people that harm community and police but that's not all of us. So we have to acknowledge that it's not working and we have to sit together to come up with solutions, but it's urgent," said Rollins, the district attorney for Suffolk County, which includes Boston.

"I'm afraid, I'm exhausted and I'm the chief law enforcement officer so imagine what other people feel

like," she said.

Sanctions-battered Iran, weary of pandemic, faces worst wave

By NASSER KARIMI and AYA BATRAWY Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — As Iran faces what looks like its worst wave of the coronavirus pandemic yet, Tehran commuters still pour into its subway system and buses each working day, even as images of the gasping ill are repeatedly shown on state television every night.

After facing criticism for downplaying the virus last year, Iranian authorities have put partial lockdowns and other measures back in place to try and slow the virus' spread.

But in this nation of 84 million people, which faces crushing U.S. sanctions, many struggle to earn enough to feed their families. Economic pressure, coupled with the growing uncertainty over when vaccines will be widely available in the Islamic Republic, have many simply giving up on social distancing, considering it an unaffordable luxury. That has public health officials worried the worst of the pandemic still may be yet to come.

"I cannot stop working," said Mostafa Shahni, a worried 34-year-old construction worker in Tehran. "If I do, I can't bring home bread for my wife and two kids."

Iran is now reporting its highest-ever new coronavirus case numbers — more than 25,000 a day. Its daily death toll has surged to around 400, still below the grim record of 486 it reached in November.

During the peak of Iran's last surge, around 20,000 coronavirus patients were hospitalized across the country. Today, that figure has topped 40,000. The health ministry warns the number will climb to 60,000 in the coming weeks. Iran remains among the hardest-hit countries in the world and the worst-hit in the Middle East.

Across Tehran, Associated Press journalists have seen signs of the pandemic's toll.

At Tehran's Shohadaye Tajrish Hospital, orderlies pushed the bodies of two victims of the coronavirus across a parking lot to its morgue, one wrapped in white, the other in a black body bag. All of its wards on five floors of the hospital are reserved for coronavirus patients. One empty gurney held a bouquet of roses left for a recently deceased man. A heart-shaped balloon hovered over a still respirator.

At the massive Behesht-e-Zahra cemetery, already reeling from the pandemic, workers laid cinder-block rows of new graves. Mourners in black wept at a stream of funerals. Officials plan to open a new morgue at the site to handle the wave of death, much wrought by what Iranians simply call "corona."

Saeed Khal, the director of Tehran's main cemetery, said workers buried 350 bodies there on Tuesday alone — at least 150 had died of coronavirus. The cemetery had never processed that many burials in a single day, not even during Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s that saw 1 million people killed.

It was "one of the hardest and saddest days for my colleagues in the half-century-history of the cemetery," Khal told state TV.

So much is the influx that some burials are being delayed by a day, unusual for Iran which follows the Islamic practice of immediately burying the dead.

Outside the gates of Tehran's Imam Khomeini Hospital complex, where the capital's poor can receive free treatment at its 1,300 beds, scores crowded around one recent day as guards turned away routine cases and allowed in only test-confirmed coronavirus cases.

"They say the wards are full of corona patients," said Manijeh Taheri, who sought a regular thyroid treatment for her mother at the hospital. "I have no idea where to take her when such a huge complex has no place for my mother."

Field hospitals are being prepared in Tehran and other major cities. State TV has shown images at hospitals outside the capital with patients being treated in hallways.

"We are not going out of the red zone any time soon," Deputy Health Minister Alireza Raisi told state media.

President Hassan Rouhani blames the current surge on the fast-spreading variant of the virus first found

in Britain, which the government says arrived from neighboring Iraq. Travel between the countries has been restricted since March, though people and commerce continue to cross each day. Overall, Iran has seen 2.2 million reported cases and 67,000 deaths in total.

Lawmaker Jalil Rahimi Jahanabadi blamed government mismanagement and continued U.S. sanctions for the virus' spread.

"Sanctions, challenges and wrong decisions will continue. We do not have sufficient vaccines so protect yourself and your relatives through personal health measures," he wrote on Twitter.

As of now, Iran has administered over 500,000 vaccine doses, according to the WHO. Supplies, however, remain limited. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has banned U.S. and British-made coronavirus vaccines, saying their import is "forbidden" because he does not trust those nations. Khamenei has approved the import of vaccines from "safe" countries, such as China and Russia, and has backed national efforts to produce a homegrown vaccine with help from Cuba.

But officials keep changing when they say the wider public will be vaccinated as it remains unclear when Tehran will have a promised 60 million doses of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine.

Amir Afkhami, an associate professor at George Washington University, said that over the past year, Iran's leadership could point to superpowers like the U.S. struggling to contain the virus. With vaccines rolled out in the West and economies reopening, this could become much more difficult to do, he said.

"Ultimately Iran is not self-sufficient when it comes to COVID-19 vaccine development, and it doesn't have the (intensive care unit) beds to absorb the patients it needs to so it really needs external help," Afkhami said.

Authorities across Iran have closed mosques, restaurants and parks during Ramadan, the Islamic holy fasting month being observed by Muslims around the world. An evening curfew for private cars is in place and travel between cities is banned. Parliament has been suspended for two weeks.

But the wider fatigue from the virus has seen people ignore warnings and host fast-breaking meals known as iftars indoors. Already, authorities blamed celebrations around the Iranian New Year known as Nowruz in March for contributing to this wave.

Masoud Mardani, an infectious disease specialist on Iran's COVID-19 national task force, has demanded a public curfew. But none so far has come.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, April 23, the 113th day of 2021. There are 252 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On April 23, 1969, Sirhan Sirhan was sentenced to death for assassinating New York Sen. Robert F. Kennedy. (The sentence was later reduced to life imprisonment.)

On this date:

In 1616 (Old Style calendar), English poet and dramatist William Shakespeare died in Stratford-upon-Avon on what has traditionally been regarded as the 52nd anniversary of his birth in 1564.

In 1789, President-elect George Washington and his wife, Martha, moved into the first executive mansion, the Franklin House, in New York.

In 1898, Spain declared war on the United States, which responded in kind two days later.

In 1940, about 200 people died in the Rhythm Night Club Fire in Natchez, Mississippi.

In 1943, U.S. Navy Lt. (jg) John F. Kennedy assumed command of PT-109, a motor torpedo boat, in the Solomon Islands during World War II. (On Aug. 2, 1943, PT-109 was rammed and sunk by a Japanese destroyer, killing two crew members; Kennedy and 10 others survived.)

In 1954, Hank Aaron of the Milwaukee Braves hit the first of his 755 major-league home runs in a game against the St. Louis Cardinals. (The Braves won, 7-5.)

In 1987, 28 construction workers were killed when an apartment complex being built in Bridgeport,

Connecticut, suddenly collapsed.

In 1988, a federal ban on smoking during domestic airline flights of two hours or less went into effect.

In 1993, labor leader Cesar Chavez died in San Luis, Arizona, at age 66.

In 1996, a civil court jury in The Bronx, New York, ordered Bernhard Goetz (bur-NAHRD' gehts) to pay $43 million to Darrell Cabey, one of four young men he'd shot on a subway car in 1984.

In 1998, James Earl Ray, who confessed to assassinating the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and then insisted he'd been framed, died at a Nashville, Tennessee, hospital at age 70.

In 2005, the recently created video-sharing website YouTube uploaded its first clip, "Me at the Zoo," which showed YouTube co-founder Jawed Karim standing in front of an elephant enclosure at the San Diego Zoo.

Ten years ago: Yemen's embattled president, Ali Abdullah Saleh (AH'-lee ahb-DUH'-luh sah-LEH'), agreed to a proposal by Gulf Arab mediators to step down within 30 days and hand power to his deputy in exchange for immunity from prosecution. (Saleh ended up leaving office in Feb. 2012.) Former Sony Corp. president and chairman Norio Ohga, credited with developing the compact disc, died in Tokyo at age 81.

Five years ago: A confident Donald Trump told supporters in Bridgeport, Connecticut, that he was not changing his pitch to voters, a day after his chief adviser assured Republican officials their party's frontrunner would show more restraint while campaigning. Britain marked the 400th anniversary of the death of William Shakespeare with parades, church services and stage performances; President Barack Obama took a break from political talks in London to tour the Globe Theatre, a re-creation of the venue where many of the Bard's plays were first performed.

One year ago: New data showed unemployment in the U.S. swelling to levels last seen during the Great Depression of the 1930s, with 1 in 6 American workers thrown out of a job by the coronavirus; more than 4.4 million laid-off workers had applied for unemployment benefits in the preceding week. At a White House briefing, President Donald Trump noted that researchers were looking at the effects of disinfectants on the coronavirus, and wondered aloud whether they could be injected into people. Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden told an online fundraiser that Trump's efforts to block emergency funding for the U.S. Postal Service showed that Trump was trying to "undermine" the election and make it harder for Americans to vote by mail. In an NFL draft conducted remotely due to the coronavirus, the Cincinnati Bengals chose LSU quarterback Joe Burrow as the first pick.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Alan Oppenheimer is 91. Actor David Birney is 82. Actor Lee Majors is 82. Hockey Hall of Famer Tony Esposito is 78. Irish nationalist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey is 74. Actor Blair Brown is 74. Writer-director Paul Brickman is 72. Actor Joyce DeWitt is 72. Actor James Russo is 68. Filmmaker-author Michael Moore is 67. Actor Judy Davis is 66. Actor Valerie Bertinelli is 61. Actor Craig Sheffer is 61. Actor-comedian-talk show host George Lopez is 60. U.S. Olympic gold medal skier Donna Weinbrecht is 56. Actor Melina Kanakaredes (kah-nah-KAH'-ree-deez) is 54. Rock musician Stan Frazier (Sugar Ray) is 53. Actor Scott Bairstow (BEHR'-stow) is 51. Actor-writer John Lutz is 48. Actor Barry Watson is 47. Rock musician Aaron Dessner (The National) is 45. Rock musician Bryce Dessner (The National) is 45. Professional wrestler/actor John Cena is 44. Actor-writer-comedian John Oliver is 44. Actor Kal Penn is 44. Retired MLB All-Star Andruw Jones is 44. Actor Jaime King is 42. Pop singer Taio (TY'-oh) Cruz is 38. Actor Aaron Hill is 38. Actor Jesse Lee Soffer is 37. Actor Rachel Skarsten is 36. Rock musician Anthony LaMarca (The War on Drugs) is 34. Singer-songwriter John Fullbright is 33. Actor Dev Patel (puh-TEHL') is 31. Actor Matthew Underwood is 31. Model Gigi Hadid is 26. Rock musicians Jake and Josh Kiszka (Greta Van Fleet) are 25. Actor Charlie Rowe (TV: "Salvation") is 25. Tennis player Ashleigh Barty is 25. U.S. Olympic gold medal snowboarder Chloe Kim is 21.